

# A new age of feminist resilience

**Lessons from Policy, Politics, and the Pandemic**

Winter (Online) Lecture Series on Europe (WOLS 2025)

University of Luxembourg, 1.12.2025, 8.30 – 10.00

**Laura Rahm, European University Institute**

# Agenda

- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 01 | What is feminist resilience?           |
| 02 | Why it matters (to historians)?        |
| 03 | Historical recap of feminist waves     |
| 04 | Backlash: Policies, politics, pandemic |
| 05 | A new age of feminist resilience?      |



# Resilience of survivors of violence

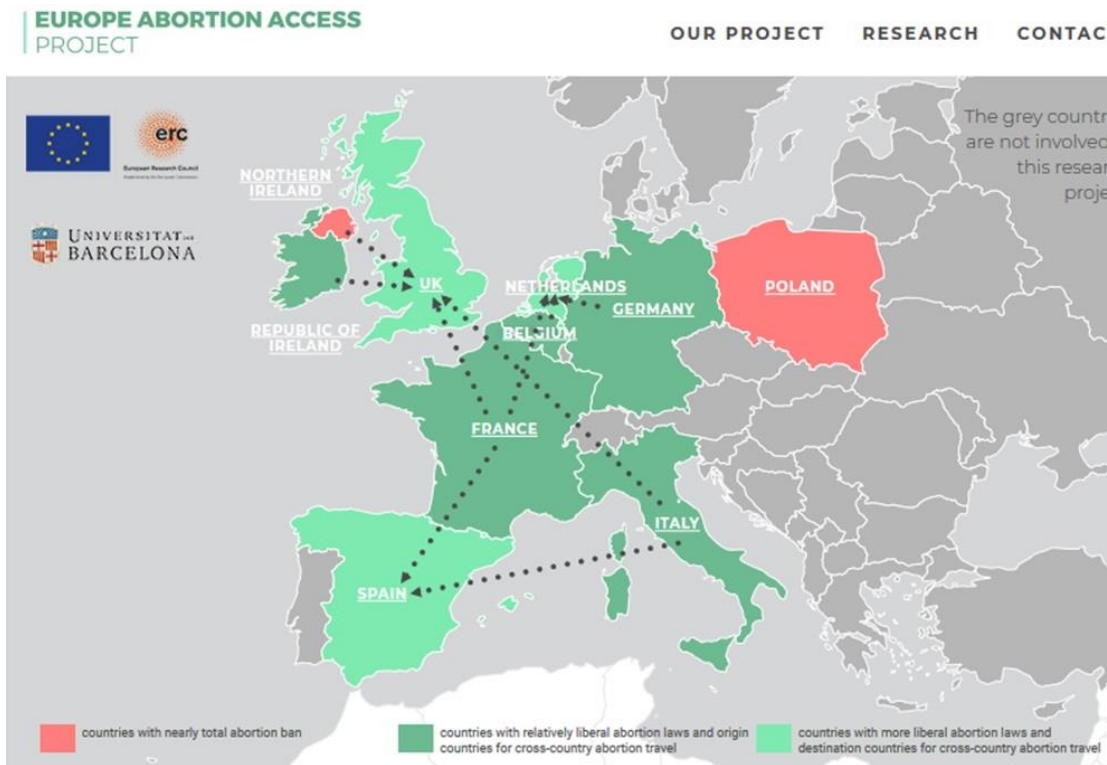


- 2007: Financial Literacy Project in San Jose de la Luz, Gto, Mexico, to break the cycle of violence against women

- 2025: Financial Literacy Project in Johannesburg, South Africa, with survivors of domestic violence at a women's shelter.



# Resilience of women traveling to seek abortion in Europe



Source: De Zordo et al. [2023](#); Rahm et al. [2022](#), [2023](#), [2024](#).

# What is feminist resilience?

## Feminism

- Organized effort to give women the same economic, social, and political rights as men.

Sources: Cambridge / Oxford University Press Dictionary.

## Resilience

- Rebounding or springing back.
- Quality or fact of being able to recover ... or resist being affected.



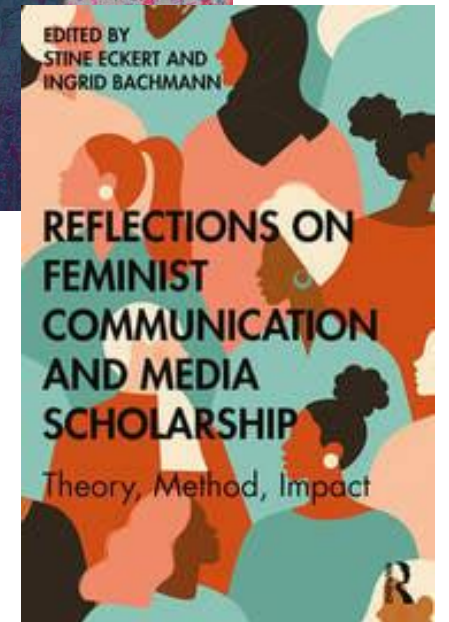
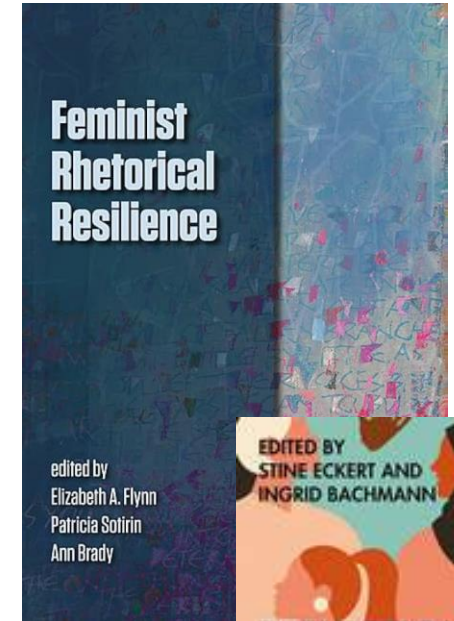
**The capacity to adapt or thrive in the face of adversity, drawing strength from feminist principles and collective action to challenge and transform oppressive systems.**

# Other definitions...

## Feminist resilience

- ‘is characterized by feminist **resistance** and opposition to the patriarchal system’ ([Krissah Marga B. Taganas 2024, 1](#)).
- emphasizes ‘agency, change, and hope in the daily lives of **individuals or groups of individuals**’ ([Flynn, Sotirin, Brady 2012, 1](#)).
- ‘is constituted through **language and interaction**’ ([Buzzanell 2021, 43](#)).

→ material-discursive, **adaptive-transformative** processes  
(Communication Theory)







# Fostering women's leadership

Gender-based resilience

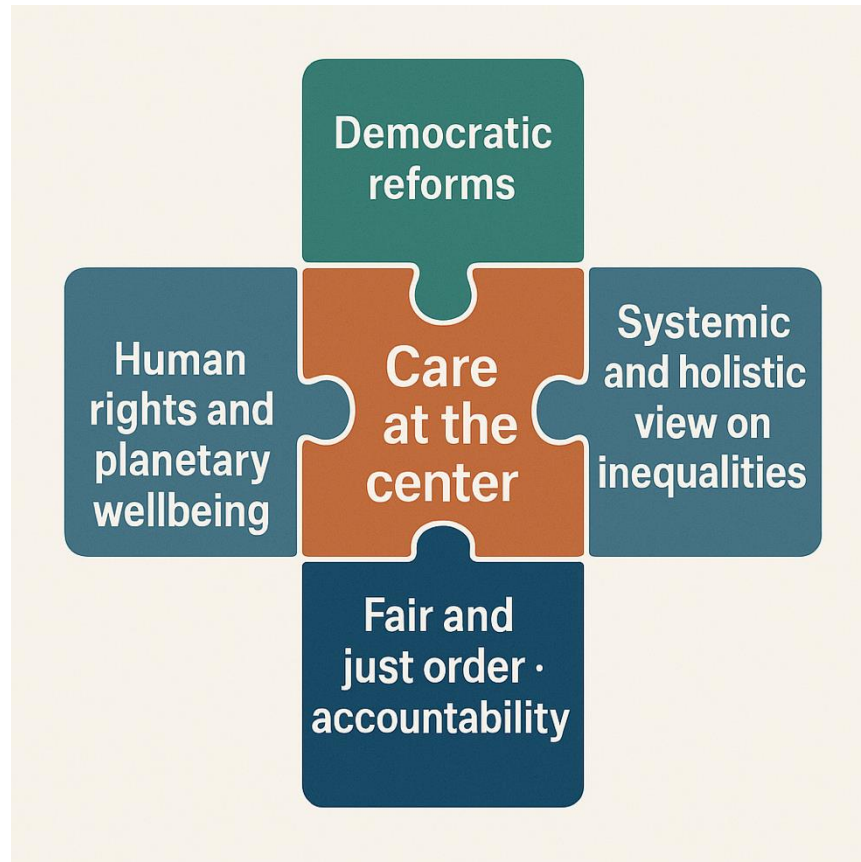
## ... and frameworks

**UNESCO's Gender-Based Resilience Framework** aims to shed light on the way **individuals** of different gender respond to shocks and structural changes, and how this, in turn, contributes to foster (or otherwise hinder) **societal resilience**.

[Source: UNESCO 2023, 2024.](#)

# Feminist critique

## Corner pieces of resilience:



Source: Desjardins and Kantor 2025

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## INTERVENTIONS: PROVOCATION

### Resilience: why should we think with care?

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Resilience has become a ubiquitous term. Individuals, communities and societies are increasingly called upon to be resilient and build resilience as a way to withstand and bounce back from compound climate-induced shocks, conflicts, health and economic crises. In this provocation we critically interrogate the potential that resilience holds for moving beyond a world marked by crises and widening inequalities. A multidisciplinary corpus of feminist scholarship conceives of resilience as a conservative and deeply exclusionary biopolitical device. Against this background, we argue that expressions of resilience from above and below firmly guided by principles of care can be seen as serving socially and environmentally just ends. We thus encourage scholars, particularly feminist scholars, to continue engaging and engaging more courageously with these two concepts in a collective effort to reclaim resilience as a transformatory device.

**Keywords** resilience • feminism • care • neoliberalism • climate change

#### Key messages

- Care and resilience do not stand in opposition to each other.
- Resilience from above and below firmly guided by principles of care can be seen as serving socially and environmentally just ends.
- When coupled with a politics and practices of care, resilience can be rethought as a feminist transformative device.

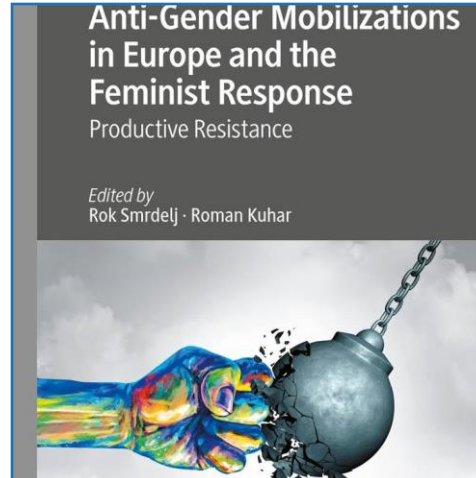
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# Why it matters?



**Democratic backsliding** in a growing number of countries, i.e. Central and Eastern Europe (Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania).



**Anti-gender, right-wing political currents** have become mainstream, across Western Europe (France, Germany, Italy) and beyond.



**1 in 4 countries** globally report backlash on gender-equality laws in 2024 ([UNWOMEN 2025](#)).

# Why it matters to historians?



- Historically, **male-centred or gender-blind** lenses (male = norm).
- ‘Recovery’ of **women’s contributions** to social, political, and economic transformations.
- **Backlashes against gender equality** generate new, adaptive forms of activism—often stealth or **under-the-radar** feminism.
- **AI and digital era**: rapid changes in how knowledge is produced, circulated, and archived.
- Understanding **feminist resilience and coping strategies** is essential for historians, for an inclusive picture of collective memory.

# Is history written about men by men?

## Popular history writing remains a male preserve, publishing study finds

Slate survey of US titles published last year shows overwhelming bias towards male historians and subjects - with a similar picture emerging in the UK

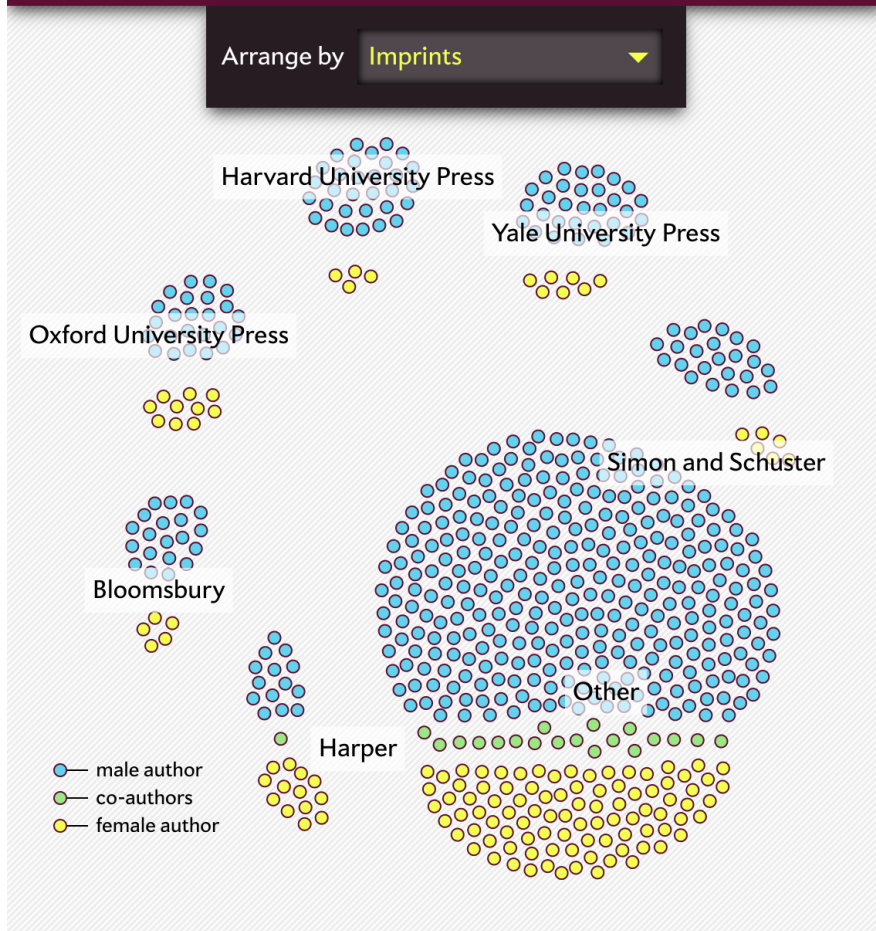


📷 'There's still very much a sense that serious history is written by men' ... a Russian sand sculpture of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta. Photograph: KPA/Zuma / Rex Features

Source: Alison Flood, The Guardian, 2016

## Who Writes History?

In the interactive below, each dot represents one trade history book that was either published or made the *New York Times* Combined Print & E-Book Nonfiction best-seller list in 2015. Blue dots represent books by male authors; yellow dots represent books by female authors; green dots represent books co-authored by men and women. Mouse over a dot for more information about individual titles, and use the menu below to see how the gender divide plays out across different categories: biographies, books about World War II, and more.

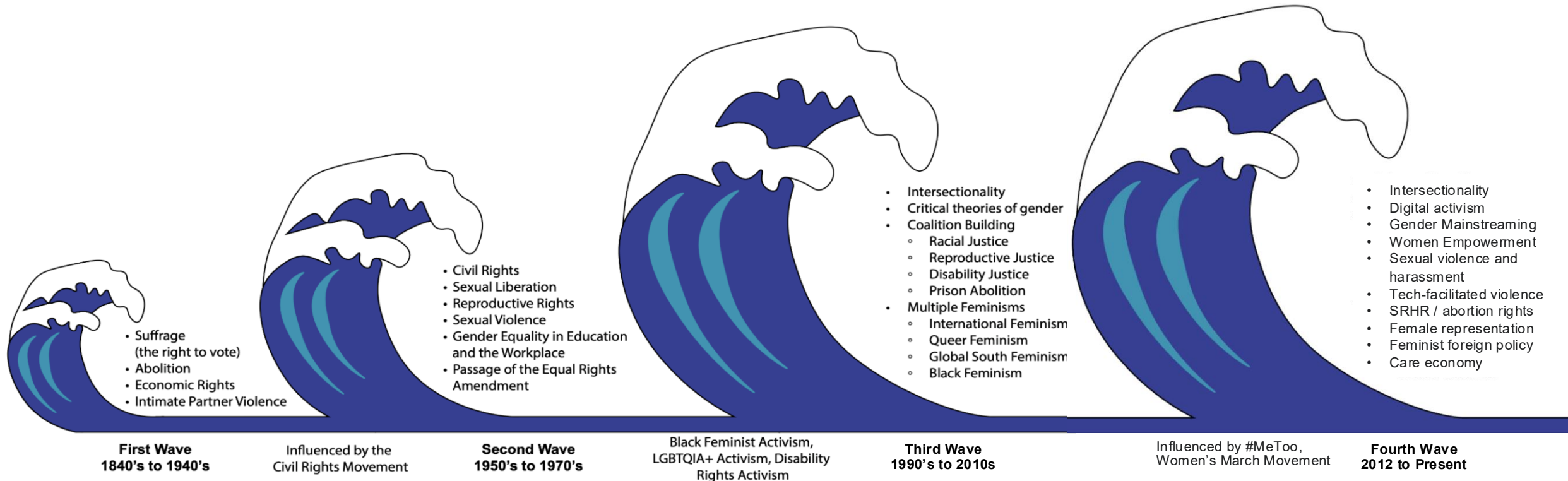


Source: Andrew Kahn and Rebecca Onion, Slate, 2016





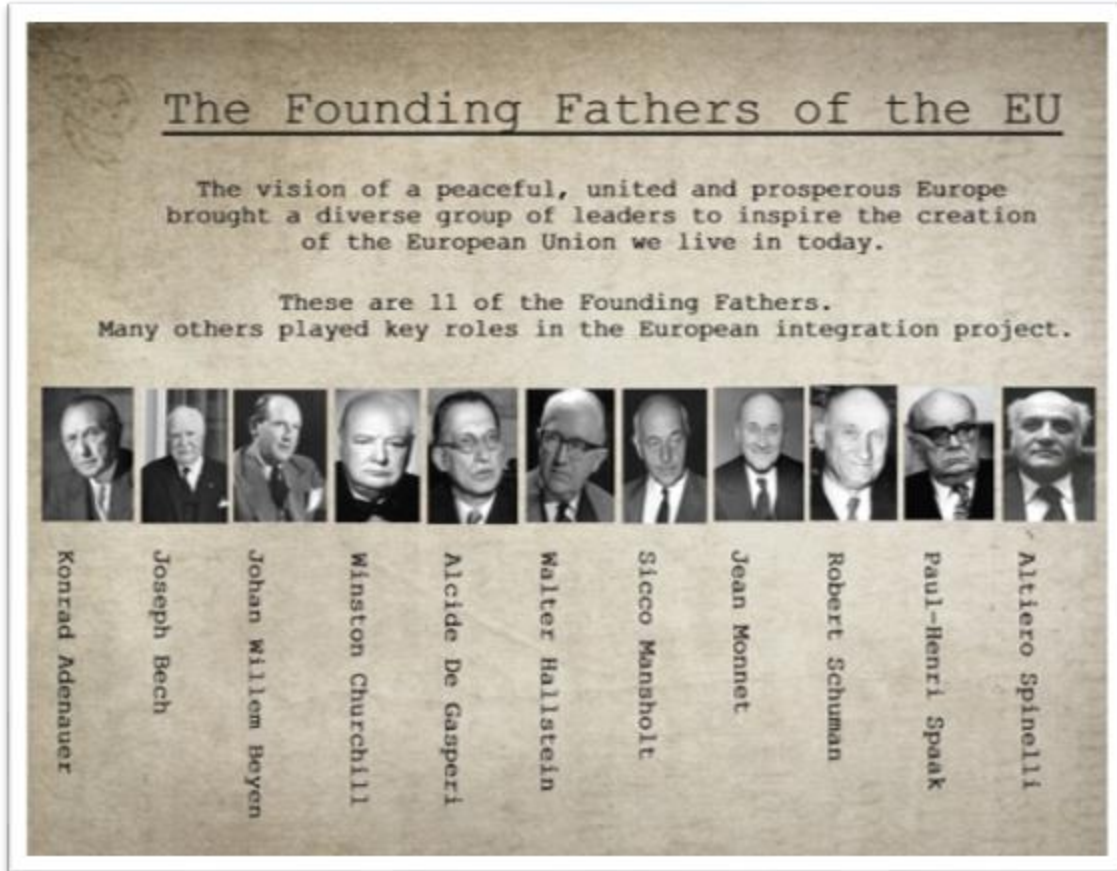
# Historical recap of feminist waves



\*N.B. Interpretations of post-feminism (post-third wave feminism) and fourth wave differ. Source: [Karena, Sanders, Losier 2024](#).  
 See also: [Finn and Brown 2022](#).



# Founding fathers vs mothers of Europe



**"We are not forming coalitions of states, we are uniting men."**  
Jean Monnet

Sources: [Alliance4Europe 2025](#); [Di Nonno 2017](#)



# Louise Weiss

(1893-1983)



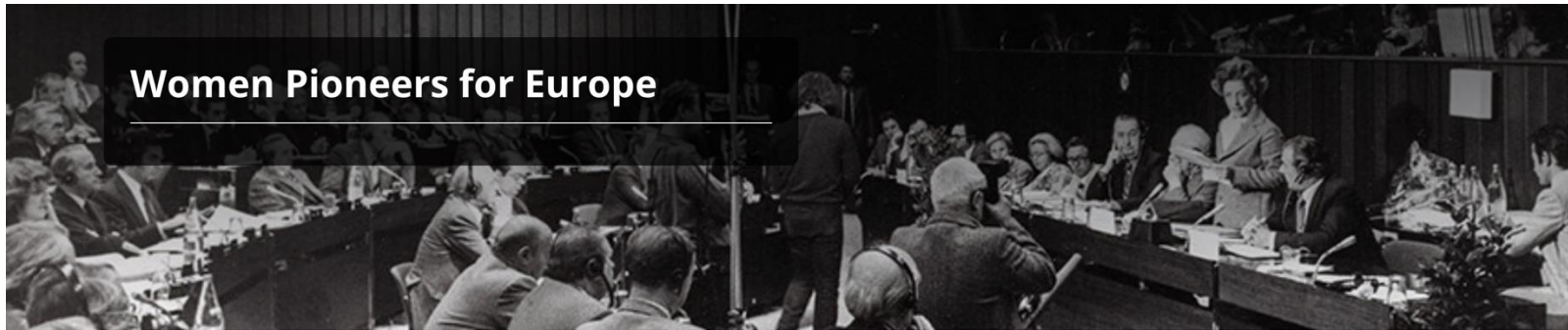
[Louise Weiss](#) among Parisian suffragettes on the Place de la Bastille on 12 May 1935



The main building of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, named after Louise Weiss.

- ‘**Louise l’Européenne**’
- French politician, writer, journalist, and **feminist**.
- Denounced women’s legal “incapacity to vote”.
- 1934: co-founder of *La Femme Nouvelle* with Cécile Brunsvicg.
- Promoter of women’s public participation and **women’s suffrage** (granted in France only in 1944).
- Advocate for European integration, peace, and women’s rights.
- 1979-1983: Weiss served as (oldest EP) Member of the European Parliament.
- [Exhibition Louise Weiss: a committed European](#)

# Ursula Hirschmann (1913-1991)



- Established *Femmes pour l'Europe* in Brussels in 1975.
- Lobbied for access to education and equal pay.
- Annual Ursula Hirschmann Lecture at EUI: 2025 Lecture with Viviane Reding



## Ursula Hirschmann

Ursula Hirschmann (1913–1991) was a German-Italian anti-fascist activist and intellectual, deeply involved in the European federalist movement. Born into a Jewish family in Berlin, she became politically active in her youth, joining the socialist opposition against the Nazi regime. Forced into exile, she moved to France and later Italy, where she played a crucial role in anti-fascist resistance. Hirschmann, with Ada Rossi, assisted the interned Altiero Spinelli, Ernesto Rossi and Hirschmann's then-husband Eugenio Colorni with smuggling the Manifesto of Ventotene from the island to the Italian mainland. She was therefore instrumental in disseminating its vision of a united, democratic Europe during the Second World War. In 1943, she was among the founders of the European Federalist Movement. Despite operating largely behind the scenes, her intellectual contributions and organisational efforts significantly shaped European thought.



# Ada Rossi (1899-1993)

- Teacher, partisan, anti-fascist, Europeanist.
- She participated in the founding of the European Federalist Movement.
- During Ernesto Rossi's confinement in Ventotene, Ada acted as a liaison for communications with anti-fascist comrades. Together with Ursula Hirschmann, she managed to smuggle out essays written by her husband and other internees on the island.
- She clandestinely published part of the pamphlet written in Ventotene by Rossi and Altiero Spinelli, *For a Free and United Europe*.
- Their vision: Cooperation between European nations would prevent future wars and ensure long-term peace and prosperity.





# Simone Veil

(1927-2017)

- **Embodied resilience:** French Holocaust survivor, lawyer, politician, women's and abortion rights defender.
- *Manifesto of the 343* (Simone de Beauvoir, 1971).
- *Loi Veil* (1975).
- **1<sup>st</sup> EP President** (1979).
- Abortion recognized as **constitutional right** in France, 2024 (after overturn of *Roe v. Wade*).



Photograph of Simone Veil, President of the EP, 17 July 1979. European Commission Audiovisual Service, P-016932. Copyright European Communities, 1979.

## Simone Veil

Simone Veil (1927–2017) was a French lawyer and politician who left an important mark on post-war Europe. Born to a Jewish family in Nice, she was deported to Auschwitz as a teenager. After surviving the Holocaust, she pursued a law degree in Paris and became an advocate for human rights and social justice. Veil's most notable political achievement for women's rights was perhaps her role in securing the legalisation of abortion in France. As Minister of Health from 1974 to 1979, she championed the so-called *Loi Veil* or Veil Act, which legalised abortion in France and secured reproductive rights for women. Throughout her life, Simone Veil remained a symbol of resilience, courage, and advocacy for justice, especially for women. In recognition of her contributions, she was posthumously honoured with a place in the Panthéon in Paris, a tribute reserved for France's most esteemed figures.

## Personification of feminist resilience



# European Parliament Election (1979)

## The 1979 European Parliament elections / Le elezioni del Parlamento Europeo del 1979 Female representation / Rappresentanza femminile

The first European Parliament elections by free, direct, universal and secret suffrage were held in the nine member states of the then European Communities in June 1979.

The first constitutive session of this directly elected European Parliament convened on 17 July 1979 in the Palais de l'Europe in Strasbourg. On that day, the new MEPs elected Simone Veil as the first President of that new, directly elected representative body.

The new Parliament was composed of 410 Members (MEPs), elected by voters for a five-year term (1979-1984). 69 of the 410 elected MEPs were women, comprising 16.8% of the total.

The newly-seated female MEPs came from a variety of professional backgrounds. 20% of them were politicians, 14% came from academia, 10% had worked as high-level public servants, 7% were journalists, and the rest came from careers in law, the social professions, trade unions, and others.

This panel presents some of the women elected to Strasbourg in 1979.

Curated by Ruth Ingeborg Meyer

Sources:  
- HAEU, FDE - 395  
- European Parliament MEPs Directory  
- Photos: European Parliament Multimedia Centre



Le prime elezioni del Parlamento europeo a suffragio libero, diretto, universale e segreto si tennero nei nove Stati membri delle Comunità Europee nel giugno 1979.

La prima sessione costitutiva di questo Parlamento europeo si riunì il 17 luglio 1979 nel Palazzo d'Europa a Strasburgo. Quel giorno, gli eurodeputati elessero Simone Veil come prima presidente del loro Parlamento.

Il Parlamento era composto da 410 eurodeputati, eletti per un mandato di cinque anni (1979-1984). 69 dei quali erano donne, pari al 16,8% del totale.

Le eurodeputate provenivano da diverse esperienze professionali: il 20% dalla politica, il 14% dal mondo accademico, il 10% era costituito da funzionari pubblici, il 7% da giornaliste professioniste e le rimanenti venivano da vari settori della società civile: avvocatessa, operatrici nel settore sociale e sindacalista.

Questo pannello mostra alcune delle donne elette nel 1979 al Parlamento di Strasburgo.



# Maastricht Treaty (1992)



**Maastricht Summit 1991** – Francois Mitterrand (FR) speaking to Queen Beatrix Netherlands. She attended the summit as a head of state and organized a welcoming lunch for the European leaders on the first day at Château Neercanne.

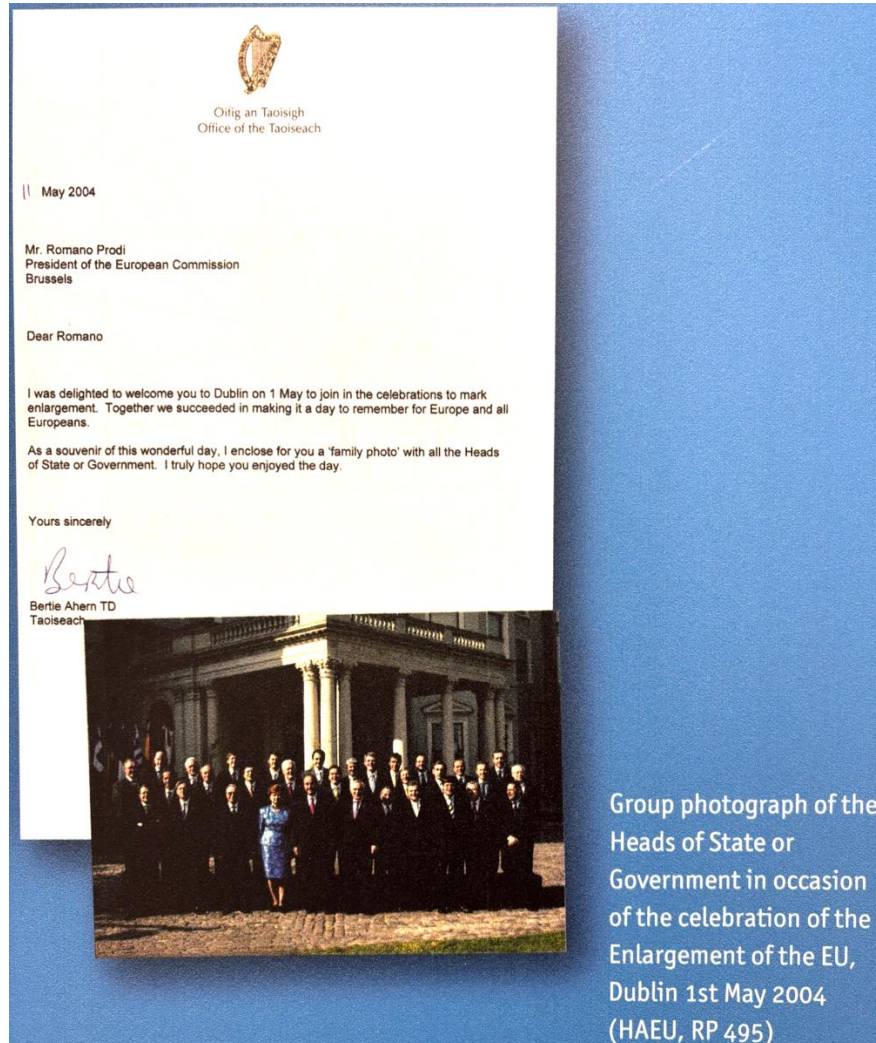
**"Though she could only make a symbolic gesture, she declared that she's fully prepared to offer her head on the coin if that would make creating a common European currency easier."** Source: [Studio Europa Maastricht 2024](#)

- Also known as the Treaty on European Union (7.2.1992)
- Twelve member countries of the European Community, now EU, had gathered.
- The treaty came into force on November 1, 1993.
- 3 pillars: community, security, cooperation

Source: [EP 2025](#)



# ‘Family Photo’ - EU Enlargement (2004)



European Commission long “for men only” club (Yvette Roudy).

- **1993–1995:** 1 out of 17 commissioners.
- **1995–2004:** 5 women out of 20.
- **2014-2019:** 9 women out of 28.
- **Since 2019:** 1st female president, 11 women out of 27.

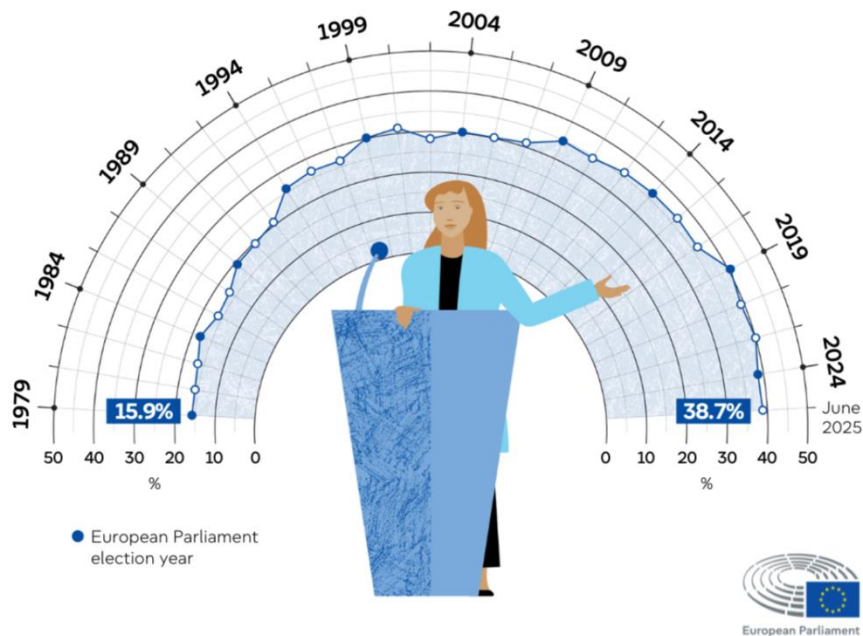
Prominent women who left a significant mark:

- **Viviane Reding** (b. 1951)
- **Emma Bonino** (b. 1948)
- **Loyola de Palacio** (1950–2006)
- **Margot Wallström** (b. 1954)
- **Ursula von der Leyen** (b. 1958)



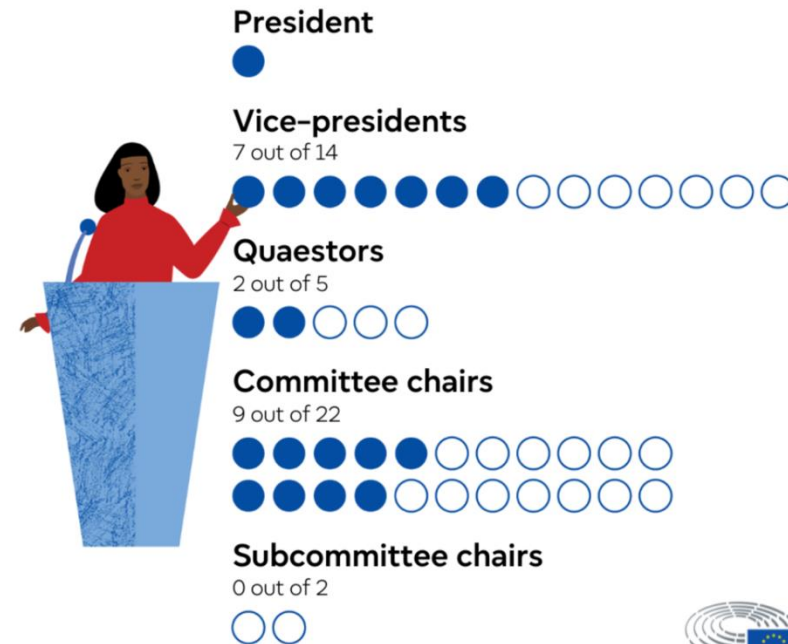
# Female representation EP (2025)

## Share of **women** elected to the **European Parliament** (1979–2025)



Source: EPRS (June 2025)

## **Women** in top positions in the **European Parliament**



Source: EPRS (June 2025)





# ‘Is there a place for women in the European Union’s judicial system?’



In total, **111 people** have served **as Judges of the Court of Justice** since 1952, only **12 of whom – 11% – were women**. The female Judges represented ten member states: Austria, Estonia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania (two female judges), Spain (two female judges), and Sweden. The first woman appointee to the Court of Justice was Fidelma O’Kelly Macken from Ireland, in 1999, almost 50 years after the court was established.

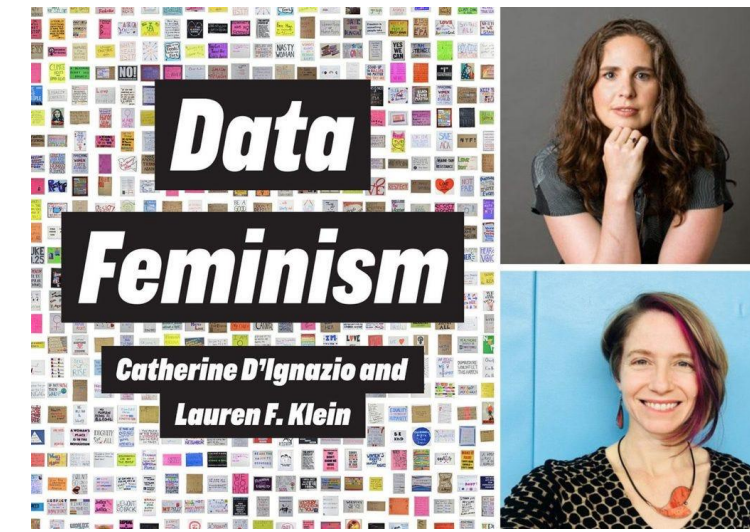


As of October 2022, there are **18 women** among the 54 judges of the General Court, or **33%**, the highest women’s representation in the history of the General Court. These female judges were appointed by 16 EU member states: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia (two judges), Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Poland (two judges), Romania, Portugal, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

Source: [Liliia Antoniuk, Young European Ambassadors in Ukraine National Coordinator, 2022.](#)



# Beyond representation



## Challenges

### Limits of Quantitative Data

- Numbers can exclude vital information on women's struggles.
- National aggregates hide intersectional inequalities (Zakaria, 2017; Kabeer, 2011).
- Unequal power dynamics remain invisible.
- Misconceptions around measurability and progress (Esquivel, 2016; Merry, 2016).

### Data Production Challenges:

- Data: mostly along the binary (male/female).
- Limited intersectional data.

## Opportunities

### Qualitative Data:

- Highlights feminist resilience
- Reflects women's daily experiences
- Resistance strategies to oppression (Fuentes & Cookson, 2020; McIlwaine et al., 2023).

### Alternative Data Sources:

- Countermapping: citizen-generated data for [localization](#)
- Big data: timely, large-scale insights; concerns on privacy, ethics, biases.
- Careful governance and a focus on feminist interests (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2023)

# Backlash

## Coordinated attack on equality

- Since 2013, **anti-gender movements** have grown into well-funded transnational networks linking conservative, religious, and political actors.
- The idea of “**gender ideology**” is used as a unifying, mobilising myth.
- Campaigns feed into **populist narratives** about identity, culture, and “European civilisation.”
- As a populist right-wing political wave, a **pan-European gender backlash** emerges.
- European Parliament (2018) warns: backlash is organised, persistent, and **normalised**.



# Politics

## Anti-gender discourse and online mobilization. Questioning women's suffrage?

### US Election 2016: #repealthe19th tweets urge US women to be denied vote

© 13 October 2016

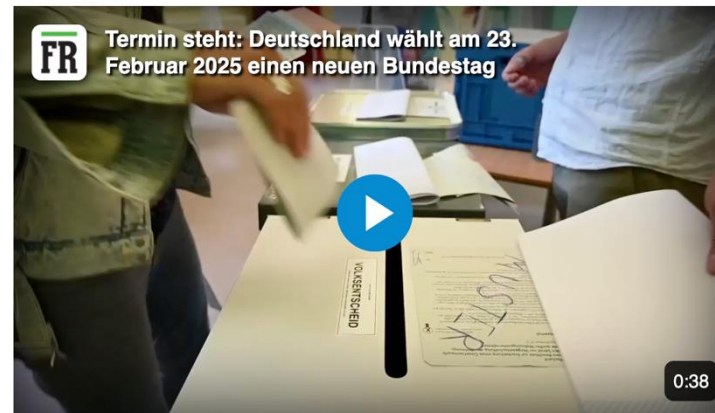


### „Emotional und labil“: CDU-Politiker hinterfragt Frauenwahlrecht und attackiert Habeck

25.11.2024, 17:47 Uhr  
Von: Paula Völkner

Kommentare

Drucken Teilen



Prior to Germany's 2025 election, CDU politician Gundolf Siebeke tweeted:

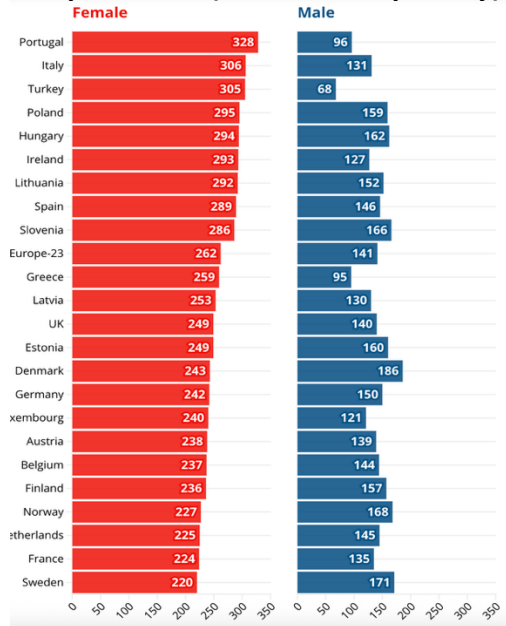
If women vote for the Green Party, "we must **unofficially consider women's suffrage** and officially consider **anti-emotional democracy education.**"

Source: Frankfurter Rundschau 2024



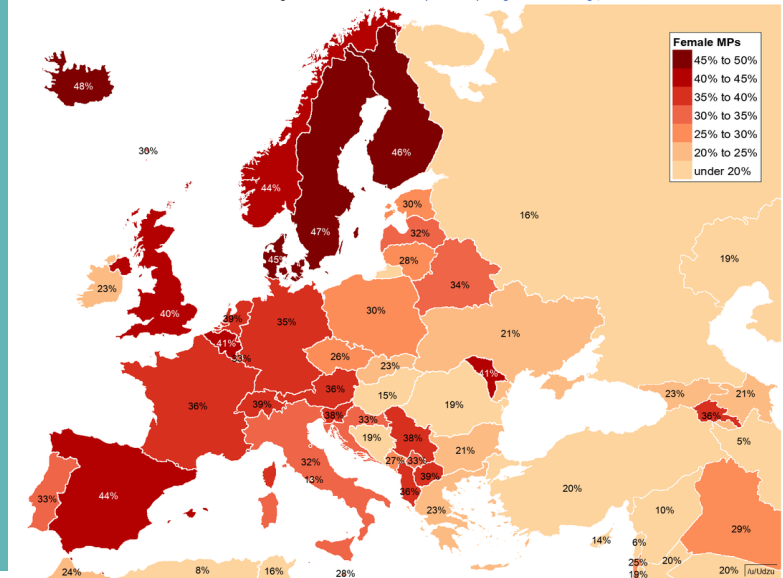
# Covid, Care, and Women in Politics

### Unpaid work (2022 in min. per day)



### PROPORTION OF FEMALE PARLIAMENTARIANS

Female MPs in the lower/single house. Sourced from <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/>, Nov 2024.



- Women perform **two times** more **unpaid care in Europe**.
- Exacerbated by the **COVID-19** pandemic.
- Upsurge in domestic violence and economic vulnerabilities.

- Women hold **33%** of **parliamentary** seats and **36%** in **local government** in 2024 in Europe.
- **Violence against women in politics:** **32%** of 2600 females surveyed from 31 European countries in 2022.

# Covid and feminist resilience



[Home](#) > [Faculté des Sciences Humaines, des Sciences de l'Éducation et c](#)

- **'Feminism(s) in the Age of COVID-19 and Beyond: Creativity, Resilience and Resistance'**
  - Virtual crafts and resilience-building among young women living in care shelters in Alexandria, Egypt.
  - ¡No estamos solas! navigated the pandemic while managing caregiving responsibilities, grief, or professional pressures.
  - Virtual meeting, 24 Sep 2021
- **Sustainable Development Goal 5 and SDG interlinkages**
  - Expert Group Meeting in preparation for HLPF 2022
  - "Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development"
  - Virtual meeting, 27-28 April 2022

Event

## Online conference: Feminism(s) in the Age of Covid-19 and Beyond



24 septembre 2021, 10.00 – 19.00

**Lieu**

Webex

LU

**Thème(s)**

Sciences humaines



# Policy shifts and democratic backsliding

- Institutional dismantling
- Legal – policy changes
- Shrinking civic spaces
- Funding cuts
- Dismantling data systems
- Targeted disinformation campaigns
- Anti-gender discourse
- Hate speech and tech-facilitated violence
- Attacks on feminist journalists, politicians, and activists.





# Foreign Affairs Council (2025)

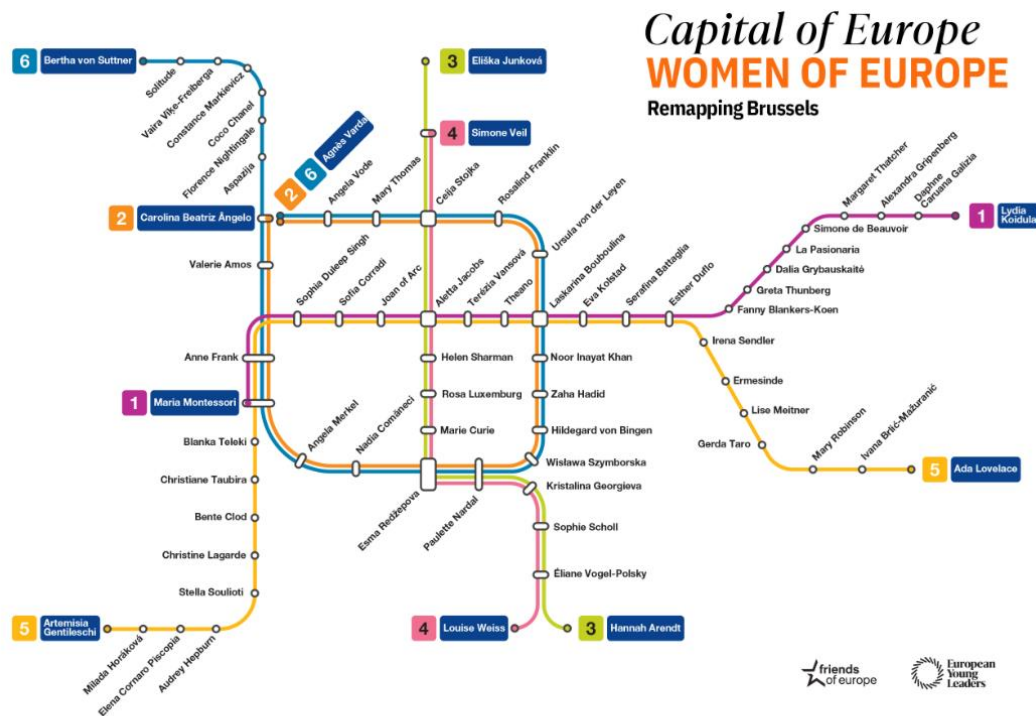
## speaking out against gender-based violence



HR/VP Kaja Kallas and Foreign Ministers mark “16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence” at the Foreign Affairs Council.

- **1 in 3** women experienced psychological violence.
- **Intimate partner violence:** **18%** of females across Europe experienced physical or sexual violence **in their lifetime**.
- **Non-partner sexual violence:** **1 in 8 women** have experienced sexual violence, including rape, by a non-partner (Eurostat 2021)
- **Istanbul Convention** on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence - entered into force for the European Union in 2023.

# Symbols, tools, and technical fixes... without structural changes?



Source: Pushbacklash 2025

# A new wave of feminist resilience?

- “Feminist resilience and responses to backsliding will, on the one hand, depend on the **capacity of women’s movements** and their strategies of state engagement before backsliding, and on the other hand, on the **modes and strategies of policy dismantling used by governments**, to which movements react.” [Source: Krizsan and Roggeband 2018, 96.](#)
- **Different Tactics:**
  - **Confrontational:** Public Protests and Counter-Actions (with varying intensity)
  - **Non-Confrontational:** Direct Social Action (peer-to-peer support), knowledge sharing
  - **Camouflage:** to get access to institutional channels
  - **Avoidance:** a strategy to disempower anti-gender actors by withdrawing altogether.

Source: Lavizzari et al. [2025](#)



# Key Lessons for the Post-2030 Agenda



**Elevate Women's Power** – beyond seats, to influence, addressing deep-rooted power imbalances.



**Prioritize the Furthest Behind** – co-created strategies developed in partnership with Global South actors.



**Secure Sustained Funding** – move beyond project cycles to predictable, long-term funding.



**Build Accountability** – better data, participatory metrics, tracking of funds and impact.

# Closing remarks

*“Even in times of weakness, we sow the **seeds for the next new beginning**. When we look back at history, we see women and queer people who fought for things that were not achieved during their lifetimes. Their struggles may have seemed futile to them, but they were not. They were necessary in order to build on them at a later date.”*

[Franziska Schutzbach \(2025\)](#)



# Thank you!

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