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Women's conditional freedom
EU actions to overcome the gender gap and combat violence against women

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Abstract

In recent years, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation for women has worsened. This deterioration has affected women in all European countries to varying degrees, with direct consequences for national social and economic systems. Today, women are increasingly insecure and poorer, and they are also frequently subjected to offline and online violence. No category is exempt: politicians, journalists, business executives, married or single women, Italian or foreign. Given the seriousness of the situation at European level, in April 2024, the European Parliament adopted the first EU rules to combat violence against women, with the aim of preventing gender-based violence and protecting victims, particularly victims of domestic violence. With this directive, the EU has renewed and strengthened its support for women, which began in 2000 with the declaration of equality between men and women. Starting from three specific questions about the status of women (whether it is determined by social and economic factors or by cultural behaviours that are difficult to eradicate, or whether it also depends on a lack of confidence in women's emancipation), the document aims to reflect on the causes of what can be defined as the "conditional freedom of women". Consisting of three parts, the work analyses the elements that condition the status of women over time, namely the body, education and salary, before moving on to the socio-economic elements that characterise the current status of women in European society (gender gap, gender pay gap and gender digital gap), as well as the EU's driving and monitoring role, with particular attention to combating violence against women. The work concludes with a reflection on women's body in light of European and global political changes.

Keywords: *European Union; Violence against women; Gender Gap; Women's conditional freedom; Women's body*

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1. Introduction

This work is a personal tribute to the women who came before us and, as a scholar, a preliminary reflection on women's issues from a historical, economic and social perspective. It arose from the evidence that women are increasingly insecure, poorer and constantly subjected to violence both offline and online. No category of women is exempt: women involved in politics, journalists, business executives, married or single women, Italian or foreign. The condition of women has further worsened in recent years, mainly due to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. This deterioration has affected all European countries, albeit to varying degrees, with direct consequences on national social and economic systems. Now we must ask ourselves, precisely out of respect for the long process of women's emancipation that has preceded us: is the current condition of women merely a consequence of the social, political and economic conditions of European societies? Or is it the result of a cultural *vulnus*, predominantly male, that prevents gender equality? Or is it the result of a partial (not yet definitive) cultural emancipation that has liberated women but has not made them free to choose for themselves and by themselves? This work is intended as a preliminary approach to the current women's question. The article is divided into three parts. The first one is dedicated to identifying the elements that have characterised the status of women in European and global society over time and continue to do so today, namely the body, education and salary. As is now clear, these are the elements that, on the one hand, lay the foundations for women's emancipation, but on the other hand continue to condition women's freedom even today. This is followed by a central section focusing on the policies implemented by the European Union for gender equality and combating violence against women from 2000 to the present day. This chapter is based on official European Union documents, Eurobarometer and European Gender Equality Index (EIGE) data, and research conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on the education systems of European countries in relation to female employment. Based on this documentation, we compared the current situation of women in three specific European countries (Italy, Hungary and Finland) and sought to understand how and in what ways the situation of women has worsened in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The picture that emerges highlights, on the one hand, the efforts made by the EU to overcome the gender gap and combat violence against women, and on the other hand, it emphasises the need to extend the concept of violence to include those economic and cultural behaviours and conditioning that compromise the quality of life of women, even in our European societies. The last part is an initial reflection on the current European and global political situation, which in recent years has seen the rise of numerous right-wing governments promoting a narrative about women that can be described as retrograde and insistently focused on women's bodies. This is a direction that is not yet structured, but which requires, as of now, extensive reflection on the part of women on their freedom to make decisions about their own body.

2. The female question between body, education, salary and role

'Gender plays a role', with these words Oliver Hall, a young supporter of Kamala Harris, who worked hard to convince voters to vote for the Democratic candidate, underlines the difficulties encountered. Not only that, Hall recalls that people were not ready to support a female president, especially not American women - they couldn't 'see her in the chair' (Hall 2024). Kamala Harris's experience is not dissimilar to Hillary Clinton's previous defeat (again against candidate Donald Trump). In that case too, apart

from the purely political issues, women did not support her candidacy[1], preferring a man who, among his many characteristics, is also a misogynist. We could say that women still today do not believe in women or, to put it better, do not believe in themselves, as Dowling well stated in her book The Cinderella Complex (1982). The author emphasises, in fact, that since the 1970s women have moved on, they have shown that they are capable, that they can achieve significant goals, but also that at a certain point they stop, they fall back into the activities of caring for and supporting their husbands and children; women, therefore, accept low or medium-level jobs and convince themselves that they live well below their means. This line of reasoning is echoed in the lapidary conclusion of Lagrave who, in the margins of a long reflection on the role of women during the Glorious Thirties (1945-1975), states that the successes of a few women mask the condition of many others: women have obtained more favourable legislation, access to education, but in the world of work they struggle to assert themselves; real competition does not take off, when it does, the sexual difference enters (1995). We can ask ourselves, are women afraid of their potential or are social and/or political-economic conditions holding them back? Is there a deep-rooted sense of dependence (the prince who saves) or, as Del Bo Boffino states, is there a concept of women's search for meaning in life that seems to exclude that a woman can do something only for herself (1982)? If we look at the long history of women's emancipation, of the search for gender equality, a number of elements emerge that are worth remembering in order to even begin to answer the questions just posed and, above all, the idea of a free and not a liberated woman, which is then the underlying theme of all reasoning around and about women.

The body is the first element that affects women's freedom and is closely linked to the role that is often given or imposed on them. Together, these two elements define the perimeter that society draws for women in different eras. Suffice it to say that women's bodies have been battlegrounds since the beginning of the struggle for women's emancipation. Subjected to severe restrictions since the Middle Ages, it was not until the 19th century that it fully assumed its role as an instrument for claiming female freedom. Although in different ways, both Mary Wollstonecraft and Florence Nightingale include in their battles for women's rights if not total freedom of control over the body, at least a greater knowledge and awareness of it. Knibiehler's analysis of the medicalisation of women's bodies is interesting in this regard. The scholar recalls that from the 19th century onwards, the doctor replaced the midwife, and childbirth became medicalised and removed from the exclusively female care and competence. Midwives, nuns, nurses, healers became salaried employees subordinate to the doctor and the 19th century woman was, according to doctors, frail, sickly and nervous (1995). It will be necessary to wait until the first women doctors for a reversal of this trend. Above all, there remains a general female ignorance about the body and sexuality. In spite of the situation just described, in the second half of the century the practice of abortion (clandestine, self-imposed or practised by doctors and midwives) increased considerably, revealing, according to Knibiehler, a strong female desire to control the body and time. The limitation of births, the author states, gives women new awareness, for example on the upbringing of their children, and also ends up modifying their relationship with the

[1] As reported in NBC News Exit Poll, in 2016, 78 per cent of conservative women, 58 per cent of white women aged 45 to 64, 64 per cent of white Protestant women, and 53 per cent of white women had voted for Trump.

opposite sex, which becomes more complicit; the husband is gradually no longer lord and master (1995). This is a substantial step in the path of female emancipation: the possibility of governing births removes women from a life confined within four walls. This emancipation process continued until the 1920s. The gradual acceptance of the idea of fertility limitation, to which Margaret Sanger would contribute greatly, allows women to bring education, possible paid work, and the idea of being able to reconcile work and family into their lives. The process is not linear, however, and the body tends to re-emerge as the prevailing element. In the 1930s, countries such as Germany and Italy reduced women essentially to a reproductive body, bent to the needs of a nation-state vigorously devoted to conquest and eager to multiply its people. The same happened in the 1950s. If the war had seen women replace men in industry or flank them in the Resistance, the post-World War II period still wanted them to be the angel of the hearth, this time educated and comforted by new, widely advertised electrical appliances. This situation is well depicted in Mike Newell's film Mona Lisa Smile (2003). The commercialisation of the contraceptive pill in 1960 would lead to the definition of a liberated woman, but in fact not yet free. With the second feminist movement that characterised the 1960s and 1970s, women fought for and achieved gender equality, the right to divorce, contraception and safe abortion. But the woman entering the eighties is stressed. Dowling describes her as a frantic working wife-mother. On her shoulders fall not only work, but also children and the home. Over the next two decades, women's bodies are commodified and subjected to periodic and systematic violence. Lagrave states, speaking of the economic boom years, that women cultivated two illusions: the first was that of education through which they would have the same opportunities as men, the second that work would liberate them (1995).

Education is the second element that helps us understand the condition of women. 1975 is proclaimed by the United Nations as the International Year of Women, followed by the first International Conference on Women from 19 June to 22 July of the same year in Mexico City. The guidelines matured and adopted in those days spoke of the adoption of concrete measures to remove the socio-economic structures that still relegated women to a position of inferiority. However, among the rights that were considered almost acquired was that of equal access to studies. Here too the path had been long and arduous. de Beauvoir recalls that in the 16th century women were still poorly educated. Very few were able to emerge in society and become acculturated due to their wealth or rank. We have to wait until the 17th century, when thanks to tutors, readings, conferences and conventions, women gain access to culture. Then followed the sciences, letters and philosophy. Finally, the women of bourgeoisie and the nobility were able to *participate* in political life. Again, de Beauvoir states that during the Ancien Régime, culture had represented a form of female emancipation (1997). But it would take over a hundred years for women to be granted access to higher and then university studies. Throughout this long journey, there was no shortage of thinkers and philosophers, detractors or men who were simply against it; even women hindered their daughters and granddaughters from reading, worried that such an occupation would take them away from family duties: 'knowing too much can lead to neurosis and forced celibacy' (Hoock-Demarle 1995: 253). Recalls de Beauvoir, in her volume The Second Sex, that a student had declared in the Hebdo-Latin that 'every female student who becomes a doctor or a lawyer steals a place from us' (1997: 23). It is not surprising that recently at a seminar on the status of women in Europe held at the university where I work, a student in his early twenties expressed the same conviction by stating that if women did not work, there would be more jobs for men.

In the words of this young man, we find the meaning of the illusion that had made women believe that, thanks to equal education, they would have the same opportunities as men. Because women had not anticipated a strong male aversion to their active entry into society and the world of work, a form of competition that was unexpected, sometimes aggressive, and still persistent.

The issue then shifts from getting an education to having an income, a salary, equated to one's skill level. As Scott states, women entered the world of work long before the advent of industrial capitalism. She is a seamstress, spinner, domestic servant, working in small family businesses, both in the city and the countryside. With her work, the woman contributes to the sustenance of the family. The problem arises when her work takes her outside the family unit. In a dimension in which the places of work and family are physically different and distant, in which work time is full time and, above all, generates a salary, the theme of the woman's body re-emerges forcefully: the sexed woman. The female worker by nature can only access certain types of work, mostly underpaid. Recall Scott that the economist Jean Baptiste Say stated that women's wages should always remain below subsistence level because of the possibility for some women to be able to rely on their families and not need to live on their wages (1995: 367). Therefore, by her physical nature, women are weaker, more suited to certain tasks, can only work during certain periods of their lives (when young and alone), are less specialised, nor can they aspire to improve. Over everything, however, prevails the protection of the role of the breadwinner invested with the task of the economic sustenance of the household. In this framework, women's wages are understood as a residual contribution that results in low wages. From the numerous studies on working women in the 19th century, we know that even the trade union struggled to accept working women and their demands. Both at the Marseilles Workers' Congress of 1879 and at the Gota Congress of 1875, which would establish the German Social Democratic Party, the delegates were clearly against the working woman (Scott 1995: 375). But women's labour is needed, it is useful to industry and the tertiary sector, which strongly demand it. As Lagrave points out, women actively participated in the *economic boom*: they mostly worked in the tertiary sector, were unskilled, and held low hierarchical levels. The subsequent period, defined as the period of *degrowth* (1975-1986), brought with it the concept of *flexible work*, which for women translated into part-time work, or a return to home-based work, often into unemployment or even undeclared work. As the scholar states, in those years the successes of a few women masked the condition of many others (1995).

At the conclusion of this brief but necessary excursus, it is possible to state that the body, education and salary have marked and determined the path of women's emancipation. We can also assert that education and salary have not yielded the desired results (the two illusions), but above all that the body has continued to determine the perimeter within which women have been able to exercise their freedom, has defined the role they have assumed in society. We can ask ourselves, and this is what we will do in the next chapter, whether the role of women in today's European society - in view of their culture and critical capacity, their skills in the field of work and research, and in the light of gender equality laws - is still limited today by the perception that society has - or intends to have - of women's body.

3. European Union: a pragmatic approach

According to the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap* Report 2023, it still takes 131 years to close the gender gap and, as indicated in 2022, the year for achieving equality remains set at 2154. In addition, the drafters note, the pace of progress has slowed, with the exception of the education sector, where as many as 117 countries out of 146 indexed have closed at least 95 per cent of the gap. Within this framework, Iceland remains the country with the best gender equality score in the world, while in the Global Top Ten we find five European countries: Finland, Sweden, Germany, Lithuania and Belgium (World Economic Forum 2023). Let us see, therefore, how the European Union is acting to close the gender gap.

Since the creation of its first Communities, the European Union has addressed gender equality with the concept of *equal economic treatment*, equal pay according to the 1957 EEC founding treaty. We can say that this approach lies in the nature of the EU to pursue social progress through economic leverage at all levels (Benocci 2020). Operationally, the EU proceeds step by step: in 2000, gender equality is recognised as a fundamental right in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and in 2006, the European Commission starts publishing the European Strategy for Gender Equality in which it indicates the measures to be taken and the date for achieving this goal. In 2016, the EU identifies 2025 as the target date for achieving gender equality. In 2017, however, a Eurobarometer survey, while noting a general sensitivity of European citizens to the issue, recorded that women earned on average 16 per cent less than men and the pay gap was largely due to less or poorer job offerings: lower-paid sectors with few opportunities for promotion, more career breaks and a worrying willingness of women to do unpaid work (European Commission 2017). Therefore, the European Commission presented a 2018-2019 Action Plan aimed at improving compliance with the principle of equal pay; it called on the European Parliament and Member States to quickly adopt the work-life balance proposal and, most importantly, to break the *glass ceiling* by funding projects to improve gender balance in companies at all management levels. Finally, the EU encouraged governments and social partners to take concrete measures to improve gender balance in decision-making. In 2020, the EU instituted the European Gender Equality Week to underline the importance of the topic, but the data, once again, is not comforting: only 67% of European women are employed, women's pensions are 30.1% lower than men's, and 75% of unpaid care and domestic work is still borne by women (European Parliament 2020-2025). In its move on the women's issue, which we can already now describe as pragmatic, the EU has recognised that there are still many obstacles to achieving gender equality within European society, not least the increasing violence against women offline and online. Before presenting the most recent actions implemented by the EU to support women, we offer some insights into the topic. Using EIGE data and specific OECD research, we will compare the status of women in three European countries (Italy, Finland, and Hungary), before moving on to the issue of violence against women, in this case supported by studies and surveys promoted directly by the EU.

3.1 A Comparison: the women status in Hungary, Italy and Finland

This section presents the similarities and differences in the status of women in three European countries, Hungary, Italy and Finland, through two survey instruments, the European Gender Equality Index (EIGE 2023) and an OECD survey on the level of education and access to work for women (2024). In addition to Italy, Finland and Hungary

were chosen for their policies on women, where Finland has pioneering legislation with high female representation, increased awareness and action for gender equality and greater protection for victims of domestic and sexual violence, while Hungary, although making efforts to improve the status of women, sees a reduced participation in political life and only a small percentage working in mathematical and technological science.

3.1.1 The European Gender Equality Index

The Gender Equality Index is an index measuring the progress of gender equality in the European Union[2]. It consists of five domains: participation and power, health, well-being and lifetime, employment and income, training and education, and gender and violence. It should be mentioned that no European country achieves full gender equality in all these areas: against a European average of 67.4 points, Sweden is in first place with 82.2, while Romania is in last place with 56.1 points (EIGE 2023).

According to EIGE parameters, Hungary ranks 26th with 57.3 points out of 100. The country scores highest in health (87.2 points) and lowest in participation and power. As indicated in the report, the participation of Hungarian women in this area is still low, while there has been a marked improvement in the domain of work (the country has moved from 21st to 11th place). The issue of time as well as social and recreational activities outside the home remains weak; in fact, Hungarian women bear the brunt of caring for relatives and children (EIGE 2023a). As stated by the EIGE, Italy's score has increased by 14.9 points since 2010, jumping eight places in the ranking (the country now ranks 13th). This change is mainly due to improvements in the areas of health, time, care and social activities, and power. However, as in the case of Hungary, significant inequalities remain in the areas of work and money (Italy has ranked last since 2010); Italian women are still not fully autonomous in managing money or understanding financial processes (EIGE, 2023b). Finally, Finland ranks eighth in the gender equality index, with 74.4 points out of 100. Since 2010, its score has improved, mainly thanks to the results achieved in the areas of power, work and participation. Particularly interesting is its score of 87.4 in the area of money, which indicates that Finnish women have great confidence in economic and financial management. Despite these achievements, the authors of the Index point out that, since 2020, the country has seen a decline in points in the time domain, falling two places in the ranking (from 4th to 6th place), and a much more significant decline in the social activities sub-domain (-18.9 points), which has led to a drop in this ranking from 5th to 17th place. The editors point out that this is the fifth largest drop in points in this area among all Member States (EIGE, 2023c).

Following the reasoning of the Index's editors, although it may be considered a success story, the Finnish case can be interpreted as an early warning sign in Europe, as the country loses points in one of the most critical areas for women, namely time to devote to themselves.

[2] The index is published every two years by the European Commission's Research Centre. The maximum score is 100, while the minimum score is 0.

3.1.2 OECD and gender equality: education levels and employment

Continuing our analysis of the similarities and differences in the status of women in Hungary, Italy, and Finland, we now examine the results of the 2024 OECD survey of education systems across European countries in relation to female employment.

As shown in the following figures Italy, Finland and Hungary share certain aspects: in all three countries men and women have the same percentage of chances of obtaining a tertiary education (54%); in all three Countries women with an upper secondary education have fewer chances of finding employment than their male peers with the same level of education. Finally, in all three countries women in jobs commensurate with their level of tertiary education earn lower wages than their male peers with the same level of education. In fact, compared to an OECD average of 83%, in Italy women receive 58% of the salary received by a man with the same level of education, in Hungary 75% and in Finland 85% of men's compensation (OECD 2024).

Figure n. 1 Education

Italy	**Hungary**	**Finland**
Probability of obtaining a tertiary qualification	Probability of obtaining a tertiary qualification	Probability of obtaining a tertiary qualification
Women 54% Men 54% OECD average 41%	Women 54% Men 54% OECD average 41%	Women 54% Men 54% OECD average 41%
Effective attainment of a tertiary qualification	E Effective attainment of a tertiary qualification	Effective attainment of a tertiary qualification
Women 37% Men 24% in line with the OECD average	Women 36% Men 23% in line with the OECD average	Women 46% Men 33% in line with the OECD average

Source: OECD (2024), Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris

Figure n. 2 Occupation

Italy	**Hungary**	**Finland**
Percentage employed without upper secondary education	Percentage employed without upper secondary education	Percentage employed without upper secondary education
Women 36% Men 72% OECD average Women 47% Men 72%	Women 47% Men 74% OECD average Women 47% Men 72%	Women 39% Men 53% OECD average Women 47% Men 72%

Percentage of employed with tertiary education	Percentage of employed with tertiary education	Percentage of employed with tertiary education
Women 73%	Women 92%	Women 87%
Men 75%	Men 95%	Men 90%
OECD average	OECD average	OECD average
Women 84%	Women 84%	Women 84%
Men 90%	Men 90%	Men 90%

Source: OECD (2024), Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris

Figure n. 3 Salary

Italy	**Hungary**	**Finland**
Percentage of wages earned by women with tertiary qualifications compared to their male peers with the same level of education	Percentage of wages earned by women with tertiary qualifications compared to their male peers with the same level of education	Percentage of wages earned by women with tertiary qualifications compared to their male peers with the same level of education
Women 58% OECD average 83%	Women 75% OECD average 83%	Women 85% OECD average 83%
Percentage of wages earned by women with upper secondary or post-secondary (non-tertiary) education compared to their male peers with the same level of education	Percentage of wages earned by women with upper secondary or post-secondary (non-tertiary) education compared to their male peers with the same level of education	Percentage of wages earned by women with upper secondary or post-secondary (non-tertiary) education compared to their male peers with the same level of education
Women 85% OECD average 84%	Women 83% OECD average 84%	Women 82% OECD average 84%

Source: OECD (2024), Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris

The OECD data show, once again, that women suffer forms of economic discrimination (Gender Pay Gap) and mortification of their high levels of education (Overeducation). In fact, highly educated women (tertiary education) are generally underemployed and often work part-time, with the result that they are destined to receive low pensions. This condition ends up taking on, due to their systematic nature, and in the writer's opinion, the contours of a form of indirect (non-physical) violence, which seriously undermines women's quality of life.

3.2. Violence against women in Europe and the consequence of pandemic by Covid 19

As stated by EU, in 2020, 33% of European women had experienced physical and sexual violence, 22% violence at the hands of their partner, and 55% sexual harassment. In general, as European observers point out, compared to a man, a woman was more likely to experience sexual harassment online (European Commission 2020). More recently, in 2022, on the occasion of Women's Day (8 March), the European Parliament commissioned a specific survey of European women to assess the impact of the pandemic on various aspects of their lives. The survey found that three out of four women believe that the pandemic has led to an increase in physical and emotional violence against women; 38 per cent of respondents said that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their personal income; 44 per cent that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their work-life balance; again, 44 per cent said women were more likely to worry about missing friends and family; 37 per cent were more anxious and stressed and 33 per cent worried about their future (European Parliament 2022). In general, therefore, after the pandemic crisis there has been a worsening of women's living conditions and an increase in levels of violence against women at European level. In 2021, the European Commission also noted that the pandemic had increased online crimes such as sexual harassment and hate crimes; that between 4 and 7 per cent of women in the Union had experienced online harassment, while between 1 and 3 per cent had experienced online stalking; that young women and girls were at a higher risk of experiencing online harassment and bullying; and that at least 12.5 per cent of bullying at school took place online (European Parliament 2021). In fact, as the Mappa delle Intolleranze reminds us, hate speech against women increases in the presence of women journalists, foreigners or women involved in politics; it increases dramatically in the presence of feminicides (2023)[3]. Finally, 90% of the revenge porn form of violence affects women. As has been observed, even at a European level, one of the most dramatic consequences of online violence is the withdrawal of women from any public role, with repercussions on their mental health and the possible loss of economic independence.

Economic independence is a necessary goal for women, because women who are not financially and/or digitally independent are particularly vulnerable. As regards the Gender Pay Gap, already mentioned, the lack of a personal income for women or the delegation to the partner of the keeping of family accounts contributes to the marginalisation and isolation of women. It is therefore interesting to recall the data collected annually by the European Commission on the Gender Digital Gap: still in 2024, significant disparities in digital skills, training or content creation and even online account-keeping between men and women remain. For example, in Italy only 55 per cent of women have an online bank account compared to the European average of 69 per cent, only 44 per cent of the sample have basic digital skills compared to 54 per cent at European level, and only 58 per cent have basic skills to create digital content compared to the 67 per cent European average (European Commission 2024).

[3] In 2022, the authors of the Mappa emphasise, online violence primarily affects women (43.21%), followed by persons with disabilities (33.95%), homosexuals (8.78%), migrants (7.33%), Jews (6.58%) and Muslims (0.15%).

4. A significant but still not decisive European role for women

As has emerged from the analysis conducted so far, it is possible to affirm that at the European level, albeit with significant differences between the twenty-seven member states, women experience a freedom that is still conditioned by their education, salary and body; the latter has recently been the subject of a new hate speech that has found ample space on the web and through social media. For its part, in recent years, as shown in the figure below, the European Union has responded by stepping up its efforts first to make women economically independent, then free to use their time for themselves and able to balance work and motherhood. In addition, the EU is taking action by offering young female students more opportunities to acquire technological and digital skills. In short, the EU continues to push for the elimination of the gender pay gap and the gender digital divide, with the aim of overcoming the gender gap. At the same time, the Union has launched policies to combat violence against women offline and online, including by adhering to the Istanbul Convention and approving a first directive on violence against women.

Figure n. 4 EU Actions

EU actions taken to improve women working conditions	**EU Actions taken to combat violence against women**
Directive on pay transparency (May 2023) Care Strategy and Recommendations on long-term care and on early childhood education and care improving accessible and quality of childcare (September and December 2022). Monitoring implementation: Work-life balance Directive (from August 2022) Directive on adequate minimum wages (October 2022) #EndGenderStereotypes Campaign (2023) In 2022, the Directive on gender balance on company boards was adopted with the aim of improving gender balance in decision-making positions in major publicly listed companies in the EU.	EU accession to the Istanbul Convention (October 2023) Digital Services Act for online platforms to remove illegal and harmful content (from August 2023) EU network on the prevention of gender-based and domestic violence (2023) Revision of the Directive on trafficking in human beings (politically agreed in January 2024) Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence (politically agreed in February 2024) Recommendation on preventing and combating harmful practices against women and girls (expected in 2024) Facilitating a Code of conduct on gender-based cyberviolence (expected in 2025) Euro 500 million allocated to the global EU-UN Spotlight Initiative

Source: European Commission. Championing Gender Equality in the EU and beyond. European Union 2024

It is important to reiterate that the many actions undertaken by the EU are designed as tools to liberate women from the many constraints and conditioning factors that affect them. The European effort in recent years has also been to change the image of women's role in European and global society, defining it as crucial to the development of society. We can argue also that the constant action taken by the EU, within the limits of its prerogatives and its pragmatism, has produced significant results. However, if we look at the case of Finland, where women are losing autonomy to devote to self-care, we understand that the EU has not yet managed to make an impact on a cultural level and therefore reach the heart of gender equality. There therefore remains a cultural vulnerability that European policies have not yet addressed or cannot address due to the specific intrinsic difficulties of the role of the European Union. The EU's attempts in recent years to set a definite date for overcoming the gender gap therefore remain unrealistic. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the *watch-dog* role assumed by the EU in recent years on the issue of combating violence against women represents an important instrument of pressure on national policies.

5. Women's body: a final reflection

Drawing our conclusions of this first contribution on the women question, we can state that when we speak of violence against women, it manifests itself not only as physical violence, not only as virtual violence, but also, as economic discrimination and mortification of women's high levels of education; in this case, we could speak of *indirect and systematic violence* that seriously undermines women's quality of life and women's freedom. It follows that a woman's role in society is not determined by her culture and critical capacity, nor by her skills in the field of work or research; even today her role seems to be severely limited by the perception society has - or intends to have - of the woman's body. In this perspective the remembered case of Finland is very indicative in respect of that cultural *vulnus* that prevents gender equality.

A further reflection on women's body is closely linked to the question of achieving full and definitive female emancipation. It is interesting to recall, in the event of Trump's election, a kind of online campaign, a word-of-mouth among American women inviting them to buy pregnancy tests and abortion pills, in the fear that the new administration would further reduce the current spaces of freedom in the area of contraception and therapeutic abortion (Shugerman 2024). It is clear from the behaviour of these women that women's body is once again in danger. This is even more true in today's world, characterised by power politics, i.e. constant confrontation between states, and by the presence of right-wing governments, even in Europe, which appeal to the principles of race and the traditional family, proposing demographic policies aimed at increasing the national population. These political orientations are in stark contrast to the global demographic policies of recent decades, which advocate limiting birth rates to combat overpopulation and ensure sustainability. In this framework, women's freedom (women's body) becomes a political issue. Some, even among the supporters of these policies, argue that a free woman can choose to devote herself to her children and prioritise a caring role. But as we have seen, it is difficult to talk about free women. Even in Europe, women's freedom is severely limited or conditioned: stifled higher education, low income, little influence in centres of power, violence against women's bodies. The issue is rather complex and thorny: faced with these limitations, a woman may be led to embrace the role

of mother and wife – once again confined to the four walls of her home – by backward but de facto "reassuring" national policies. In this context, women's inability to resolve the issue of motherhood also plays an important role. Today, as in the past, there is a lack of female reflection on the issue of women's freedom to procreate or not. However, women should not leave it to others (men, governments, institutions, etc.) to make important decisions about women's bodies, least of all in the emotional wake of national demographic decline. As de Beauvoir rightly observed, there is still no female "we". A "we" that should help women no longer have to define themselves as women but, as is already the case for men, simply be women.

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