



gender equality

Gender equality policy and implementation in 10 EU countries: Gaps and opportunities



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Introduction

Empower women, empower humanity

Gender equality is an essential condition for sustainable development. In other words, our efforts to improve societies without degrading the natural environment and future generations well-being depend on empowering women and girls. Why? Women and girls are powerful change-agents and have valuable perspectives and ideas, yet persistent gender bias prevents them from uplifting themselves and others through equal participation in society and decision-making.

To illustrate: according to UN-Habitat's 2024 World Cities Report, studies show that women-led local governments prioritise environmental protection more than male-led ones,¹ yet women are chronically underrepresented in political leadership roles.

Gender equality (GE) means that rights, responsibilities and opportunities are not pre-determined by being born male or female.² Sustainable Development Goal 5, 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls', aims to eliminate all forms of gender-related discrimination and bias. However, according to the United Nations, progress towards global GE is off track. For example, monitoring of Target 5.c, 'Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels', indicates one current shortfall: Available data from 2018–2021 show that only 26% of countries have comprehensive systems to track and make public allocations for GE.³ This statistic matters for global sustainable development because GE in all aspects – from political representation, to economic power, to reproductive rights – is a way to address root causes of unsustainability and impoverishment and increase collective well-being.

On the European stage, GE is a core value of the Union, a fundamental right, and a key principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The European Union leads globally in GE, with 14 of the top 20 countries in this area being EU Member States.⁴ However, no Member State has achieved full GE, and the average Gender Equality Index Score is 71 out of 100, based on 2022 data.⁵ This Index tracks indicators for Work, Money, Knowledge, Time, Power, and Health as a proxy for GE at country level. While 71 out of 100 seems like a passing grade, the goal is 100, or full equality. Consequently, 'A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025' (GES) and the 'Gender Action Plan III' (GAP III) were put forth as key EU policy frameworks. GES' key objectives are: ending gender-based violence, challenging gender stereotypes, closing gender gaps in the labour market, achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy, addressing the gender pay and pension gaps, closing the gender care gap, and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics.⁶ Meanwhile the GAP III outlines an EU policy framework with 5 pillars of action. Most relevant for this report is a pillar which calls for close cooperation with Member States and partners at a "multilateral, regional and country level".⁷ This policy pillar references local level actors like civil society organisations and other local activists but does not explicitly mention the role of local governments.

¹ <https://unhabitat.org/wcr/>

² https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1059?language_content_entity=en

³ https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5#progress_and_info

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0152>

⁵ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024>

⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0152>

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_2Slovenia184



SUBLIME SDGs’ work on gender equality

The SUBLIME SDGs project, meanwhile, specifically highlights the role of local authorities to achieve 65% of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals, GE included. Through cooperation between local authorities and civil society organisations, SUBLIME SDGs’ ambition is to transform small and resilient EU border communities into ambassadors of sustainability, inclusion, empowerment and peace. As a part of this ambition, the project aims to identify and bridge gaps between national and European GE policies and their translation into local level policy and practice.

This report sets the scene for future dialogue between national policymakers and local partners around GE and its mainstreaming in local and national policies.



Figure 1 - SDG5, Gender Equality, has made moderate progress in the EU

The project, and therefore this report, focuses on 10 countries and 10 communities within them:

Italy	Municipality of Lampedusa and Linosa	Greece	Municipality of West Lesvos
Malta	Town of Msida	Hungary	Siklós border territory
Austria	Straß in Steiermark Municipality	Slovenia	Bela Krajina region
Bulgaria	Burgas Municipality	Romania	Tulcea Municipality
Cyprus	Nicosia Municipality	Poland	Poznan District

Table 1 The 10 SUBLIME countries and communities featured in this report

According to the Gender Equality Index 2024,⁸ Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Malta have Index scores lower than the EU average but are making faster improvements over time, reducing the gap between them and the EU. Slovenia has GE levels equal to the EU average, but the country’s progress has been slower than the EU average. Austria performs better than the EU average on GE and progresses more rapidly. Hungary, Poland and Romania have all improved their Gender Equality Index scores but are consistently and significantly lower than the EU average.

⁸ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024/EU>

Research objective, method and key research questions

Research objective

SUBLIME SDG's research aims to promote better understanding of both the gaps regarding GE and the opportunities to incorporate GE (as aligned with the EU GES 2020-2025 and GAP III) in local and national sustainable development policies.

Research method and key research questions

Through desk research and expert interviews, 10 national reports were prepared to summarise the current context of Italy, Malta, Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, and Poland according to the following research questions:

- What are the existing national and regional (if mentioned) gender equality policies?
- What is the level of implementation of the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and GAP III by national and local authorities?
- What types of sustainable development initiatives and policies fostering gender equality are adopted by local authorities?
- In summary, how advanced is the progress towards the SDG Target 5c: adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislations for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls at all levels? What recommendations are there to enhance progress?

This transnational report summarises key findings from the 10 national reports to give a broader picture of GE policy gaps and opportunities.

Findings

What are the existing national and regional (if mentioned) gender equality policies?

Gender equality is indicated in the Treaty on the EU as one of the Union's essential tasks, and as such Member States are obligated to integrate GE into their laws and policies. Specifically, GE-related EU Directives on topics like equal pay, equal treatment at work, and equal treatment in social security schemes must be translated into national law.⁹ Consequently, almost all EU Member States have some form of legislation related to GE.¹⁰ These laws look different from country to country and are translated into a myriad of policies at the national level. The 10 national reports highlight relevant constitutional provisions, laws, strategies, and action plans, working groups, along with commissions, advisory bodies and national agencies.

⁹ https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ge_law_33_european_countries_2015_en.pdf

¹⁰ https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/institutions-and-structures/eu-member-states?language_content_entity=en



Constitutional provisions

All 10 countries covered in this report have GE rooted in their highest legal order – their constitutions. Constitutional provisions vary, but generally offer a legal guarantee for equal economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights for men and women. For example, the Maltese Constitution states in Article 14:

“the state shall promote the equal right of men and women to enjoy all economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights and for this purpose shall take appropriate measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination between the sexes by any person, organisation or enterprise; the State shall, in particular, aim at ensuring that women workers enjoy equal rights and the same wages for the same work as men” ¹¹

Laws

In accordance with their constitutional provisions, most national GE legislation comes in the form of so-called equality or equal treatment law. These laws stipulate equal treatment between women and men in work, education, health, and decision-making, among others. For many countries, these laws originate from around the turn of the century (e.g. Austria 1993, Hungary 2003, Romania 2002, Malta 2003), and some have been updated since (e.g. Austria’s national GE law was refreshed in 2023). Apart from national laws strictly dedicated to GE, there is legislation countering gender-based violence (e.g. Sicily, Italy 2012), anti-discrimination laws which include protections against gender-based discrimination (e.g. Poland ca. 2004, Slovenia 2016), parental leave laws (e.g. Malta 2022), and gender quota legislation (e.g. Malta 2020 introduced a 40% quota for its national parliament seats). GE also appears in national migration law (e.g. Italian migration law labels pregnant women as a vulnerable category to be protected). Finally, gender mainstreaming laws (e.g. Austria 2000) take a holistic approach by instructing all national decision-making to consider gender.

Strategies and action plans

A plethora of current national strategies align with the national GE laws, above. These include: national gender/gender equality/equal opportunity strategies (e.g. Bulgaria 2021-2030, Cyprus 2024-2026, Hungary 2010-2021, Romania 2022-2027, Slovenia 2023-2030, Italy 2021-2026, Malta 2022-2027), gender-based violence strategies (e.g. Cyprus 2024-2028, Romania 2022-2027, Malta 2017-2028), and women’s rights strategies (e.g. Cyprus 2014). Out of the 10 national reports summarised for this paper, only three referenced linkages between GE and national sustainable development strategies: Hungary’s National Framework Strategy on Sustainable Development (2012–2024) integrates gender perspectives into development plans; Romania’s National Strategy for Sustainable Development 2030 includes SDG 5, focusing on reducing the gender pay gap, preventing violence, and increasing women’s leadership representation; Slovenia’s Sustainable Development Strategy promotes inclusive and equitable development, addressing GE primarily in the context of social justice.

¹¹ Constitute Project. (2022). Malta’s Constitution of 1964 with Amendments through 2016. Retrieved from https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Malta_2016.pdf?lang=en



Various national action plans exist to operationalise the GE strategies above. They set more specific objectives such as integrating women's rights perspectives into public policies, improving women's political representation, preventing gender-based violence and human trafficking, and increasing access to education and reproductive health services, among others. For example, Greece's National Action Plan for Gender Equality (2021-2025) outlines GE policies at the national level around four key priority areas: Prevention and fight against gender-based and domestic violence, equal participation of women in the labour market, equal participation of women in decision-making and leadership roles, and gender mainstreaming in sectoral policies.

Working groups, commissions, advisory councils and national agencies

There are several examples of national-governance bodies responsible for guiding progress on GE. The Austrian Interministerial Working Group on Gender Mainstreaming/Budgeting (est. 2000) is tasked with ensuring GE in major federal projects and budget decisions. The Romanian National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men is responsible for developing and implementing GE strategies. Malta's National Commission for the Promotion of Equality for Men and Women (est. 2003) is an independent body for the promotion of GE, and Malta's Advisory Council for Women's Rights (est. 2017) was created to strengthen communication between the government and civil society on GE.

Analysis

Several points merit further exploration, namely: implementation gaps, political trends, multi-level governance, and sustainable development framings. Firstly, the breadth of national-level GE governance signals recognition of gender challenges and the ambition to address them. However, it is important to see beyond the text and have a clear view of what is being achieved. The 10 national reports clearly state that implementation gaps exist when it comes to translating policies into practical benefits for women. For instance, several of the countries analysed promote GE in the labour market on paper, while not offering adequate parental leave in practice. Furthermore, GE has strong cultural ties, which cannot be easily influenced by top-down governance from the EU or national levels. Further detail on implementation challenges is given in the next section.

Secondly, the progression towards stronger GE policies should not be taken for granted in a rightward-shifting political context. Gender politics is one of the favourite talking points and targets of right-wing movements. Under Italy's current right-wing populist ruling party, The National Strategic Plan on Male Violence against Women (2021-2023) has not been renewed, and drastic funding cuts for gender-based violence prevention have been reported. However, left and liberal European democracies continue GE efforts, like in Poland which has lately seen stronger legislation and national initiatives countering gender-based violence. Furthermore, public opinion remains influential, even in right-leaning countries. Following public revolts over femicide in Italy, a new draft national law was passed in March 2025 that would officially bring the concept into national law and give lifetime sentences for perpetrators.

Thirdly, although not overly detailed in the 10 national reports, the relationship between national GE laws and policies and local-level governance is worth noting. This relationship seems to take the form of guidance, on one hand, and obligations on the other. Illustrating the prior, the Hungarian Strategy for the Equality of Women and Men (2010-2021) guided local governments on employment equality and combating gender-based violence. Cases exemplifying the latter include Slovenia's Equal Opportunities for Women and Men Act which establishes obligations for both state and local authorities in ensuring GE, a March 2025 draft law in the Sicilian regional assembly which imposes a 40% gender quota for municipal councils in towns with up to 15,000 inhabitants, and Bulgarian national law that also defines GE responsibilities to be implemented by local governments. In the case of Malta, local authorities have limited self-governance capacity, as policies are largely centralised under the remit of the central government.



Acknowledging such dynamics between national, regional and local governments is needed to understand the levers and barriers of change in GE governance.

Fourthly and lastly, from the 10 national reports, it appears that national GE governance is not tightly connected with the concept of sustainable development. Only three of the reports mentioned GE’s relation to national sustainable development strategies (Hungary, Romania, Slovenia). While such strategies may exist in the other seven countries, the lack of mention raises questions about how closely sustainable development and GE are framed at the national level.

What is the level of implementation of the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and GAP III by national and local authorities?

The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (GES) and GAP III aim to advance GE across all sectors, with specific focus areas such as women’s participation in decision-making processes, closing the gender pay gap, combating gender-based violence, and supporting women’s economic empowerment. The 10 SUBLIME national reports suggest that their respective countries align with EU GE frameworks because they possess various national GE policies, detailed in the previous section. However, to reiterate, all Member States are required to align national legislation with EU GE directives, and EU accession necessitates compliance on GE and non-discrimination.¹² Poland’s accession in 2004, for example, was marked as a turning point for its national GE policies. Thus, as mentioned previously, it is important to look beyond such policies as symbols of GES and GAP III alignment and focus on assessing implementation.

Hinting at the complex and demanding nature of such a task, the national reports could not give comprehensive overviews of GES and GAP III implementation in each country. Only the Cyprus national report disclosed measurable progress – stating that 25% of actions in the National GE strategy (2024-2026) have been implemented. Generally, however, implementation was stated as a challenge, with the 10 countries demonstrating slow and rather ad-hoc progress – but progress none the less.

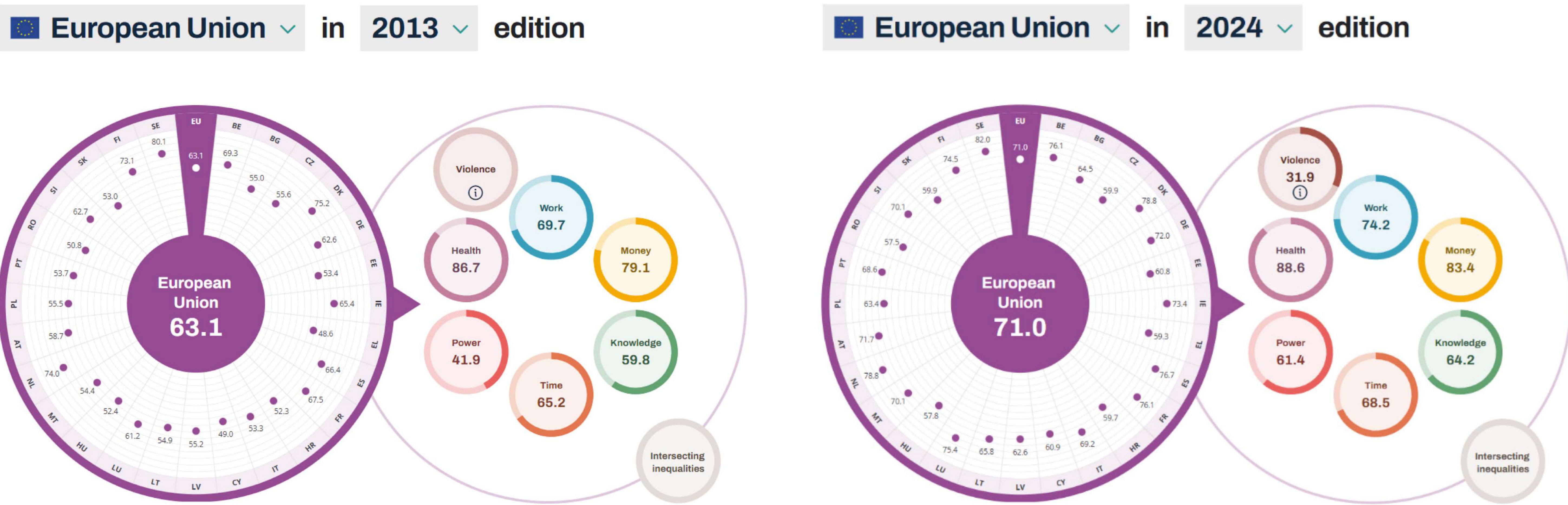


Figure 2 Comparison of the EU average Gender Equality Index scores from its earliest and most recent data sets demonstrates GE progress.

¹² <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/legal-developments/16-law/77-transposition-of-the-eu-directives-on-gender-equality-and-non-discrimination>

Regarding women's participation in decision-making processes, there has been mixed results. For example, Poland has seen a recent uptick of women in leadership and public administration positions, Malta's new 40% parliamentary gender quota has increased the number of women represented nationally, while in the 2022 Italian general election, female representation fell for the first time in the last 20 years. Conversely, women's representation in Italian regional councils rose from 13-23% between 2012 and 2023. An overview of key indicators related to GE in decision-making positions across political, economic and social spheres can be seen for each country under the 'Power' domain of the Gender Equality Index.¹³

The gender pay gap and women's economic empowerment meanwhile, are claimed by most of the 10 national reports as a persistent problem. In Hungary, for example, the gender pay gap in 2021 was 17.3%, higher than the EU average of 12.7%. However, the Gender Equality Index's overview of key indicators related to financial resources and economic situation through a gender lens shows improvements in this domain over the last decade, at least at the EU level. Furthermore, many of the 10 countries consider the fight against gender-based violence crucial for fulfilling GES and GAP III priorities. According to the 2024 Gender Equality Index's data on 'Violence', in the EU-27, 31 % of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by any perpetrator since the age of 15.¹⁴ Measures combatting gender-based violence were the most commonly cited examples of GAP III and GES implementation in the national reports. For example, Malta's police force established a new hub in 2024 for professionals in gender based and domestic violence to respond to cases in an adequate manner. Finally, while only mentioned in two national reports (Greece and Italy), gender-responsive migration policies are an aspect of GAP III which is being addressed to some extent through national and local implementation. The March 2023 Lampedusa Protocol, for instance, aims to improve obstetric and gynaecological care for pregnant migrant women.

Implementation challenges

Most national reports find that implementation of GES and GAP III by local authorities is relatively weak. This is reportedly influenced by the following intersecting factors:

- Absence of specific GE policies and action plans in municipalities despite presence of national legal frameworks
- Uneven or ad-hoc political and institutional commitment to GE measures, which often depends on staff members' personal dedication to the cause
- Failure to systematically collect data on key issues like gender-based violence, and to monitor or enforce GE policies
- Persistent traditional gender roles are there to enhance progress?
- Limited human and financial resources for GE initiatives, (e.g. Cyprus' National strategy for women's rights does not have gender budgeting provisions for the local level, although this is foreseen after 2028)
- General economic difficulties, particularly in rural regions, which deprioritise GE
- Burn-out of existing service providers and weak or overburdened GE civil society networks

¹³ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024>

¹⁴ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024/domain/violence>

Despite these recurring challenges, many local authorities are finding ways to advance GE, as detailed in the following section.

What types of sustainable development initiatives and policies fostering gender equality are adopted by local authorities?

A wide range of GE-related initiatives by local authorities were shared in the 10 national reports. Markedly similar to the national level, the accounts of these local initiatives lack an explicit framing in which ecological sustainability and GE are part of a holistic approach to sustainable development.

For instance, the Polish report found a lack of gender impact assessments for local sustainable development projects, meanwhile the Slovenian report found that in the Bela Krajina region there was no structured approach to link GE with SDGs. The one noted exception was Baranya County, Hungary, which integrates gender perspectives into its sustainable development programs.

Negligible sustainable development framing aside, it should be noted that local level data on GE and GE initiatives is not readily available and that regional disparities exist, according to the 10 national reports. The presence of local GE policies is quite varied: Some municipalities have GE policies on paper but lack specific actions, funding and implementation details (e.g. Tulcea, Romania), while others were found to have no projects, events or campaigns implementing GE measures (e.g. Burgas, Bulgaria). In some cases, local authorities are guided or obliged to adopt GE policies by higher levels of governance. In Cyprus, the Union of Municipalities of Cyprus transfers national guidelines to municipal representatives, which only recently included GE. Consequently, local GE efforts there are progressing further. In Greece, municipalities are encouraged to establish Equality Committees to implement GE initiatives, and most have done so. Meanwhile in Hungary, Local Equal Opportunity programs which aim to implement national GE policies locally are mandatory for municipalities over 10,000 inhabitants.

More concrete examples of GE initiatives and policies by local authorities are as follows:

Gender mainstreaming and budgeting	Gender mainstreaming is present in some local-level governance approaches. For example, in Austrian local authorities, gender mainstreaming has taken root in local decision-making, particularly around public transportation and childcare funding. In Poland, some local governments have introduced gender-responsive budgeting which allocates funds for local GE projects.
Collaboration with civil society	Civil society organisations are often seen as experts and front-line workers in the field of GE. Local authorities fund or collaborate with these organisations to advance local GE efforts. In Burgas the local government collaborates with NGOs focused on social inclusion and violence prevention. Meanwhile Hungarian local governments collaborate with NGO-led community projects on domestic violence, women’s empowerment via community projects, networking and advocacy. Notably, Malta’s Advisory Council for Women’s Rights is purposed with strengthening ties between government and civil society on GE, and it assists in proposing policies to address GE challenges.

Health and parental supports

Both pop-up and institutionalised initiatives are supporting women's health and parenthood. In Lampedusa, 'Health Open Days' provided free sexual health and breast cancer screenings. In Cyprus and Greece, local authorities are creating friendlier environments for breastfeeding and child changing in public spaces and workplaces. To support maternal health of women migrants, local authorities in Greece have conducted outreach in refugee reception facilities, and in Lampedusa there is a systematic triage for pregnant women to address the needs of migrant women arriving via the Central Mediterranean route.

Social welfare and sports

Social programs are seen as indirectly promoting GE, and sports are an avenue for promoting GE amongst youth. In Cyprus, local implementation of social welfare activities through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan touch on issues that affect women more than men, including child and elderly care. In Bela Krajina, social programs like employment promotion, family support, and social services for vulnerable groups are seen as a way to move GE forward. Meanwhile in Lampedusa, local sport associations are implementing gender-sensitive safeguarding policies to prevent gender-based abuse and discrimination in youth sports.

Gender-based violence and safety

Local authorities are expending significant effort to counter gender-based violence and increase safety. This area is likely one of the most consistently active areas of GE initiatives. Some examples include special law-enforcement training for gender-based violence response in Burgas, and creating special local-level law enforcement units for domestic abuse cases in Greece. Local authorities are also hosting shelters for victims of violence (Burgas), and in some cases with broadened services for more vulnerable women e.g. impoverished, single parents, and disabled (Greece). Once such service is job placement assistance which help women transition back to self-sufficiency (Greece). Other initiatives include increased lighting in public areas (Cyprus) and a support system network of social services including shelters, vocational counselling of victims and support groups (Tulcea).

Educational and awareness raising initiatives

Child and adult educational opportunities, both in and outside schools, are used by local authorities as a pro-active approach to GE. Within schools there are gender-sensitive educational policies (Poland), initiatives to raise awareness on GE topics (Burgas), targeted campaigns on gender-based violence (Greece), and cyberbullying prevention programs (Lampedusa). However, Lampedusa's gender-based violence prevention curriculum was removed from the 2025-2028 educational plan. Educational opportunities for adults include female entrepreneurship programs and local technical vocational training programs (Poland) among others. Awareness-raising is also an important cluster of local activities. This is seen in street naming reform to recognize female historical figures (Cyprus), anti-violence, anti-trafficking, and anti-discrimination campaigns (Tulcea), and public events on gender-based violence (Greece).



Internal local administration reforms	Local motivation to address GE cannot only come top-down from national regulations but also from within and be accompanied by adequate knowledge and skills. In Nicosia, trained municipal equality officers were appointed in 2025 to implement GE actions and liaise with the National Office of the Equality Commissioner. In Tulcea, Romania's National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men conducts training sessions on GE for public officials and professionals.
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In summary, how advanced is the progress towards the SDG Target 5c: adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislations for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls at all levels? What recommendations are there to enhance progress?

In the past few decades laudable advances towards SDG Target 5c. have been achieved thanks to new policies and collaborative action on multiple scales. National and regional GE policies are particularly strong, as noted in the national reports of Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, and Greece, however the local level needs improvement. Multiple national reports pointed out that, while local implementation of national policies can be quite active, the fact remains that it is uneven, unsystematic and therefore somewhat weak. And as mentioned, GE policy implementation is not consistently tracked and there is a lack of transparent, available data which could be used to inform better GE policies.

One essential ingredient for adopting sound GE policies is to have more gender-balanced politics at the national, regional and local level. Though political party affiliation may be more indicative of GE support than a politician's gender, female politicians tend to work across party lines to champion GE issues.¹⁵ Nationally there is evidence of more balanced politics and commitments to increase female leadership (Austria), and gender quotas in national parliaments (Malta). Locally, the poor representation of women is pronounced. In Austria, only 232 out of 2,092 municipalities have female mayors, and the municipal council of Straß, Austria, has 6 women and 19 men.

The Burgas Municipal Council has 10 women and 41 men, and the Cyprus Union of Municipalities has no women on its board. Lampedusa and Linosa's Municipal Council is an outlier with its female majority (7 out of 12 council members), including a female Deputy President. Interestingly, a 2024 local perception survey in the municipality revealed 62% of respondents believed more women should hold decision-making positions.

As referenced throughout this transnational report, there are many topical and governance domains in which national and local GE policies could be introduced or strengthened.

Topic-specific domains for policy improvement

Increase female political leadership, especially at local levels	Leadership training programs, supporting female candidates, mentorship networks and enforced gender quotas in national parliaments and municipal councils are some ways to increase political representation.
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¹⁵ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation>

Enable and enforce women's economic empowerment	Despite advances in parental support and workforce participation, gender-based income inequality, entrepreneurship access, unemployment, informal labour and a pay gap persist. Economic empowerment is enabled through improved parental supports, family-friendly workplace policies, funding female-led businesses, and mentoring programs for women entrepreneurs. Enforced equal pay policies are necessary to improve wage equality. Gender differences in workforce participation should also be monitored and addressed via targeted policies.
Encourage education in male-dominated fields	Europe's women have enjoyed improvements in education access and higher-level education enrolment nearly equalling or surpassing that of men, however women are underrepresented in STEM programs. Targeted support through stereotype-aware youth education curricula is one way to proactively address this.
Expand access to gender-sensitive healthcare services	Women's health access is restricted in many rural areas, which forces women to travel for essential care. Health awareness days and funding of local clinics are key.
Adequately resource gender-based violence prevention	Gender-based violence is prominent on the GE agenda, but remains a critical issue, with shelters being underfunded and cuts to prevention strategies and funding in some countries. Adequate resources are needed to support victims, raise awareness on the issue, and to train frontline responders.

Governance domains for policy improvement

Consistently prioritise and allocate adequate funding	At local levels especially, attention to GE appears to fluctuate. Local councils and national parliaments can establish dedicated GE committees, gender budgeting which allocates resources to GE policies, and strengthen gender mainstreaming in all policy areas. Integrating GE goals into development plans will ensure consistency in government strategies so that the topic does not get sidelined.
Monitor and enforce GE policy implementation	Local GE policy implementation is overly reliant on personal engagement of local officials. Strengthening monitoring and enforcement mechanisms is essential to ensure that GE policies are implemented consistently and effectively across all municipalities. Local authority accountability can be increased by introducing mandatory compliance measures, and at the national level, a central database on GE should be established to improve data collection, analysis, and monitoring of GE progress across each country.
Help local authorities be GE champions	GE policy obligations on local authorities without accompanying support will not result in the desired progress. Additional funding and training should be provided to local authorities to enhance their ability to implement GE policies effectively. EU funds could be leveraged for this purpose.

Partner up for policymaking

Multi-level governance between local, regional, national and international actors will help develop well-informed GE policies that are also tailored to local needs. This is especially important when local authorities do not have a mandate to make their own GE policies (e.g. In Malta, regional councils oversee local councils and make policies).

Strengthen and collaborate with GE civil society

When active, civil society is a strong advocate for GE and a good policy implementation partner. Women play a significant role in civic life and activism. In Lampedusa, 40% of NGOs are women-led and they work on environmental protection, cultural preservation, migrant assistance, and women's empowerment. Meanwhile on Lesbos the only GE NGO is no longer active. When civil society falters, action slows. Local authorities are well-positioned to strengthen and collaborate with civil society, although national assistance is important to facilitate this. Malta's Advisory Council for Women's Rights is a good example of a governance mechanism to strengthen government-civil society ties.

Enhance public awareness and wider participation

Persistent and damaging gender roles entrench inequality and slow down progress. A culture change is needed, which requires influencing societal mindsets. Thus, both national and local GE policies should have an awareness and participation element which addresses gender stereotypes and promotes equal roles in the workforce and family life, for example. Inclusive forums for discussion and consultation on GE issues are one method. It is important that men and boys are also engaged in the GE topic.

Apply an intersectional lens to protect the most vulnerable

Some women face greater discrimination than others based on factors like income, nationality, marriage status, physical abilities, geographic location, and ethnicity, among others. Migrant women, Romani women, and women in more remote and or poor regions were all highlighted in national reports as more vulnerable. GE policies should consider the intersecting challenges faced by such women to provide proper support.

Better integrate GE into sustainable development policies

Rather than being seen as a 'nice to have', GE needs to be understood as part of the picture of progress. When GE is well-integrated into national and local sustainable development strategies and action plans, it improves the likelihood that they improve well-being for all.



Conclusions

This report aimed to give an overview of gender equality policy implementation, gaps, and opportunities in the 10 SUBLIME countries. It first outlined the existing national and regional GE policies. Then it assessed the level of GAP III and GES implementation around key policy areas and clarified specific challenges for local-level implementation. Next it clustered several types of GE initiatives and policies being implemented by local authorities. Finally, this report highlighted both topical and governance domains to be considered for new or improved GE policies at national and local levels.

In brief, progress is clearly visible over the past decades, but there is a long way to go before reaching complete gender equality. Local authorities are demonstrating a will for change and are finding ways to move forwards despite structural challenges. National level guidance, obligations, and financial support are needed to ensure that European GE priorities are systematically implemented across all municipalities through a sustainable development lens, rather than relying on ad-hoc support and individual personal commitments. While GAP III's action pillars call for close cooperation with Member States and partners, local authorities need to be brought to the table too.

Only then will GE ambitions become reality.

Authorship: ICLEI Europe, April 2025.

Figure sources:

Figure 1

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=SDG_-_Synopsis#SE_MAIN_TT

Figure 2

<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2013>

<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024>





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SDGs