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Gender Equality in International Relations: The Slow Implementation of Established Norms

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Women worldwide have been more affected by the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic than men. This again drew attention to the need for progress in achieving gender equality, which not only is a fundamental human right but also positively influences economic development and international security. That is why more and more countries include the perspective of equality between women and men in their foreign and development policies. In accordance with the commitments and recommendations of the United Nations, Poland should recognise the requirement of equality in its policymaking, including in recovery plans after the pandemic.

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The Effects of the Pandemic on Women

Men and women have been unevenly affected by the pandemic. According to UN statistics, men account for the majority of confirmed COVID-19 cases (53% globally), but it has been women who have faced the negative economic and social effects of the pandemic to a greater extent. Women, who statistically earn less and hold less-stable jobs, have been more exposed to layoffs and the loss of their livelihood. [While women account for 39% of all employment in the world, they comprised 54% of overall job losses as of May 2020.](#) According to [UN estimates](#), women's employment was 19% more at risk compared to men's. One reason for the more frequent layoffs of women was their overrepresentation in sectors hit hardest by the crisis, such as the hotel industry and catering services. Women also more often than men were forced to leave the labour market or limit their professional work because of the increased burdens of unpaid domestic work and childcare during the lockdown. The UN expects a significant increase in the poverty rate of women (by 9.1%) by the end of 2021, however, women are already now 25% more likely to live in extreme poverty than men. The forecasts also indicate that the situation is unlikely to return to the pre-pandemic level by 2030. This can be explained not only by the economic recession but also by the limited access to education—[UNESCO estimates](#) that 11 million girls will not return to school after the pandemic for economic reasons, which will reduce their chances of future employment.

Among the non-economic effects of the pandemic, the UN indicates a significant increase in domestic violence, estimated to have been experienced by 243 million women worldwide last year. The number of reported cases grew by around 30% in countries as disparate as France, Argentina, and Singapore. Physical and verbal violence also occurred against women employed in the health and social care sectors, where women represent 70% of the workforce in these sectors globally. They also faced elevated risks of infection as they were more likely to be frontline workers, for example, nurses or care workers—infection rates among female health workers were three times higher than for men.

For these reasons, the [UN predicts](#) a rise in gender inequality due to the pandemic, after decades of global progress. Although in some areas a lot has been achieved over the past few decades (e.g., in regulations supporting equality or access to education), in recent years the global progress in strengthening the economic and social position of women has [slowed down](#), while in some areas, such as women's reproductive and sexual health and rights, there is a global [pushback](#). Among the pressing problems, the UN lists discriminatory regulations and social norms, the under-representation of women at all levels of political leadership (25% on average in national parliaments), widespread violence (perpetrated against 1 in 5 women aged 15-49 annually) and violence against women in public life.

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Global Commitments and Standards

The normative framework for ensuring equality between women and men is clearly defined. Its development took a few decades, mainly within the UN. Women's equality was first acknowledged as a universal human right in the UN Charter adopted in 1945. Until the 1970s and the mass emergence of women's movements, equality was not a priority for the organisation or its member states, although the requirement of women's equal participation in political life, their access to education and work, as well as non-discrimination, appeared in several UN documents (including the Convention on the Political Rights of Women in 1952 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1966). Bodies dedicated to this issue were established within the UN, while gender became part of the mandate of existing agencies. In 1979, the key Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted.

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The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, a political document and the first universal commitment to advance equality between women and men, was a milestone. In the years that followed, UN legal instruments consolidated the crucial role of women in achieving economic growth, security, and peace. The flagship regulation of equality is the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (SC) of 2000, which urges member states to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional, and international institutions, and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflicts, as well as a strengthened commitment to the rights and protection of women and girls under international law. The Security Council has adopted nine additional resolutions under its Women, Peace, and Security agenda, on the basis of which member states prepared national action plans. The UNSC remains focused on it, [most recently adding climate change to the security challenges affecting women's lives](#). Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls cuts across all priorities and is one of the 17 goals of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The UN goals and standards for equality are based on a research-confirmed link between gender equality and global prosperity and security. The [latest estimates](#), which already take into account the negative effects of the pandemic for women on the labour market, indicate that global GDP could be \$1 trillion lower in 2030 than it would be if women's unemployment tracked that of men. In turn, eliminating inequalities in the labour market would add \$13 trillion to the global economy. [In the EU](#), improving gender equality would lead by 2050 to an increase in GDP per capita of around 6% to 9.5%, which amounts to around €2 trillion to €3 trillion. [Other studies](#) show that meaningful female participation in peace processes would make agreements more likely to last and be implemented, while more women in parliaments reduces the risk of human rights violations and recurrence of conflicts.

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In UN regulations, gender equality is understood as equal rights, obligations, and opportunities for both women and men. Gender in this terminology refers to social attributes and opportunities associated with being female and male. The Council of Europe (CoE) defines gender equality in a similar way—as equal visibility, empowerment and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life. Gender is defined as the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men. At the same time, the CoE, as well as the EU, emphasises in its documents that women and men are heterogeneous categories that include, among other factors, their origin, religion, disability, gender identity, or sexual orientation, and equality applies to everyone regardless of these.

Regulations in the European Union

Gender equality is a core EU value, enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights and in the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. The Union has adopted six directives covering equality between women and men, which is also a key principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights. In the field of combating violence against women, the point of reference for the EU, and other organisations of the democratic world that create international standards, is the 2011 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence—the “Istanbul Convention”, signed and ratified by the vast majority of EU countries. In 2017, the EU as an organisation signed the agreement, but its ratification did not take place (due to the non-accession of six Central and Eastern European Member States) and remains one of the main goals of the European Commission (EC) and its president, Ursula von der Leyen.

In 2020, the EC presented the first ever gender equality strategy in the history of the EU. This was justified by significant inequalities in the labour market (for example, in the EU, women earn 16% less than men on average) and of widespread violence against women (33% of women in the EU have been victims of physical or sexual violence), despite the fact that the Union is among the world's

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leaders in gender equality. The strategy aims at eliminating gender stereotypes, ensuring equal participation and equal opportunities in the labour market, including equal pay, and achieving a balance between the participation of women and men in decision-making and political processes. The EC has also committed to mainstream gender equality in all EU policy areas.

Gender Equality and Foreign Policy

Although gender equality is mainly a principle shaping domestic policy, more and more countries with ambitions of global influence mention it among the assumptions of their foreign policy. The first “feminist foreign policy” programme was announced by Sweden in 2015, which committed to support the participation of women in peace processes, protect women’s rights as human rights, and promote a gender-specific distribution of global income. The current government has taken over these goals, but some of its decisions, such as continuous arms sales until 2019 to Saudi Arabia, which blatantly fails to respect women’s rights, have been criticised as inconsistent with the feminist programme. The same reservations apply to France, which has not stopped up until today such trade, despite the implementation of a cross-sector international equality strategy. Gender equality appears as a foreign policy goal also in other European countries, including Spain, Finland, and Estonia, as well as at the EU level—according to a plan presented by the European Commission in November 2020, by 2025 85% of all new external EU actions are to contribute to gender equality and women’s empowerment. **Similar** trends can be seen outside of Europe. For example, Mexico’s strategy assumes increasing the number of women in diplomacy, while Canada’s focuses on distributing development aid in order to enhance women’s empowerment in the world. Defending women’s rights, including sexual and reproductive health, is [one of the key elements of the Biden administration’s foreign policy](#). Evidence of that is in the [Interim National Security Strategy Guidance](#), which indicates

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gender equality as a goal both in the context of supporting inclusive economic growth and social cohesion, and in the promotion of democratic values in the world. The topics discussed during the [first foreign visit of Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Japan](#) also prove that the U.S. will emphasise the cause of women in relations with its allies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities and endangering the progress made on gender equality so far. That is why governments should include gender equality in their efforts to combat the crisis. Aiming at gender equality is a requirement resulting from international norms and obligations, focusing on the social consequences of biological sex. According to these standards, equality between women and men is crucial to the protection of human rights and economic growth, and in the EU also to the functioning of democracy and the rule of law. The aim of gender equality is to ensure equal opportunities in society. At the same time, gender equality does not exist in the biological sense.

According to [UN recommendations](#), as a first step women should participate in setting up recovery plans and decision-making, even if this requires introducing quotas to include them. Secretary-General António Guterres [called on](#) states to put women at the centre of the response to COVID-19. The UN also draws attention to the need to include the socio-economic needs of women resulting from gender inequality in stimulus packages and to introduce measures preventing violence against them and provide assistance to victims.

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The government may also try to systematically include gender equality in subsequent areas of its policy, in accordance with the way of thinking of the EU or the U.S., both key partners of Poland.

Poland, which committed to use its [current term in the Human Rights Council](#) also to protect human rights as a precondition for sustainable development, can take advantage of the pandemic period as an appropriate moment to commit to gender equality. The government may also try to systematically include gender equality in subsequent areas of its policy, in accordance with the way of thinking of the EU or the U.S., both key partners of Poland. Failure to better protect women's rights will hinder relations with the new U.S. administration. Poland needs to make progress in terms of equality as indicated, for example, by the [EU Gender Equality Index](#), in which the country ranked 24th in 2020.