

# The Prioritization of the SDGs: Analysis of European Policies in Favor of Gender Equality



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**Abstract** Since the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), researchers have sought to analyze the performance of states and the policies that nations can adopt to implement the results of the individual Goals (Dello Strologo et al., *Organizational Resilience and Female Entrepreneurship During Crises*. Springer: Switzerland, 2021). Hepp et al. (*Accelerating the United Nation's 2030 Global Agenda: why prioritization of the gender goal is essential*", *Global Policy*, 10: 677–685, 2019) indicated that the pursuit of the commitments made by signing the 2030 Agenda must be conducted by prioritizing the SDGs and identifying SDG5 on gender equality as central. This study, therefore, aims to analyze, for the European nations that perform best in the individual SDG5 indicators, the policies adopted to identify the most effective actions.

To achieve the research objective, the authors used an exploratory qualitative methodology, the case study, which allows investigating contemporary phenomena in their context (Blaikie, *Designing Social Research: The Logic of Anticipation*, Polity Press: Malden, 2000) and obtaining a broad description of a particular phenomenon (Yin, *Case study research and Applications*, 6th ed., Sage: Thousand Oaks, 2018). In addition, the study was completed with quantitative analysis to see if the countries identified as the best according to the qualitative analysis will also be the best by 2030.

This article aims to analyze the policies adopted by European countries to meet the commitments made by signing the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, *Transforming OurWorld: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*; Division for Sustainable Development Goals: New York, NY, USA, 2015) in terms of gender equality to ascertain which policies have proven to be most effective. Although other studies

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have analyzed the pursuit of the SDGs, to date no study has investigated the policies that are enabling excellent results for each indicator of SDG5 which, as has been indicated, represents the Goal that must be prioritized in the pursuit.

It is believed that the results of this study provide governments with the tools to identify, and possibly adopt, policies that can increase gender equality outcomes. In addition, the adoption of such policies could amplify the positive effects from an integrated perspective and, consequently, increase the commitment of states in the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda. It is believed that these results can be achieved, as policies will be analyzed which, to date, based on data provided by Eurostat, have already made it possible to achieve excellent results in the individual indicators of SDG5.

**Keywords** Sustainable Development Goals · SDG 5 · Gender diversity · Agenda 2030

## 1 Introduction

Since the introduction of the SDGs, researchers have sought to analyze the performance of states and the policies that nations can adopt to implement the outcomes of the individual Goals highlighting the difficulties encountered in aligning policies with the Agenda2030 goals (Dello Strologo et al. 2021). Hepp et al. (2019) pointed out that the achievement of the SDGs should be conducted by prioritizing some of them and identified SDG5 on gender equality as central.

SDG5 takes on a benchmark role as it includes indicators regarding different aspects of gender equality such as discrimination, violence, and women's participation in both the political and economic spheres (Heß 2020).

The key role of SDG5 with respect to all SDGs fits into the broader requirement recognized by the Agenda2030 to consider them as an indivisible whole to be achieved by considering the interrelationships between all goals and between their respective dimensions (Purcell et al. 2019).

The vast majority of SDGs studies deal with the state of SDGs implementation (Firoiu et al. 2019) in a specific nation and do not perform a broader spectrum analysis.

In this context, given the central role played by SDG5, it seems useful to analyze the progress made by different eurozone countries on gender equality. The analysis is part of a line of study started only recently (Dello Strologo et al. 2022) on the subject of policies adopted by the various countries to achieve the goals set by the SDGs and, in particular, those that have analyzed SDG5.

This study, therefore, fills the gap by investigating for each indicator (SDGI) of SDG5 the countries that rank first based on Eurostat data.

The analysis was conducted according to the exploratory qualitative case study approach, which allows contemporary phenomena to be investigated in their context and obtain a broad description of a particular phenomenon (Yin 2018). The data search was conducted through institutional documents (Corbetta 2014) and

secondary data from previous studies following the recommendations of Ruggiano and Perry (2019).

It is believed that this contribution can be relevant for governments as it aims to provide them with the tools to identify policies that can increase performance on SDG5 and, consequently, also in other SDGs.

The process of emulating the best countries, from a competitive perspective, could foster the greater commitment of states in the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda, especially in the pandemic context that is affecting the globe, also because Covid-19 has exacerbated existing disparities between women and men (European Commission 2021).

## 2 Literature Review

Many studies since the introduction of the SDGs have analyzed the interactions between the SDGs (Pradhan et al. 2017) or have studied the degree of implementation of the SDGs in individual countries through time-series-based analyses (Boto-Álvarez and García-Fernández 2020).

In line with the goals of the Agenda2030, several authors have emphasized the need to consider the SDGs as an indivisible and integrated whole to be achieved by considering the interrelationships, both positive and negative, among all the Goals (Purcell et al. 2019), according to an integrated approach (Hegre et al. 2020).

Thus, it is appropriate to monitor that progress in some areas does not occur to the detriment of others (Heifetz and Linsky 2002).

Nilsson et al. (2016) theorized a useful model to quickly understand which SDGs contribute positively to a given adopted policy, through goal-scoring that can assess the intensity with which different SDGs interact.

Pradhan et al. (2017) indicated that SDG1, SDG3, and SDG5 have a significant positive correlation with the other SDGs, confirming that improvement in these SDGs contributes to the achievement of the other goals. In the same vein, Hepp et al. (2019) argued that eliminating gender inequality (SDG5) would enable improvement in all other SDGs.

The importance of achieving the SDG5 goals seems to have been embraced by the various European governments; in fact, EU gender equality policies have expanded considerably and cover a wide range of programs (Lombardo and Meier 2008).

Many studies that have addressed the issue of gender equality have focused on the role of different institutional actors in the pursuit of gender equality, highlighting how international organizations play an important role in national policy-making (Boyle and Preves 2000; Hantrais 2000).

Achieving the goal of gender equality is complex because gender equality policy is a hybrid field that encompasses numerous frameworks that can be grouped into four areas: equality legislation, work-life balance, gender mainstreaming, and gender equity in decision-making (Skjeie et al. 2019).

The 2030 Agenda, with particular reference to SDG5, does not guide the tools and policies needed to achieve the goal and, indeed, has been widely criticized. The main criticism points out that it is predominantly focused on the public sphere although it has been noted that equality in the public sphere is highly dependent on equality in the private sphere (Chiva 2009).

At the same time, however, several papers have shown that Agenda2030 has offered an important “window of opportunity” to put more effort into achieving SDG5 (Borza 2010; Bútorová 2009).

In any case, it is worth noting how the study of the policies adopted by the various countries for the achievement of the goals of SDG5 can be particularly useful for emulation purposes, without prejudice to the fact that the background of each country must necessarily be considered. As Hudson and Lowe (2004) point out, “copying” policies in a different context can lead to results that are not in line with expectations. It is therefore important to understand whether certain policies have been adopted by more than one country to confirm their relative ability to provide an increase in the nations’ gender equality outcomes.

### 3 Research Method

To achieve the objective of the present study, a mixed qualitative–quantitative method was used, which is widely used in the reference literature on the degree of implementation of the SDGs (Firoiu et al. 2019).

To conduct the qualitative analysis, the case study technique was used, which allows for the analysis of contemporary phenomena and understanding of them (Yin 2018; Blaikie 2000).

To conduct the quantitative analysis, the countries to be analyzed were preliminarily selected through data provided by Eurostat (Eurostat 2021): for each SDGI of SDG5, the best performing countries were selected. The use of official statistics allows for highly credible data.

SDGI 5.1 was excluded because Eurostat data only showed values from 2012 onward.

For each country, the data search was done through institutional documents searched on the Internet, which is particularly well suited to studying the policy domain (Corbetta 2014) and through secondary data results from previous studies for which the recommendations of Ruggiano and Perry (2019) were followed.

Eurozone countries were analyzed because their relative commitment to adopting policies in line with the goals of the 2030 Agenda is known (Salaris et al. 2020).

Next, an analysis was conducted for each country to identify and analyze the policies used by the nations in pursuit of gender equality.

The authors employed a triangulation to increase the reliability of the data produced and the validity of the procedure used (Patton 2015).

To complete the quantitative analysis, the authors used, consistent with the previous literature on the degree of implementation of the SDGs, the FORECAST.

ETS function of Excel software (Firoiu et al. 2019) to check whether the same countries at the end of the Agenda2030 will turn out to be the best. This function identifies, based on a set of historical data, the value that a variable will assume in the future by assigning decreasing weights to the results that go back the longest in time (Hyndman and Athanasopoulos 2019). This methodology, therefore, appears to be the most suitable to achieve the objectives of the present study (Canela et al. 2019).

## 4 Result

The results obtained are summarized in Table 1 which shows for each SDGI the country that has achieved the best results and the countries that will achieve them by 2030.

### 4.1 Luxembourg: SDGI 5.20 and 4.20

Luxembourg, which renewed its National Action Plan for Equality in 2015, has indicated that gender equality will be a policy priority. The Ministry of Economy supports female entrepreneurship with awards and to facilitate female employment. Childcare facilities have been incremented and in 2005 a new type of kindergarten was introduced that cares for children 5 days a week from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Official newspaper of the Grand Duchy from Luxembourg 2005.)

In 2014, the reform of Parental Leave was announced: fathers can reduce their working hours by 20% per week for 20 months or divide it into 4 periods of one month. The allowance paid is proportional to the income received but cannot be less than the minimum wage (Official newspaper of the Grand Duchy from Luxembourg 2016).

Since 2016, Luxembourg has had an equal pay law, and salary inequality has become a crime.

**Table 1** Best performing countries

SDGI	2020/2021	2030
Gender pay gap in unadjusted form 5.20	Luxembourg	Czechia
Gender employment gap 5.30	Lithuania	Estonia
Inactive population due to caring responsibilities by sex 5.40	Norway	Luxembourg
Seats held by women in national parliaments and governments 5.50	Iceland	France
Positions held by women in senior management positions 5.60	Iceland	France
Early leavers from education and training by sex 4.10	Croatia	Greece
Tertiary educational attainment by sex 4.20	Luxembourg	Switzerland

Source: Authors

As for education policies, since 2002, the Ministry of Education has been supporting a project called “girls-day” that aims to enhance the skills of young women.

## **4.2 Lithuania: SDGI 5.30**

Lithuania’s desire to be annexed into Europe accelerated the development process in terms of gender equality (Taljunaite 2003). In 1996, the government established the Women’s Advisory Board to coordinate work on the Gender Equality Act, which came into effect in 1999.

Lithuania became the first CEE state to adopt a law establishing equal status for men and women with oversight by the Ombudsman Equal Opportunities, an office established by the government in 2001. The office was given broad powers, including the responsibility to represent the rights of victims of discrimination in court and the ability to initiate investigations into alleged discrimination. The Office of the Lithuanian Parliamentary Ombudsman and the Office of the Equal Opportunity Ombudsman was then established. The Office of the Ombudsman plays a crucial role, e.g., it recently carried out a project that ended in 2019 “Municipalities’ Code of Success” under which seminars were organized to ensure equal opportunities between women and men, in which 150 representatives of municipalities and NGOs participated (EIGE 2020).

Important has been the activist role of women in parliament (Office of the Equal Opportunities Om-budsperson 2001; Sloat 2004). In 2005, the Law on Equal Treatment was enacted (Sloat 2004), which was revised in 2016 to include: a prohibition on giving priority to both sexes in job advertisements for civil servants; a prohibition on asking job seekers about family status and family planning; and a requirement that women and men be guaranteed equal opportunities in the purchase of goods and services.

Since 2012, Lithuania has compiled several key policy documents: the National Program for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 2010–2014; the National Equal Opportunities Program for Women and Men 2015–2021; and the National Program Implementation Plans for 2015–2017 and 2018–2021, which set out concrete actions starting with adequate budget allocations (EIGE 2020).

The purpose of the National Program for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 2015–2021 (Valstybinį moterų ir vyrų lygių galimybių programa 2015–2021) is to ensure a coherent, sophisticated, and systematic approach to gender equality issues across all sectors. The National Program per-follows four main priorities: (a) equal opportunities for women and men in the labor market; (b) gender balance in decision-making; (c) gender mainstreaming; and (d) enhanced geoeconomic effectiveness.

### **4.3 Norway: SDGI 5.40**

As early as 1859, mothers in Norway were granted the same right as fathers to decide on matters concerning the lives of their children; paid maternity leave was granted in 1909, and numerous welfare measures for mothers were introduced in the following years (Lister 2009).

In 1978, Norway enacted the Gender Equality Act that covered “all sectors of society” and established the first Ombudsman and the Gender Equality Tribunal (Holst 2007). In fact, in the 1980s, women’s economic independence became a key goal of Norway’s gender policies (Borchorst and Teigen 2009).

There have been additional policies to support parents: the development of publicly subsidized day-care and extracurricular care has been a priority since at least the 1990s; Paid Parental Leave has been extended over time and is now 49 weeks with 100% coverage (or 59 weeks with 80% coverage), where some weeks are reserved for the mother, some for the father, and some conditional. In addition, there are paid leave for nursing mothers and paid leave to care for sick children. There is also a range of special benefits for single parents.

In 2009, a special White Paper was launched (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality 2009) stating that women and men should share responsibility for children (Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality 2009). In addition, in 2011, the first national action plan on gender equality was launched (Norwegian Ministry of Children’s Equality and Social Inclusion 2011), which identified four strategic priority areas: (1) women’s political empowerment; (2) women’s economic empowerment; (3) sexual and reproductive health and rights; and (4) violence against women (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2007).

Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls continue to be an important priority, the new action plan (2016–2020) supported the gender dimension of the 2030 Agenda and the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (Unwomen 2020).

### **4.4 Iceland: SDGI 5.50 and SDG 5.60**

As early as 1850, women were granted equal inheritance rights and in 1894, the first women’s rights organization was founded which allowed for national suffrage in 1920 (Johnson et al. 2013).

In 1975, activists planned Free Women’s Day in which approximately 90% of the female population went on strike demonstrating that their work was vital to the nation (Johnson et al. 2013). Within a year of the strike, the first gender equality law was debated and passed.

In 2009, a 40% gender quota was imposed on corporate boards (Axelsdóttir and Einarsdóttir 2017) and the incidence of women in politics increased.

The high participation of women in the labor market can be partly explained by the numerous initiatives to improve public childcare.

Of particular note is the Parental Leave Act of 2000, which introduced a leave period model consisting of three months maternity, three months paternity, and three optional months. The non-transferability of the leave promoted gender equality within families (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006).

Iceland's self-image has positively influenced the willingness of Icelandic governments to take additional measures. One example is the 2018 Equal Pay Standard under which the employer must demonstrate that the company wage system is fair (Institute for Social Research 2018).

#### **4.5 Croatia: SDGI 4.10**

The system of reforms that affected Croatia was driven by the desire to join Europe: a gender equality law was introduced in 2003. Harmonization of labor market legislation (e.g., prohibition of discrimination/sexual harassment) also began during this period, and attention was paid to domestic violence (Dobrotić et al. 2013).

The first comprehensive piece of anti-discrimination legislation in Croatia was the Anti-Discrimination Act of 2009, amended in 2012.

The Gender Equality Act arose to define the method of protection from discrimination on gender grounds (EC 2021). This legislation introduced a requirement to ensure 40% pink quotas in government and politics within three election cycles.

In 2015, the Parliament adopted the Comprehensive Education Strategy "Nove boje znanje" which provided an in-depth analysis of the education system starting from kindergarten while also covering the concept of lifelong learning.

In 2016, the document entitled "Cjelovita kurikularna reforma" was approved, which aims to prepare students for working life (Hornstein Tomić and Taylor 2018).

Particular attention was paid to girls from large families of low socioeconomic status, living more than 3 km from the school. Croatia's progress is especially affected by policies in favor of the Rom community for whom transportation has been provided from home to schools living in remote and isolated settlements (EC 2021).

## **5 Discussion and Conclusion**

Analyses have shown that many nations have adopted policies in support of Gender equality, which in many cases has become one of the primary objectives of national policies.

It has been noted that the reduction of inequality is the result of a long-term commitment that, in line with the findings of previous studies (Dello Strologo et al. 2022) is in the following objectives: education, employment, and empowerment.



Although the policies adopted allow for good results in terms of gender equality, it is appropriate for nations to take action to change social conventions and redistribute tasks and responsibilities within families (Einarsdóttir 2020).

Governmental engagement on gender equality must be ongoing. As the results for 2030 show, none of the states that can be called the best today will maintain the lead. Therefore, governments must continue to monitor the degree of implementation of SDG5, strengthening national statistical offices, to understand the areas in which action is needed to fulfill the commitments made by signing the 2030 Agenda.

The objective of the study was to analyze the policies adopted by the eurozone nations that currently perform best in terms of SDG5, given the interdependence between this goal and improved performance in other SDGs as well (Hepp et al. 2019).

Although policies cannot simply be copied across different nations (Hudson and Lowe 2004), the analyses conducted were able to show that the best performing nations followed a common thread that, starting with education is aimed at promoting women's access and retention in the workforce. In this perspective, it has been necessary to create a welfare system capable of redistributing the responsibilities linked to the birth of children among parents. In addition, particularly relevant are the policies that have allowed for the development of day-care centers, both in terms of numbers and in terms of exemption of hours to support parenting.

The authors believe that the study adds to the debate on gender equality with numerous contributions by pointing out the measures implemented by nations to achieve the goal and, more generally, to fulfill the commitments made by signing the Agenda2030.

The analysis carried out more than 7 years after the introduction of the Agenda2030 makes it possible to evaluate the path taken by the nations and to identify the policies that have enabled the achievement of excellent results.

The results of the study are believed to be relevant for governments, as they outline a road map of adoptable best practices and policies for the pursuit of gender equality, integrating internal organizational shortcomings according to an integrated logic.

In fact, it is only by knowing the processes of gender equality that it is possible to plan the policies to be adopted, identify the areas in which interventions are needed and monitor the progress of the policies adopted.

In this perspective, the relevance of national statistical offices is emphasized. It is only through the implementation of these bodies that it is possible for countries to verify the effects of the policies adopted and identify areas where further action is needed. This circumstance appears even more relevant, since, as has been noted (Dello Strologo et al. 2021), there is often a non-homogeneous distribution within nations and states should also be able to identify the regions in which it is appropriate to carry out interventions through specific measures.

The study can also be an impetus to improve the information provided for Eurostat statistics, spurring a process of awareness on the part of women concerning the issue of violence for which there is a certain reluctance to report (Zaviršek 2020) but

especially on the part of institutions that must make a greater effort in the collection and dissemination of information.

Although the study makes many contributions to the existing literature, it has some limitations that need to be considered. The study does not consider additional indicators that could, due to interrelationships, increase the results in SDG5 and that could be considered by future studies.

In addition, institutional documents and secondary data from other studies were used as the basis for analysis, as they are more relevant to policy analysis. However, it is believed that further studies could, through the use of interviews, gain insight into the basis on which governments decide on policies to be adopted, as well as citizens' perceptions of the policies adopted.

In conclusion, although the results obtained can be considered relevant for those working in the field, it is hoped that future studies will continue to analyze in greater depth policies useful for the pursuit of gender equality, also taking into account the cultural, political, and historical evolution of the country examined to fully understand the origin of inequality and the best tactics to follow with constant attention to the evolution of legislation.

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