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Sustainability Growth Innovation*

Opinion

Gender Equality post 2025

Adopted on 15-07-2025

Executive Summary

This opinion sets out SGI Europe's key messages and recommendations on the forthcoming EU Gender Equality Strategy 2025–2030. It highlights persistent gender gaps in employment, pay, and leadership, and emphasises the role of social partners in creating more inclusive labour markets.

Drawing on examples from its members, SGI Europe outlines how services of general interest can contribute to gender equality through targeted measures in employment, care provision, and service access. The opinion also stresses the importance of supporting women's full-time work, addressing occupational segregation, and ensuring inclusive workplaces.

To achieve meaningful progress, the document calls for a practical approach that links gender equality to economic performance, demographic resilience, and service quality across Europe. It emphasises the need to prioritise the implementation of existing directives over introducing new legislation, alongside stronger support for social dialogue and improved collection and use of gender-disaggregated data.

Introduction

SGI Europe welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2025–2030. As a cross-sectoral employer organisation representing public and private providers of services of general interest (SGIs), SGI Europe reaffirms its commitment to gender equality while calling for a strategic focus on implementation, capacity-building, and sector-sensitive approaches.

SGI Europe and its members are committed to promoting gender equality both in their role as employers and as service providers. As such, SGI providers play a dual role: they are key not only major employers in female-dominated sectors such as health, social care and education, but also enablers of women's labour market participation through the essential services they deliver.

Equality between women and men is a core value of the European Union and enshrined in the Treaties as well as the Charter of Fundamental Rights. It is also a critical driver for a resilient, competitive and prosperous Europe. We therefore welcome the political commitment of Ursula Von der Leyen to deliver a new Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030, a task which will be carried out by Commissioner Hadja Lahbib.

This initiative comes at an important time, as both global and internal EU dynamics threaten not only future progress on gender equality, but also the hard-won gains achieved to date. With rising radicalisation and anti-feminism movements, it is crucial that all actors and levels of society, from EU institutions to national governments, social partners and civil society, work together to protect and advance gender equality.

In this context, we also welcome the publication of the Women's Rights Roadmap as an expression of renewed political commitment to safeguarding and advancing gender equality across the EU, particularly in light of growing backlash and resistance to women's rights.

Recognising the intersectional dimensions of gender inequality, SGI Europe stresses the importance of taking a broad and holistic approach. We support a dual approach to promoting gender equality through specific actions alongside gender mainstreaming. At this stage, the focus should be on practical and supportive measures that can effectively translate existing EU commitments into tangible improvements, particularly at local and organisational level.

Gender equality beyond men and women

While this opinion primarily addresses gender equality between women and men, SGI Europe emphasizes that gender equality should be approached in a wider context. SGI Europe encourages an intersectional approach, considering factors such as ethnic origin, disability, age, sexual orientation, and socio-economic background. This approach ensures that policies and practices effectively address the diverse realities and barriers faced by different groups.

In this context, SGI Europe welcomes the ambition of the Commission to foster synergies across EU initiatives such as the Gender Equality Strategy, the LGBTIQ equality strategy, the new Anti-racism strategy and the Strategy for the rights of people with disabilities, among others.

Towards the new Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030

SGI Europe wants to emphasize that there is a strong European legal framework that support the ambition of a gender-equal labour market with equal opportunities for men and women. This framework includes the Pregnant Workers Directive (92/85/EEC), the Employment Equality Directive (2000/78/EC), the Gender Goods and Services Directive (2004/113/EC), the Recast Gender Equality Directive (2006/54/EC), the Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158) and more recently the Pay Transparency Directive (2023/970).

The Pay Transparency Directive (2023/970), while aiming to reinforce the principle of equal pay, raises serious concerns at the implementation stage. These relate notably to unclear definitions, particularly around the concept of “categories of workers”, which risks diverging interpretations across Member States, significant administrative burdens, and the potential for legal uncertainty that could increase litigation risks. In addition, the interaction of the Directive’s provisions with existing national reporting frameworks poses practical challenges for compliance, especially in labour-intensive sectors.

Such difficulties are shared by employers, public authorities, and social partners alike and reflect the broader challenge of translating ambitious EU-level policy objectives into workable, proportionate measures across diverse national contexts. In SGI enterprises, which are often characterised by complex employment structures and limited administrative capacity, these issues are particularly acute.

SGI Europe therefore firmly believes that the 2023-2030 period should focus on consolidating and supporting existing legislation rather than introducing new binding initiatives in the area of gender equality on the labour market. The EU should prioritise providing clear and harmonised guidance on key legal concepts, notably on the classification of workers, developing model templates and sector-specific toolkits to support implementation and investing in capacity-building tools at both national and organisational level.

Only by addressing these implementation barriers can the EU ensure the full and fair application of equal pay principles across all Member States.

Advancing women’s participation in the labour market

The persistent gender gaps in the labour market stem from a combination of structural and societal factors. These include occupational and sectoral segregation, with certain jobs traditionally dominated by either women or men; disparities in career progression; the high incidence of part-time work among women; and their under-representation in leadership roles. Additionally, unequal distribution of unpaid care duties and persistent gender norms continue to influence outcomes in the workplace, at home, and across society.

In 2023, the gender employment gap in the EU stood at 10.2 percentage points, ranging from just 0.2 in Finland as the lowest to 19.8 in Greece as the highest¹. This not only reflects unequal access to economic opportunities, but also represents a major untapped potential for growth. Estimates suggest that advancing gender equality could raise EU GDP per capita by up to 9.6% by 2050 and generate over 10 million additional jobs².

Closing the employment gap is thus both a social imperative and an economic opportunity that requires strong commitment and collaboration across sectors and institutions. It requires not only political will but also concrete

¹ Eurostat (2024) [Gender statistics](#)

² European Institute for Gender Equality (2017) [Economic benefits of gender equality in the EU: Economic benefits of gender equality in the EU policy context](#)

enabling conditions, including quality services, targeted investments and tailored support at national and sectoral level.

The role of care in removing barriers to employment

Access to adequate and affordable childcare and long-term care remain a major obstacle for enabling women to participate in the labour market on equal terms. In 2023, the employment rate for women with at least one child under the age of six was 10.5 percentage points lower than that of women without children.³ In 2024, 0.9% of women willing to work were not participating in the labour force due to caregiving responsibilities, nine times higher than the rate observed for men (0.1%)⁴. This is a tremendous loss for the European economy and society, representing both untapped labour potential and a barrier to gender equality in the workforce.

While progress has been made towards the achieving the original and revised Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care, significant disparities remain between Member States, particularly on the target of numbers of children under the age of three participating in formal child care⁵. Further actions and investments are needed to increase the affordability and accessibility of childcare for families in Europe. Moreover, many Member States continue to face workforce shortages and low attractiveness of jobs in the care sector, which limits both access to services and the quality of care.

Challenges in female labour market participation are however also prevalent in countries that do have high childcare coverage. Access to care services is not the sole solution but a prerequisite in enabling higher female labour market participation.

SGI Europe reiterates the need for a stronger political and financial commitment at EU level to implement the European Care Strategy and support care infrastructure development across Member States.

Recognising the central role that care plays in enabling labour market participation, the European Social Partners have a [Joint Statement on childcare provisions in the EU](#) that underscores the critical role of quality, affordable, and accessible childcare in promoting gender equality, supporting employment, and addressing social disparities. It calls for strengthened investment in the sector, improved working conditions for childcare workers, and enhanced data collection to uncover inequalities. It also promotes practical tools, such as collective agreements funding targeted childcare support, exemplifying how social dialogue can deliver solutions that address both worker and employer needs while supporting societal goals.

Full-Time Work as a Foundation for Equality

Increasing women's participation in the labour market is not only vital for achieving gender equality but also for closing the gender pay and pension gaps. In 2023, 28% of female workers reported working part-time, compared to only 8% of men⁶.

Women's reduced presence in the labour market, whether due to part-time work or prolonged absences, affects income across the life course with substantial lifetime income disparity between women and men. Furthermore, the economy misses out on valuable work hours by women who are absent from the labour

³ European Institute for Gender Equality (2024) [Return to the labour market after parental leave: A gender analysis](#)

⁴ Eurostat (2024) [SDG 5 – Gender Equality](#)

⁵ European Institute for Gender Equality (2020) [Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work](#)

⁶ European Commission (2024) [Women more likely to have worked part-time in Q3 2023](#)

market and the workplace. This underlines the importance of supporting transitions from part-time to full-time work, where appropriate, through enabling policies and supportive workplace cultures.

Supporting women's full participation is therefore a shared responsibility and it starts with providing the right conditions and information. In addition to providing adequate and accessible care services, awareness of how different forms of leave and flexible working arrangements affect long-term income and pensions must increase. Early, clear communication to employees about the financial implications of work patterns is essential and must involve employers, trade unions, and public authorities alike.

In Denmark, SGI Europe member 'Local government Denmark' (KL), together with their trade union counterparts, have launched the initiative "The Future with Full-Time". The initiative aims to make full-time work the default option in municipalities. It includes the development of lifetime income and pension calculations, serving as practical tools for employers, employees, and decision-makers to better understand the long-term economic implications of working hours.

Similar initiatives could be promoted and scaled up at EU level, with targeted support under the European Semester and through cohesion and social funds, to encourage Member States to invest in full-time enabling measures.

Tackling gender segregation in the labour market

Segregation in the labour market remains one of the most persistent barriers to gender equality. Women and men continue to be unevenly represented across sectors, roles, and hierarchies, limiting both individual growth and economic opportunities as well as the effective use of the full talent pool.

Tackling such segregation requires not only long-term cultural change, but also concrete measures to improve the status, and attractiveness of female-dominated sectors.

Occupational and sectoral choices are often shaped early on and strongly influenced by societal expectations and gender norms. These norms contribute to the concentration of women in fields such as education, health and social care, while men remain overrepresented in technical, scientific, and managerial professions.

In the EU, the public sector employs 27% of all female workers, compared to only 16% of male workers⁷. This gender imbalance contributes to systemic undervaluation of female-dominated sectors and reinforces economic inequalities. As a result, austerity measures and budgetary restrictions in public services disproportionately affect female employment.

This makes it all the more important to ensure that upcoming fiscal reforms, including those linked to the EU's economic governance framework, do not further weaken these key sectors.

Conversely, investing in these services holds strong potential for advancing gender equality. Services of general interest, including health and social care, transport, and housing, not only generate jobs but also create the conditions for equal labour market participation. Public investment in SGIs should be recognised not only for its social impact but also as a driver of gender equality and inclusive growth. By strengthening the

⁷ EIGE (2017) Work-life balance / Flexible working arrangements in European Union, [Gender Equality Index](#)

accessibility and attractiveness of these sectors, Europe can build a more inclusive and resilient workforce that can drive Europe's competitiveness in the face of ongoing transitions.

Another example from the SGI Europe Danish section is the partnership between the Danish social partners focusing on the gender-segregated labour market and young people's educational choices. Within this partnership, an analysis of the impact of gender on young people's educational choices has been prepared and several dialogue meetings have been held with relevant stakeholders, in order to formulate several recommendations on how to support a cultural change that can lead to a labour market with a better gender balance. Most recently, the partnership published a report with good cases and examples from both the private and public labour market available, in Danish, [here](#).

SGI Europe member Wiener Stadtwerke Group has various initiatives aimed at attracting more women to technical jobs. As part of its outreach, the group regularly participates in Vienna Daughter's Day, an initiative aimed at encouraging girls to explore careers in STEM. Wiener Linien supports female technicians through scholarships of €5,000 coupled with dedicated mentoring programmes for students. With a programme for women in trades and technology, Wiener Linien also offer a shortened technical apprenticeship on the second educational path, open to all ages. Similarly, Wiener Netze offers an abridged electrical engineering apprenticeship which has proven successful, with all six women who started the first round in 2021, completing it by 2023, now employed at Wiener Netze.

Promoting women in leadership positions is also a key objective within the Wiener Stadtwerke Group, a commitment that has given tangible results. At Wiener Linien, the share of women in leadership positions rose from around 19 % in 2015 to almost 45 % in 2025. Wien Energie, now has 33% female representation across its workforce, and women lead half of its operational business areas. These outcomes reflect a sustained commitment to structural change and gender-balanced leadership pipelines.

Inclusive and Equal Workplaces

SGI Europe members aim to lead by example in promoting high-quality, inclusive employment in sectors essential to Europe's future. Our members work towards ensuring decent, inclusive, and safe working environments that appeal to a wide and diverse talent pool, while at the same time delivering high-quality services. Discrimination, harassment, and violence have no place in the modern workplace and must be proactively prevented and systematically addressed.

This ambition is especially relevant in light of persistent labour and skills shortages, threatening EU competitiveness and social cohesion and further exacerbated by Europe's ongoing demographic transition. These challenges are particularly acute for services of general interest, where many sectors face chronic staffing gaps, growing demand, and ageing workforces. To ensure continuity and quality of service provision, it is crucial to attract and retain talent through inclusive, fair and safe workplaces.

Several SGI Europe members are putting this ambition into action through concrete initiatives, illustrating how our sectors can lead the way in building equitable and forward-looking workplaces through structured strategies, strong social dialogue, and concrete, measurable actions.

In Sweden, SGI Europe member SALAR has adopted a comprehensive nine-point employer strategy to promote gender equality and tackle skill shortages. This programme includes practical guidance on working hours, parental leave, gender-based violence and harassment, pay transparency, leadership, and career development. It also promotes full-time work, longer working lives, and improved visibility of employment

benefits to ensure municipalities and regions remain attractive employers. More information is available, in Swedish, [here](#).

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Central Government has a similarly example of a holistic approach to diversity and inclusion. They have, among other actions, set concrete gender targets for middle and senior management (45–55% women) and introduced objective recruitment and selection rules, leadership and talent development programmes, inclusive employment conditions, and collective agreements that address issues such as menstrual health and menopause.

In Germany, Wiener Stadtwerke have implemented the internal project “Respect for Boundaries – Zero tolerance for harassment, bullying and discrimination”. The programme combines awareness-raising, such as mandatory training for all employees, with structural improvements to ensure respectful and supportive working conditions. Central to the initiative is the creation of dedicated trust-based support channels, including designated contact persons, enabling employees to speak up and seek assistance without fear of retaliation.

Equal access to services

As service providers, SGI Europe fully understand and support the importance of equal access to services. Our members ensure continuity, equity and accessibility in services that are vital to European citizens and territorial cohesion, and are committed to principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which guarantees the right to access essential services of good quality.

Unequal access to services risk leading to higher inequalities in society at large and further worsen the disparities between women and men in terms of poverty and exclusion.

To support actions that promote gender-equal access to quality essential services and ensure they meet the diverse needs of all users, the EU can play an important role in the collection, availability and use of systematic and reliable gender-disaggregated data.

Actions such as gender-responsive budgeting and inclusive service design are among the measures that help ensure services are accessible to all. Gender-responsive budgeting helps ensure that public resources are allocated in ways that promote equality, while inclusive service design ensures that services respond to the specific needs of all users.

These approaches rely on robust data to identify gaps, monitor progress, and guide effective public action. Without this evidence base, inequalities risk remaining invisible and public policies may fall short of delivering on their objectives.

Social partners role in creating a gender equal labour market

The social dialogue is an important and effective tool to promote gender equality in the labour market. In order to ensure its effectiveness, it is important to safeguard the capacity and autonomy of social partners, recognize their role and provide support for them to scale up their efforts.

Social partners are strategically positioned to co-design and implement targeted measures that are tailored to the specific contexts of sectors, regions, and workplaces. Through collective agreements, joint initiatives, and sector-specific tools, they can address practical barriers to equality more directly and flexibly than top-down regulation. This complements EU-level efforts and enhances local ownership of gender equality goals.

To fully harness the potential of social dialogue, the EU should prioritise investments in capacity-building for employer and trade unions organisations. Supporting the development of expertise, data-sharing, and good practice exchange on gender equality can strengthen the role of social partners in implementation, particularly in sectors facing labour shortages and rapid transformation.

The recognition of social partner's contributions to advancing gender equality should be better recognised and integrated into the design and evaluation of EU strategies and funding instruments. This includes ensuring their involvement in programming and monitoring processes under EU funds, as well as promoting their role in accompanying the implementation of gender-related directives such as the Work-Life Balance and Pay Transparency Directives.

An additional example of actions taken by social partners to promote gender equality in the labour market, comes from SGI Member 'Union des employeurs de l'économie sociale et solidaire' (UDES).

UDES, together with their trade union counter parts, has signed a cross-sectoral agreement to promote professional equality between women and men in the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE). As part of this commitment, UDES has developed a practical guide to support SSE employers in turning equality principles into concrete workplace actions.

The guide helps organisations assess the relevance and implications of professional equality from social, human, economic, and legal perspectives; conduct internal diagnostics to identify strengths and areas for improvement; and access a variety of user-friendly tools and examples of best practices. To facilitate implementation, 12 thematic fact sheets have been created covering essential topics such as gender-equal recruitment, pay equity, prevention of workplace violence and harassment, and how to negotiate professional equality agreements. The material is available, in French, [here](#).

Achieving gender equality in the labour market requires a sustained and coordinated effort across all levels. SGI Europe and its members stand ready to contribute through practical measures, constructive social dialogue, and context-specific solutions. To make real progress, we need enabling conditions, clear guidance, and recognition of the role played by service providers and social partners in addressing persistent barriers. With the right tools and support, we can move from ambition to implementation.