
25. EU gender equality policy and the progressive dismantling of feminist governance?

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The European Union (EU) is often considered a progressive political arena with regard to the promotion of gender equality. Since the 1970s, the EU has promoted a series of norms and values higher than those in effect in most member states, and gender equality is one of the rare policy domains in which the EU has gone beyond the mere fluidification of the market. This has been made possible by the existence of a specific system of governance which fits the criteria for feminist governance stated in Chapter 1 of this *Handbook*: feminist institutions and institution-building, feminist networks, public policy explicitly aimed at achieving gender equality through hard and soft regulation, and transversal integration of gender equality within public action from elaboration to implementation. This de facto system of feminist governance was originally established in a non-feminist environment and nevertheless managed to overcome various political, legal and institutional barriers in order to create an alternative space of re-regulation favourable to gender equality at the European level. This complex and intertwined system of feminist governance enabled the promotion of gender equality as a legitimate goal and autonomous field of competence of the European Economic Community (EEC) and later the EU. Today, the evolution of this system brings into question the nature of the EU gender regime and its ‘gender equality project’ (Walby, 2018). Conflicting trends are at play, including populist opposition to gender equality (Siim and Fiig, 2021), but also an ambitious discourse and positioning of the European Parliament (EP) and the European Commission which came into power in 2019, advocating for a ‘Union of equality’.

The first part of this chapter retraces the trajectory of the emergence and consolidation of this system of feminist governance, exploring the extension of gender equality promotion at the European level, the development of policy instruments in this domain, as well as progressive institutionalisation and setting up of its policy community, from the signing of the Treaty of Rome to the beginning of the 21st century. The second part reviews the transformation of the different elements of this system since the mid-2000s. The analysis shows that even if some positive initiatives have recently appeared, the EU system of feminist governance is undergoing a process of dismantling and can be considered under threat.

FROM NON-FEMINIST REGULATION TO FEMINIST GOVERNANCE IN THE EU

In 1957, the newly signed Treaty of Rome included an article 119, now article 157 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), which guaranteed equal pay to male and female workers for equal work. However, this article was certainly not conceived as a feminist stand by the ‘founding fathers’ of the new EEC. The negotiators of the Treaty believed that European integration would foster economic progress, which in turn would naturally bring about social

progress. Additionally, member states sought to retain their competences in social matters. The primary aim was to harmonise national social systems, in order to avoid distortions in competition among the member states within the context of the gradual elimination of customs and trade barriers. It is under this light that the content of article 119 can be understood: it was not a matter of asserting the principle of gender equality, or even of demonstrating a desire for social justice, but rather of avoiding any risk of social dumping in sectors that relied heavily on female labour, such as the textile industry (Hoskyns, 1996). Nevertheless, out of this non-feminist beginning, progressively emerged a fully-fledged public policy, including instruments, institutions, representations and a policy community that can be considered as constituting feminist governance at the EU level.

Progressive Extension of the Perimeter of Gender Equality Policy

Theoretically, the principle of gender equality covers a diversity of possible understandings, which, in turn, can each be translated into different policy strategies (Squires, 2007). The three main conceptions of gender equality are: equal treatment, which is based on the concept of equal rights and implemented through the law; equal opportunities, which is based on the concept of difference and translated into the policy process through positive action or positive discrimination measures; and equal impact, which is based on the concept of gender and primarily operates through instruments such as gender mainstreaming. Most feminist analyses agree that like a ‘three-legged stool’ (Booth and Bennett, 2002), gender equality policy can only pursue its objectives if it is stable on its feet and if it achieves a balance between these three main policy strategies.

At the level of the EEC, and then the EU, a political strategy for the promotion of gender equality based on equal treatment was established from the mid-1970s, and then complemented from the 1980s by the recognition of equal opportunities. This alliance was in turn extended by the implementation of gender mainstreaming from the mid-1990s, allowing a progressive definition and extension of the remit of gender equality public policy, however imperfect (see MacRae, 2010).

The principle of equal treatment was contained in article 119 of the Treaty of Rome on equal pay for equal work. In the 1970s, this general principle was extended by the Court of Justice of the EU to access to employment and to social security. Since then, equal treatment in the labour market covers equal pay, access to employment and matters of social security, but also training, professional advancement and working conditions. The definition of equal treatment has again been widened with the signing of the Amsterdam Treaty: its article 13 (now article 19 TFEU) referred to the limits of action in the fight against discrimination as being the same as the ‘limits of the powers conferred by [the treaty] upon the Community’, opening the way for radical extension. The new definition allowed the adoption of a 2004 directive (2004/113/EC) extending equal treatment to access to and provision of goods and services. The economic domain remains nevertheless the main limit to the definition of equal treatment between women and men at the EU level.

When it comes to equal opportunities, this concept was introduced at the European level with the 1976 directive on equal treatment (76/207/EEC), evoking the possibility of equal opportunities through positive action. The development of equal opportunities as a complement to equal treatment only emerged at the beginning of the 1980s, however: funding programmes aimed at removing obstacles to the participation of women in the labour market

were established from 1982. As part of the European Social Fund, these programmes allowed the EEC to intervene in the promotion of equal opportunities in the supply and demand of employment (training, combating professional segregation, enabling professional requalification). But they also allowed the European Commission to finance projects linked to issues such as home-based work, child care, political representation, women's health and sexual harassment, which were all beyond the legal scope of article 119. However, the regulatory frame for equal opportunities remained extremely limited in the 1980s, especially because of the lack of legal basis.

It was only in 1992 that equal opportunities started to become firmly established with the directive on the health and safety of pregnant workers (92/95/EEC). It was the first hard law that embraced the logic of equal opportunities, considering women as a group benefiting from differentiated treatment in order to compensate for existing disadvantages. A disposition on equal opportunities on the labour market was finally integrated into the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997: member states have the possibility to set up positive action measures in relation with the functioning of the labour market in favour of what is called the 'underrepresented sex'. This step was important because it ran contrary to the liberal definition of gender equality as only equal treatment.

Positive actions have benefited from renewed interest at the EU level with a proposed Commission directive on improving gender balance among non-executive directors of companies listed on stock exchanges, commonly known as the 'Women on Boards' proposal, which sets the aim of a minimum of 40 per cent of non-executive members of the underrepresented sex on company boards. Presented in 2012, the text was blocked by the Council until 2020, when the EP and the Commission resolved to relaunch the negotiations with renewed impetus. The new Directive was formally adopted by the EP and the Council in November 2022.

The principle of equal impact appeared for the first time in a European text in 1991, but it was only really endorsed as a policy strategy for the EU after the UN Beijing Conference on Women in 1995 and it was finally integrated into primary law in the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997. Article 3.2 proposed a description of gender mainstreaming (although it did not use the phrase itself) and validated the generalisation of this principle to all EU policies. The turn of the 1990s was a crisis period for social policy at the European level due to the lack of political will in national governments, the general drop in social spending and the resistance of employers' unions to any kind of social regulation. In this context, gender mainstreaming was part of the first soft law measures that were able to get around the legislative restrictions imposed by the member states. After Amsterdam, gender mainstreaming has been implemented across policy domains at the EU level, at least formally. This implementation has not been developed consistently across policy fields, but it has allowed a significant extension of the field of intervention of gender equality policy, enabling the legitimate tackling of subjects such as decision-making, economic and social cohesion, development cooperation, gender budgeting, publicity and media, scientific research, and human trafficking and violence, both in internal and external policy areas.

Since the signing of the Treaty of Rome, the restrictive definition of the limits of the legitimate action of the EU (i.e. employment, paid work and the labour market) has been questioned and outstripped, and the EU's jurisdiction and possibilities for action with regard to gender equality promotion have been progressively and substantially increased. The next sections will show how the other components of the EU system of feminist governance have also progressively developed.

Progressive Diversification of Policy Instruments

The progressive extension of the field of action of gender equality policy at the EU level has been matched by a parallel extension and diversification of the instruments used in order to implement this public policy. These include legal but also budgetary and transversal policy instruments.

As mentioned above, the inclusion of article 119 in the Treaty of Rome was decisive: it made public action promoting gender equality possible by providing the European Commission with the legal and political legitimacy to make proposals and develop strategies that would gradually constitute a feminist public policy in a constrained environment. Starting in the mid-1970s, secondary law started to be developed and by the turn of 2000, the legal instruments of the European gender equality policy composed a solid corpus. In 2022, ten directives on gender equality are in force, including both a recast directive on equal treatment and equal opportunities in matters of employment and occupation, and legislative texts against trafficking in human beings, in particular women and children, adopted under articles 79 and 83 TFEU.¹

Starting from the mid-1980s, the directives have been complemented by numerous non-binding legal instruments, which are part of the EU *acquis*. Initially, these soft law instruments mainly remained restricted to the sphere of employment (such as dignity at work) and were tools aimed at monitoring legislation. From the 1990s and the development of gender mainstreaming, there has been an increase in the number of soft law instruments (resolutions, recommendations, communications) and a diversification of their content (decision-making, development cooperation, publicity and media, scientific research, violence against women, etc.).

European gender equality policy is not only a regulatory policy and from the late 1970s it has included distributive instruments. This development can be seen as the result of compensation by member states for the blockage of proposed directives in the Council. It can also be seen as a strategic reaction by the Commission, which took the initiative to propose the first multiannual ‘action programmes’ and to use them to create new margins of manoeuvre for itself, to extend the range of its actions and to ground its image as an active institution in the field of gender equality (Ahrens, 2019).

Starting from the mid-1990s, a new category of policy instruments has flourished. It includes incorporating concerns linked to gender inequalities into the EU multiannual programmes in the field of social policy (European Employment Strategy from 1997, Lisbon Strategy from 2000), as well as the development and implementation of gender mainstreaming. These new sets of transversal instruments display the two major trends which characterised EU gender equality policy up to the Lisbon Treaty: a reinforcement of non-binding measures and an extension of boundaries. Indeed, the transversal approach represented by gender mainstreaming means questioning the foundations of a gender equality policy solely concerned with matters of employment and occupation. The flexibility and malleability of these transversal instruments accelerate this process still further, since the integration of gender equality into new areas is neither exceptional nor legislative. Instead, it becomes a daily process, part of the routine of administrative activities (Schmidt, 2005).

In sum, European gender equality policy can be seen as an accumulation of different types of policy instruments aggregating around initial primary law. These elements don’t really

follow a unique objective, nor do they constitute a coherent and organised ensemble, yet they form the material basis of feminist governance at the European level.

Progressive Institutional Structuring and Networking

Defining gender equality policy as an accumulation of instruments is not sufficient, however, to gain a precise understanding of the entire system of feminist governance in the EU, which goes beyond this material basis. It is important to examine the environment of the policy, especially its institutions and policy community which have gradually come to constitute a distinct policy sector with a high level of internal coherence, and which are essential to the formation of feminist alliances (see Chapter 28 of this *Handbook*).

The first embryonic structure for the gender equality sector emerged at the beginning of the 1970s with the creation of a working group on women's employment with representatives from the member states. On the basis of this group, the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men was established, and it inaugurated a singular form of functioning, combining informal relationships and official structures, promoting engagement for the women's movement and for European integration.

Within the European Commission, the institutionalisation of the gender equality policy began to take shape after the adoption of the first directives on equal pay and equal treatment (Mazey, 1995). Two structures were set up in 1976: the Bureau for Problems Concerning Women's Employment in the DG in charge of employment and social affairs; and the Women's Information Service in DG Information. The first structure was in charge of supervising the implementation of the legislation and developing policy instruments, the second structure aimed at ensuring awareness of women regarding this policy and to maintain dialogue with women's and feminist organisations. From the beginning of the 1980s, the Women's Bureau developed thematic networks of experts, in order to support and legitimise its action in the field of gender equality. Members of these groups were chosen for their specific expertise but also for their engagement with the cause of gender equality.

Another important pillar for feminist alliances within the EP (see Chapter 26 of this *Handbook*) was an Ad Hoc Committee on Women's Rights, created as early as 1979, and becoming permanent in 1984. From outside the gender equality sector, the 'FEMM Committee' was seen as a feminist bastion, before being a deliberative or legislative arena.

When it comes to civil society groups and movements (see Chapters 27 and 28 of this *Handbook*), the European Women's Lobby (EWL) was 'only' created in 1990, some 15 years after the adoption of the first directive on equal pay. Before the creation of this umbrella organisation, small groups existed but the representation of women's interests at the European level was largely based on individual activities and resources rather than on structured and professionalised collective action. These informal networks were, however, important pieces and active elements in the setting up of the EU system of feminist governance as early as the 1970s and 1980s in a non-feminist general environment.

THE MECHANISMS OF THE DISMANTLING OF EU FEMINIST GOVERNANCE

On the eve of the 21st century, the EU was considered by some authors as ‘one of the most progressive political systems in the world regarding the promotion of gender equality’ (e.g. Hafner-Burton and Pollack, 2000: 452). However, in the following years, under the combined influence of the 2004 enlargement and the political fragmentation it entailed; budgetary restrictions, especially after 2008; and transformation of the interinstitutional balance and administrative reforms, the EU system of feminist governance has started to be destabilised, inducing a process of policy dismantling. This second part presents the characteristics of these changes, with regard to gender equality policy instruments, structures, networks and cognitive frameworks (for a detailed view of today’s gender politics in the EU, see Abels et al., 2021).

Weakening Policy Instruments

Since the 2000s, EU gender equality policy has evolved into what can be defined as a rights policy framework. That is a policy framework that primarily focuses on the promotion and enforcement of rights, including the fight against discrimination. One of the main characteristics of rights policies is to emphasise an individual approach to discrimination and to favour modes of public action based on the judicialisation of the treatment of inequalities. Legislation and regulatory action have always been at the heart of the EU’s action in the gender equality field. However, its specificity has been to be built on a threefold equilibrium combining law, funding for positive action programmes and integration of gender equality transversally. Beginning with the 2008 crisis, managerial reforms and financial pressures have increased, while political focus has decreased. As a consequence, budgetary instruments have started to be undermined, coordination instruments have been considerably weakened and the centre of gravity has shifted, with legal instruments becoming its main component.

This shift can be considered detrimental to the EU system of feminist governance, since the legislative function of the gender equality policy has not given birth to much progress. Indeed, although the revised Lisbon Treaty provides a reminder of the place of gender equality in the values and missions of the EU, the modifications brought to the European normative framework remain very limited (Ellis, 2010).

When it comes to secondary law, legislative developments since Lisbon have encountered many obstacles. The revision of existing directives (on parental leave and on equal treatment of self-employed and assisting spouses in 2010) included only minimal requirements. Some proposals have been blocked in the European Council (gender balance on boards of listed companies and horizontal anti-discrimination) or abandoned because of absence of compromise (revision of the directive on the protection of maternity). The proposals that have been adopted have either experienced very conflictual negotiations (2019 directive on work–life balance for parents and carers) or resulted in the side-lining of the gender equality focus (2011 and 2012 directives on human trafficking and the victims of crime).²

With regard to soft law, the Council has not renewed its European Pact for gender equality which ended in 2020 and was not associated with any precise objective. The Commission has replaced the five medium-term action programmes which covered the period between 1982 and 2006 with a series of programming documents,³ including the latest one, the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–25. However, they are no longer attached to funding instruments and

therefore remain primarily declaratory (Ahrens, 2019). Budgetary instruments have necessarily been impacted by reduction in funding which began to hit gender equality policy in the 2007–13 multiannual financial framework. Since then, the budget allocated to gender equality as a proportion of the overall EU budget has regularly decreased (Jacquot, 2015: 147–53).

An equivalent dismantling of the third pillar of EU gender equality policy – coordination instruments – has taken place. First, there has been a near-total evaporation of concern with the fight against gender-based inequalities in the major multiannual action plans of the EU. In the Europe 2020 strategy, the European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights, the integration of gender inequalities has been in significant decline, with only a few mentions of specific discrimination faced by women in the labour market and no acknowledgements in the accompanying objectives or indicators (Elomäki and Kantola, 2020; O'Dwyer, 2018). Second, the impact of gender mainstreaming on the transformation of gender relations and on the nature and degrees of gender inequalities has been extremely limited (Guerrina, 2020). Even more, recent analyses have shown that resistance to the deconstruction of gender norms and the transformation of power structures has started to emerge, even in policy domains which used to be considered as receptive, such as scientific research (Cavaghan, 2017; Vida, 2020).

Rationalising Institutional Structures and Dissolving the Networks of Feminist Governance

Two main trends have characterised the evolution of EU gender equality structures and networks of actors over the last decades: first, a phenomenon of professionalisation of actors, which led to the marginalisation of activist and feminist involvement in the development of gender equality policy, and second, a phenomenon of normalisation of its institutional and administrative specificities, which are increasingly seen as inappropriate for the standards of EU 'good governance'. As a consequence, the cause-based coalition traditionally supporting European gender equality policy has undergone a process of erosion and the interconnectedness of the different types of actors (administrative, political, academic, activist) specific to feminist alliances, and key to feminist governance, has been weakened.

In 2010, there was a transfer of portfolio within the European Commission and in 2011, the Directorate for Equality and the Fight against Discrimination (home of the Gender Equality Unit), formerly part of DG Employment and Social Affairs, started reporting to DG Justice. Far from being a merely organisational matter, this administrative transfer was consequential for EU gender equality policy. First, it signalled the fact that gender equality was (only) one ground of discrimination among other fundamental rights and tackled from a primarily legal perspective. Second, it implied a loosening of the ties between gender equality and social policy. This has a particular significance in times of economic crisis. It is all the more difficult to infuse employment and social inclusion initiatives with a gender perspective, even if the consequences of the crisis are deeply gendered. Recently, social initiatives have had a hard time including a transformative gender perspective, as exemplified by the European Pillar of Social Rights (Plomien, 2018). This situation has (partly) evolved since 2019 with the von der Leyen Commission and the introduction of an Equality Commissioner. This new portfolio is responsible for all matters linked to inclusion and equality; however, on the organisational front, it does not have its own administrative services and only has authority over 'relevant units' which remain part of DG Justice and DG Employment. Commissioner Dalli also chairs a 'Task Force for Equality composed of experts from the Commission services'.⁴ This new

integrated organisation has not proven efficient in mainstreaming gender equality concerns, as shown by the gender-blind content of the 2020 EU recovery plan (Recovery and Resilience Facility).

Following administrative reforms within the European Commission, the number of expert groups has also been drastically reduced. In this new approach to the role of scientific knowledge in European governance, expertise is mainly outsourced, but this outsourcing is not seen and used as a possibility of creating partnerships or coalitions of cause, but rather as mere service provision (Jacquot, 2020). As a consequence, the strong cross-network cohesion that characterised these groups is gradually weakening, diminishing their driving force in support of the policy and also the sense of community which used to unite the members of the EU system of feminist governance.

Another major change was the creation of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, inaugurated in 2010). Even though it was initially conceived as a tool aimed at producing gender expertise along with liaising with a variety of gender equality actors, in practice EIGE produces technical knowledge rather than alternatives or a political vision (Hubert and Stratigaki, 2011). The creation of EIGE can be linked to a general trend towards de-politicisation affecting all organisations responsible for gender equality, as well as some feminist organisations. EU policymakers are increasingly expected to draw on specialised and technical information in order to elaborate and formulate ‘evidence-based’ proposals. In this context, EIGE is characteristic of the transformation of feminist activism and knowledge into ‘gender expertise’ (Prügl, 2015), and the emergence of ‘market feminism’ (Kantola and Squires, 2012). Some authors have underlined how such an exclusive technocratic approach to gender equality policymaking contributes to gender expertise being emptied of political perspectives, and feminist governance being weakened for bureaucratic purposes (Jacquot and Krizsán, 2021).

Another important change in the structure of EU gender equality policy has to do with the evolution of the institutional balance of power, especially between the three poles of the legislative triangle (European Commission, EP, Council of the EU). In line with analyses considering that European integration is undergoing a phase of ‘new intergovernmentalism’ (Hodson and Puetter, 2019), member states have increased their presence and dominance in EU gender equality policy. They play a stronger role in the policy process via the enhanced role of the presidency trios in the agenda-setting sequence and the design and monitoring of the policy. This stronger role induces a relative marginalisation of the Commission and of the EP (including the FEMM Committee), which have generally been in the lead in terms of feminist governance at the EU level.

Finally, there have been important transformations within the system of representation of interests in the gender equality sector, concerning both civil society (particularly women’s and feminist organisations) and social partners (in particular women’s committees). The development of a broad rights policy that gathers gender equality, the fight against discrimination and the promotion of fundamental rights leads to a thematic competition, whereby civil society organisations (CSOs) working in each of these areas seek recognition of their demands. This is doubled by financial competition for funding and subsidies, competition that is intensified in periods of budgetary crisis. Within this new environment, the EWL has to manage the tension between providing efficient technical expertise to policymakers and acting as a critical voice advocating for women’s interests (Seibicke, 2019). Thus, the influence of feminist mobilisa-

tion is clearly limited (Cullen, 2014). Moreover, for a few years, gender equality as a policy issue has taken a back seat in the social partners' agenda (Elomäki and Kantola, 2020).

All these changes taken together contribute to the deterioration of relations between key actors in the gender equality policy sector, whether public (femocrats, MEPs) or private (activists, academics, experts). Previously close and frequent exchanges and collaborative relationships have loosened, contributing to the upheaval of the system of EU feminist governance.

Adopting a Minimalist View of Gender Equality Policy

Since the second half of the 2000s, European gender equality policy has undergone a period of crisis affecting its instruments, its institutions and its policy community, thereby shrinking its legitimacy. Dominant beliefs and discursive representations of the place and role of EU action with regard to gender equality have also been impacted. Consensus on ends and means has been more difficult to reach with the increase in the number of member states and the multiplication of national gender regimes (Walby, 2004). Also, some member state governments like Poland or Hungary have started directly attacking EU gender equality policy for ideological reasons (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2018) and this overt opposition is used as political cover by other member states whose opposition is mainly budgetary. Moreover, the extension of the perimeter of gender equality policy to include new issues (such as trafficking, development), as well as the challenge of taking multiple discriminations into account, have contributed both to a fragmentation of policy instruments and actors, and to a fragmentation of ideas and representations. Confronted with this increased diversity of meanings and the difficulty in agreeing on objectives and strategies for action, the cognitive framework of EU gender equality policy has become more unstable and consequently more vulnerable.

Beyond the fragmentation of the principle of equality, the context of the economic and budgetary crisis has also contributed to destabilising the cognitive framework of EU gender equality policy. Since 2008, the EU's policy agenda has been reorganised and the norm of gender equality has become subordinate to other objectives higher up in the list of political priorities, particularly economic ones (see Chapter 27 of this *Handbook*). The configuration of 'equality for the market' (Jacquot, 2015) has been accentuated again, and even when subordinated to economic objectives, initiatives in favour of promoting gender equality have a hard time finding legitimacy. Gender equality has become an objective which is not only subordinate but genuinely secondary. In this configuration, gender equality can only exist 'despite the market', with only minimalist ambitions and restricting its focus to issues that can aggregate the widest possible interests. This minimalist conception of EU gender equality policy can be seen when examining the flagship initiative of the Commission. In March 2021, it tabled a proposal for a directive on pay transparency to strengthen the principle of equal pay. Constrained by the shrinkage of political and budgetary opportunities, this proposal addresses the issue of equal pay through a minimalist lens. Tackling the gender pay gap, and even more, pay transparency, has become the single issue to which gender equality in employment and occupation is reduced. Issues such as the quality of employment (including part-time work), working conditions or the structural discrimination embedded in the gendered classification of occupations are left unaddressed.

So, if feminist governance includes the existence of public policy which explicitly promotes gender equality, then this minimalist conception of gender equality signals that the EU system of feminist governance is still in place but in a muffled tone and with reduced ambitions.

CONCLUSION

In their famous book on policy implementation published in 1973, Pressman and Wildavsky aimed to explain implementation failures in the US federal system and more precisely *How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland*. More recently, Abels and Mushaben have analysed how the *Great Expectations* with regard to advancing gender equality raised by the election in 2019 of Ursula von der Leyen as the European Commission's first woman president run the risks of being constrained by *Structural Limitations* (Abels and Mushaben, 2020). In this chapter we have seen the role and importance of these institutional limitations in recent years: the reinforcement of the Council and the marginalisation of the Commission and the EP, the stronger polarisation over gender issues which make consensus more difficult. We have also seen that other elements, such as economic restrictions, administrative upheavals and ideational changes, have to be taken into account in order to understand the transformation with regard to gender equality. Beyond the formal provisions related to the status of gender equality as a fundamental right and a common value of the EU, these combined limitations have weighed on the EU system of feminist governance since the mid-2000s.

The Covid-19 crisis has shown that these constraints weigh heavily on existing gender leadership. Indeed, after the presentation in March 2020 of the much-awaited Gender Equality Strategy for 2020–25, the European Commission in its April work programme suggested postponing any binding measures until 2021 to 'avoid increasing the administrative burden for those companies affected by COVID 19',⁵ even though the pervasiveness and critical level of gender inequalities have been brought to the fore by the pandemic. Paraphrasing both Pressman and Wildavsky, and Abels and Mushaben, we could thus consider that 'Great Expectations' in March 2020 'Have Already Been Dashed' in April 2020. When in competition with other saillant issues, gender equality initiatives tend to be sidelined, raising the question of the EU gender equality policy as only a 'good weather' policy and its ability to withstand backlash and obstacles. This finding is all the more critical since the damaged EU system of feminist governance will have difficulty supporting any renewed political will in this field.

NOTES

1. This count does not include the new 'Women on Boards' Directive which will be added to this series of texts at the end of 2022 or beginning of 2023 after its publication in the EU Official Journal.
2. Only since 2021 has this legislative framework started to be revived with the adoption of the Directive on gender balance on corporate boards in November 2022, the proposal on pay transparency in March 2021, and the proposal on combating violence against women and domestic violence in March 2022.
3. Roadmap for Equality between Men and Women (2006–10), Women's Charter (2010), Strategy for Equality between Women and Men (2010–15), Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality (2016–19).
4. See https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/dalli/announcements/union-equality-first-year-actions-and-achievements_en.
5. *Europe Daily Bulletin*, 'Trade unions regret Commission's postponement of gender pay equality measures', no. 12471, 22 April 2020.

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