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# The EU Campaign against Gender Stereotypes: Ideas, Interests and Individual Freedom

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## THE GENDER EQUALITY STRATEGY

It is a sad fact that inequalities between men and women are still prevalent in the EU and impacts on numerous aspects of women's lives (pay gap, domestic violence, childcare, careers, overall income...)<sup>1</sup>

However, the 2020-2025 gender equality strategy of the EU<sup>2</sup> has reached certain results. It prolongs the progress made by the EU in that area over the last decades, thanks to legislation, gender mainstreaming (integration of the gender perspective into all other policies) and particular measures to empower women. According to the commission, positive trends are the following: higher number of women in the labour market and better education and training, even if the commission admits that even on the labour market there is still progress to be made. Thus, women are still over-represented in lower paid sectors and under-represented in decision-making positions.

The EU Gender Equality Strategy aims to contribute to the Union of Equality advocated by the first Von der Leyen Commission with policy goals and actions to progress towards a gender-equal Europe by 2025. This long-term goal is defined as *“a Union where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are free to pursue their chosen path in life, have equal opportunities to thrive, and can equally participate in and lead our European society.”*

The shorter-term 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. Gender mainstreaming and intersectionality are essential principles in the implementation of this strategy. Besides, a coherence between internal and external policies regarding gender equality is also pursued.

Some very concrete results have come out of this strategy. The Pay Transparency Directive was adopted in May 2023 ensuring that the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value, protected by the Treaty since 1957, finally becomes a reality.

On 8 March 2022, the European Commission proposed a directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence and in 2024, the co-legislators adopted the directive on this matter. It is the first comprehensive European law to address violence against women. It criminalises certain types of physical violence, offline and online. The Directive also creates comprehensive measures for victims' protection, access to justice and support, such as shelters, rape crisis centres and helplines.

Besides, the EU has been part of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – the Istanbul Convention – since 2023. The EU is now bound by demanding criteria to prevent and end violence against women. This entails funding, policy, and legislative measures. The Commission also established an EU network on the prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence for Member States and stakeholders to debate new issues of violence prevention, exchange of knowledge and good practice.

Another progress is the Directive on gender balance in corporate boards, aiming to improve the gender balance in corporate decision-making posts in the EU's biggest firms adopted on 22 November 2022. This new EU law will help overcome the glass ceiling on the boards of listed companies and give a real chance to more women to get those positions.



The new EU-wide work-life balance rights for parents and carers started applying in summer 2022. In September 2022, the goals on early childhood education and care to improve women’s labour market participation.

Finally, the European Commission created a campaign to put gender stereotypes into question, on 8 March 2023. The “EndGenderStereotypes” campaign, disseminated throughout 2023, tackled gender stereotypes affecting both men and women in different spheres of life, including career choices, sharing care responsibilities and decision-making. This is the aspect we want to focus on in this paper.

## THE EU CAMPAIGN AGAINST GENDER STEREOTYPES

On the website outlining the EU campaign against gender stereotypes, we read that gender stereotypes limit everyone’s freedom and that we need to question them.<sup>3</sup>

For instance, in terms of career choices, we read that “stereotypical expectations for women and men, girls and boys, can limit our aspirations, choices, and freedom. Therefore, we need to question what is due to free choice; and what is due to our stereotypes.”<sup>4</sup> In this strategy, the opposition between gender stereotype and individual freedom is very clear.

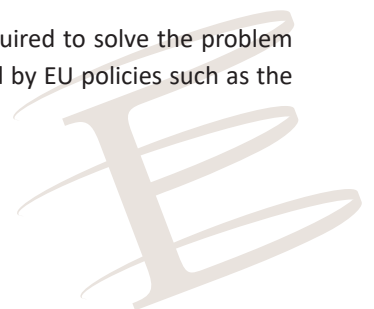
The experts continue by explaining how this applies to professional choices: “girls are more likely to be guided and choose to pursue studies or vocational training in education, health, welfare, and the humanities, whereas boys are more likely to choose and follow studies or vocational training in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (...). While many factors might influence such decisions, it is important that we discuss the impact of gender stereotypes”.<sup>5</sup> These stereotypes are blamed for wage differences since the careers that girls and women chose (such as the care industry, for instance) are known to have much lower salaries than in the energy or construction industries, dominated by men.

As a solution, the strategy encourages to “challenge stereotypes at a young age in order to break them” and the first step in that respect should be to understand how they “impact” many decisions, including our career and educational choices. The EU strategy also blames gender stereotypes for the inequalities that still exist in the work-life balance: “The roles and responsibilities of men and women in their families and jobs are determined not only by their free choices but also by gender stereotypes.”<sup>6</sup>

It is indeed true that the majority of girls and women tend to choose different careers that are less rewarding financially and that women do take on a much bigger share of childcare responsibilities. Mothers work part-time more than fathers do,<sup>7</sup> have more career interruptions and diminish their professional ambitions, even when they are very educated. On top of the wage discrimination existing on the job market, this bigger sacrifice women make when they become mothers also has an impact on their income while they work, and on their pensions later on. This means that women are more likely than men to fall into social exclusion and poverty.

The strategy is right to highlight that caregiving responsibilities need to be better shared by both parents and supported by affordable, high-quality childcare services. It also rightly points out that this would be beneficial for children who need both of their parents involved in raising and looking after them. And it also adds that work-life balance measures can enable a flexibility which can be beneficial for single parents.<sup>8</sup>

On that specific issue of work-life balance, the strategy addresses the policies that are required to solve the problem and reminds us that work-life balance and better access to childcare services are promoted by EU policies such as the



Work-life Balance Directive (including a right to paternity leave and an equal right to parental leave) and the European Care Strategy. However, the overall and seemingly unquestioned postulate of the strategy is that getting rid of gender stereotypes will bring about more equality on these various aspects. Thus, this campaign asserts that abolishing gender stereotypes is the main solution to end all gender equality, including to make the care and work-life balance more just from a gender point of view. This quote is very explicit: “*Gender stereotypes limit us all. Let’s shatter them and open up a world of possibilities*”.<sup>9</sup>

On that specific question of work-life balance, there appears to be a confusion in the campaign. In some respects, we hear that practical measures are the means to get rid of gender stereotypes: “*We can only overcome gender stereotypes by taking concrete actions and encouraging equal participation of women and men in all aspects of life*”.<sup>10</sup> But the overall approach of the campaign, including on work-life balance, postulates that stereotypes *create* inequalities. One can wonder: are stereotypes the cause of the problems, as asserted numerous times in the strategy, or are they the consequences of a lack of concrete actions to create more equality?

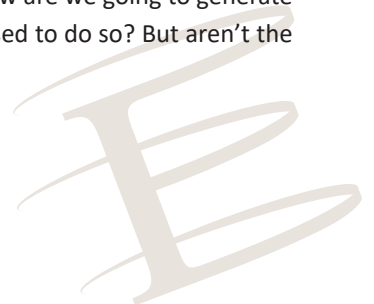
There seems to be an inconsistency here: the overall narrative of the EU on gender stereotypes is that the latter generate inequalities and that, therefore, the solution is to destroy those stereotypes, mainly with tools such as raising awareness, education and training; in other words, the work recommended is to take place at the level of norms and ideas.

This confusion is also present in the part of the strategy dealing with decision making. We read that “*women are still underrepresented in decision-making positions across all sectors, from politics to business to academia*” and that “*this perpetuates the myth that men are better suited for leadership and sends the wrong message to girls and young women that they are not as capable or worthy of taking decisions*”. So it seems here that the practical inequality between men and women in decision-making reinforces the different views we have on what it means to be a man or a woman, in other words, gender stereotypes, and the solution here also seems to be practical: we need to stop this vicious cycle and “*bring more women into management and political leadership to serve as role models for future generations*”.

The solutions referred to by the strategy are actions already taken by the EU both at the level of discourses and education, in order to change gender stereotypes in decision making (raising awareness, political dialogue, mutual learning and exchange of good practices, strategies and tools for positive change, disseminate data, and analysis of trends and good practice), and at the more concrete legislative level, mainly via the directive on gender balance in company boards (EU action to promote gender balance in decision-making - European Commission).

Therefore, to fight against several inequalities between women and men – mainly in work-life balance and decision making –, the EU institutions highlight the importance of concrete and practical action, including legislation; and it adds that this action would impact on how we perceive men and women, in other words, on stereotypes.

Nonetheless, the overall strategy against stereotypes establishes a causality between those stereotypes and inequalities and states numerous times that the main obstacle to gender equality lies precisely in gender stereotypes; many times, those documents assert that those norms *explain* inequalities. Therefore, we are confronted with a logical and practical problem: the general approach aims to deconstruct stereotypes in order to create new policies but it is also stated that some of these new policies will overcome gender stereotypes. And we were told that in order to create these policies we have to destroy gender stereotypes... So, where do we start? A little bit everywhere? How are we going to generate more practical actions towards gender equality? Is it just an enlightened elite that is supposed to do so? But aren't the elite themselves imbued with those stereotypes?



In the rest of this analysis, I would like to offer a slightly different approach to the one imbuing the EU gender strategy on gender stereotypes. I will analyse further the limitations of the EU vision in that respect and offer a more dynamic approach to stereotypes. In doing so, I will move away from an excessive focus on ideas (what can be called an “idealistic” approach to social change) towards a more realistic approach linking ideas and interests in progressive change. It might be useful to mention that this EU approach reflects a view that has become dominant over the years among gender experts at the EU, national and international level alike. I will therefore quote texts from those various circles.

I will start by questioning two assumptions imbuing these studies and recommendations: firstly, that gender stereotypes are pure social constructions, and, secondly, that stereotypes create inequalities.<sup>11</sup>

### STEREOTYPES AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS?

The overall approach on stereotypes adopted by the EU and the literature on gender, in general, does not directly question where those stereotypes actually come from, but it seems to postulate that they are purely constructed by society and reproduced by institutions such as schools, universities and others.

Gender experts often consider that gender identities are a matter of social construction; thus, they are opposed to the naturalist current. Certainly, most gender experts focus on the impact of gender stereotypes on the evolution of individuals and tend to overlook the question of where they come from. However, since they radically oppose all the naturalist arguments about the creation of general ideas of “male” and “female” behaviours and identities, we can assume that they have a constructivist explanation of the latter. Rather than deriving from natural factors, stereotypes are pure social constructs. From this perspective, it would be obvious that current norms about the feminine and masculine are merely social artefacts, produced and reproduced by the various institutions shaping individuals and society.

This constructivist postulate is problematic in many ways. First of all, one cannot easily prove that those stereotypes are purely constructed. While it is possible to make a more or less exhaustive list of the gender norms prevailing in a given society at a given time, it cannot be demonstrated that they are pure social constructions. Essentialists will always have an easy time retorting that if these stereotypes exist and are so present, it is because they reflect much deeper natural realities. For instance, they could argue that the stereotype about motherhood derives from the natural tendencies of mothers to devote themselves to their children. The norm on female empathy would be the simple theorisation of a natural fact, namely that of a tendency of women to listen more to the needs of others, and the same for the other clichés about the feminine.<sup>12</sup>

The argument of the historical and geographical variability of gender norms seems to provide grist to the mill of the constructivists: if ideas about the feminine and masculine vary from one era and society to another, this means that they are not the simple extrapolation of innate and natural tendencies. However, essentialists might retort, has there ever been a systematic study of these so-called differences? Are they radical or superficial? Do they not cover universal similarities in the supposed differences between the feminine and the masculine? In other words, while it can be shown that a whole series of gender representations are reproduced by existing institutions, their original cause is much more difficult to trace.

In a more dynamic conception, ideas – including stereotypes – emerge from conflicts of interest and social practice. Moreover, they are tools used by individual and social actors in the struggles of interests and relations of domination that oppose them. They are not constructed from above nor are they causal factors of these social realities.<sup>13</sup>

Stereotypes are not created in an abstract way by institutions or actors considered to be external to individuals, but emerge from social practice, which is itself woven with relations of domination and contradictory interests. And they then serve to legitimise this reality rather than explain it, as activists and experts in the genre often postulate.

The priority, from a political point of view, is therefore to change that dynamic by creating new visions appealing to women and helping them fight for a more just society. What mobilises individuals to act collectively is a discourse articulating their interests in an appealing way.

### ARE STEREOTYPES THE CAUSE OF GENDER INEQUALITIES?

It is a vital question of strategy. Most actors in favour of gender equality will agree on the purpose of creating equal freedom for men and women. However, an approach focusing mainly on stereotypes could be a little limited.

One of the problems in this approach is its excessive focus on norms and ideas as explanatory factors of socio-political reality. Is it really ideational factors that account for social reality and, more specifically, for gender inequalities?

Most experts on gender do not only show that there are norms about the feminine (and the masculine) that are constructed and reproduced by different social institutions. They add that these norms *cause* or *explain* the continuing unfavourable situation of women in a large number of sectors.

Much of this literature focuses on this socialisation in educational spheres.<sup>14</sup> A significant number of studies in the sociology of education and the science of education have focused on this famous “gender socialisation”. The postulate is that gender stereotypes are one of the main factors, or sometimes even *the* main factor, explaining gender inequalities in education, employment,<sup>15</sup> care responsibilities,<sup>16</sup> the gender pay gap,<sup>17</sup> etc.

This approach can be described as “constructivist”, in the sense that it attributes to gender a role in the social construction of the individual, his social role and his social identities. According to this perspective, gender socialisation begins at an early age and is first and foremost the work of the child’s entourage, i.e., his or her family.<sup>18</sup> Parents, we are told, educate children differently depending on their gender and this would have an impact on the type of learning they provide them, the hobbies, sports and cultural activities they encourage them to do and the behaviours they value in their children in general. Most gender experts point to the fact that this distinct socialisation is then reinforced with early childhood care structures and educational institutions, in which representations are very gendered, and children and adolescents are treated differently according to their sex.<sup>19</sup> Socio-cultural media are also perceived as contributing to gender socialisation.<sup>20</sup>

These gendered representations would then have a huge impact on the lives of young people and adults. For example, the sacrificial motherhood norm would explain why women, once they become mothers, give up flourishing careers or personal passions for their offspring and perform more domestic chores. The same goes for the standards on appearance, gentleness, collaborative spirit, empathy, etc. We are told that all these preconceived ideas about the feminine are not only constructed by society but also explain why women are still stuck in generally less favourable situations than men.

However, this assertion is a postulate much more than an adequately demonstrated thesis. To be able to prove that gender norms cause unequal relations between the sexes, it would be necessary to be able to conduct experiments that would be totally unethical. Thus, representative samples should be isolated in distinct environments and educated in these from an early age. Some groups would be exposed to gender norms and others would be educated in “neutral” environments.



It is obviously impossible to carry out this type of experiment in liberal and democratic societies, and fortunately! In real society, we cannot isolate the individual from his environment. Researchers themselves evolve in broader symbolic and material environments that have a strong impact on their perceptions. How then could we prove that ideas such as sacrificial motherhood cause some of the inequalities affecting women, when these representations seem to constitute, again and again, an inevitable horizon of thought in our societies?

It could very well be that other factors explain this situation. According to essentialists, it is the “nature” of women (made up of our hormones, genes and brain). From an economically radical perspective, it could be the impact of a capitalist system that favours the exploitation of workers and the reproduction of their labour power within the home. This would explain why women should spend more time in the domestic sphere. Hence this very demanding standard on maternity.

At the individual level, the harshness of the capitalist system could also push individuals to seek refuge in the home when they can. In this case, the maternity norm would simply be a symbolic tool allowing women to escape exploitative professions. Men, on the other hand, would find other escapes. The stereotype about the sacrificial mother would then push women to leave the laborious exploitation – admittedly, sometimes to lock themselves into another form of exploitation – but it would not be the main cause of this “choice”.

Certainly, norms on the feminine can justify or legitimise the unjust situations experienced by women. But the cause(s) of these are undoubtedly multiple and complex. To take the example of abuse: an abuser will use the norms on motherhood (“you’re a bad mother”), on appearance (“you’re ugly today”), and on empathy (“forgive my gesture” or “you don’t have a heart. Put yourself in my shoes!”) to justify his abuse and try to keep his victim under his control. But it is difficult to demonstrate that these norms are the reasons why women are more victims of abuse.

A role in legitimising inequalities and injustices is not trivial. If it is true that gender norms occupy this function, then it is absolutely imperative to denounce them loud and clear. But if we accept that their role is above all to *legitimise* these injustices rather than to *explain* them, then the consequences to be drawn in terms of struggle and alternatives must be distinct from those that are still very often proposed.

The issue of causality in explaining society is a complex one and leads to much more than one explanatory factor. It is likely that gender inequalities are rooted in a diversity of causes, some of them ideational, some of them material. Power struggles take place at a crossroad between those two extremes, and they tend to shape inequalities. It is far too simplistic to assume that current inequalities between the sexes are only or mainly due to stereotypes taking place at the level of ideas. Material conditions, including socio-economic and biological dimensions, must also play a role.

On the other hand, stereotypes are important in justifying gender inequalities and in preventing women from fighting for more equal freedom. Let’s just take another example: the idea that women naturally belonged in the domestic sphere and did not have the ability to take part in public decisions justified their exclusion from political participation for centuries in the West. These ideas did not necessarily explain this injustice but they justified and legitimised it; and, more importantly, they prevented women from realising that this inequality was unjust and that they were as capable as men to make decisions about public matters.

## HOW CAN WE WORK TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY?

The alternative offered by the EU strategy on stereotypes focuses on ideas (including norms and discourses) as driving



forces for change. If ideas explain reality, then changing them can change reality. Applied to the issue at hand, it means that we have to “question”, “challenge” or even “shatter” gender stereotypes in order to move towards gender equality. This is the explicit alternative offered by the EU campaign against gender stereotypes<sup>21</sup> and it echoes many of the propositions made by gender experts and in the general literature on that topic.<sup>22</sup>

The postulate underlying this strategy is that, if we change our ideas about gender, then the reality of gender inequality will change. Yet, history does not seem to sustain such a view. In matters of socio-political progress in general, much more is at play than normative and discursive battles.

On a general level, several factors have to be taken into account when explaining social reality.

First of all, we must take into account the structural factors that strongly constrain social relations and individuals. These can be of various types: material, environmental or biological. Thus, the economic system in which we evolve has an impact on all our social relations and therefore also on the situation of women. The structural factors that constrain all our social relationships are also environmental. These structural factors may also include biological dimensions. Biology has an impact on our social relationships. And this biology is partly distinct for men and women.

These structural factors influence individuals and their interactions: they shape the conflicts of interest that constitute the fabric of collective interactions. To take just a few simple examples: our economic system creates conflicts of interest between workers and owners of capital. Basic biological differences between men and women can create conflicts of interest related to, for example, reproductive issues or physical strength.

Let us note that these conflicts of interest are always mediated by ideological conflicts: ideologies reflect and influence contradictory power relations. This ideological factor is not a causal factor but mainly serves to justify social realities. And politics is a realm where both struggles of ideas and interests are expressed.

Along that line of thought, gender stereotypes are norms justifying inequalities affecting women and relations of domination between the sexes. The link between ideology and inequality is not a causal link but one of legitimation. Whether gender inequalities serve the economic, political or family system, they reflect broader factors and are justified by ideologies that have long served the interests and views of the male group. Women were for a long time excluded from public life. From then on, the dominant ideologies, present in all public spheres (civil society, politics, artistic and cultural life, etc.), generally reflected the interests of men. It can be argued that gender norms are one of the means of legitimizing inequalities affecting women.

### **IDEAS ARE NOT ENOUGH: TOWARDS A REALISTIC APPROACH**

For most gender experts in universities, associations and public institutions, the solution to gender inequalities is above all symbolic: it is a matter of denouncing, deconstructing and eliminating preconceived ideas about masculinity and femininity. This work, which must be carried out from early childhood and continue in schools, universities and various places of socialization, is supposed to lead to the liberation of women. Thus, in several countries, many mechanisms have been put in place in educational institutions to promote equality between girls and boys by challenging these stereotypes and offering a more “neutral” perspective on gender.<sup>23</sup>

The approach imbuing the EU campaign seems to be very similar.<sup>24</sup> This campaign aims to raise awareness about the



role gender stereotypes play in society. The overall narrative of the EU on gender stereotypes is that the latter generate inequalities and that, therefore, the solution is to destroy those stereotypes, mainly with tools such as raising awareness, education and training; in other words, the work recommended is to take place at the level of norms and ideas.

In this line, if gender norms *create* injustices, then it is enough to remove them in order to put an end to these injustices. This is why a lot of the focus in the alternatives offered by gender experts refer to education and changes of norms and views on what it means to be a man or a woman in society.<sup>25</sup> This reasoning holds if the postulate on which it is based is correct. On the other hand, if these norms are only tools for legitimizing the disadvantages suffered by women, then the work on alternatives must be profoundly different.

This approach can be defined as “idealistic” in a philosophical term: it grants ideas a transformational power as such. Far from such approaches, I defend a profoundly realistic perspective of social change<sup>26</sup>: ideas cannot, on their own, transform society, whether in a progressive or regressive direction. In other words, ideas do not have a direct impact on reality. They are always closely linked to struggles of interests, which are themselves influenced by structural and material factors. Thus, in general, dominant ideas defend the interests of dominant groups.

For the subject at hand, this means that it is not enough to denounce gender stereotypes, or even to try to replace them with “neutral” visions, for the realities they legitimize to disappear. Certainly, a work of critical deconstruction is essential, and it has been done remarkably by gender experts for decades. However, when it comes to *transforming* reality, we must go further. In a realistic perspective, we need to build a critical and alternative discourse that speaks to the victims of the injustices denounced – in this case, women. Such a discourse could aim to mobilize a majority of women in favour of equal freedom. Put differently: we need to find the words that resonate, not only to gender experts and feminist activists, but also to ordinary women.

I would now like to address another limitation in the dominant vision on gender stereotypes, also present in the EU campaign: a tendency to thoroughly reject the notion of differences between the sexes.

### THE NOTION OF “DIFFERENCE” MATTERS

A negative bias against the idea of differences between men and women imbues the work towards gender equality, both at the EU and national levels. The mere idea of a difference between the sexes is rejected as a conservative prison for individuals.

Of course, one can understand why “differentialist” views are not welcome by those in favour of gender equality.

Many authors defending this approach have argued that it is possible to establish a link between, on the one hand, differences between the sexes in hormones, genes and the brain and, on the other hand, supposedly feminine (or masculine) characteristics.<sup>27</sup>

Gender experts and their feminist allies respond passionately to this literature.<sup>28</sup> In particular, they show that the studies on which it is based are not very valid or are insufficiently confirmed. They also argue that science, as things stand, shows more inter-individual differences within each sex than between the two sexes. Some “constructivists” have analysed in detail the type of studies invoked by essentialists to demonstrate their inanity.<sup>29</sup> The argument of the malleability of the brain and epigenetics – the evolution of genes as a function of the environment – also invalidates the very act of looking

for immutable innate differences between the sexes.

These refutations and criticisms of essentialist approaches are extremely useful. In doing so, however, gender experts have sometimes gone too far in their opposition to the notion of difference. This is almost always perceived as a bad thing. The overall EU approach to gender equality seems to follow that approach by postulating that, if we got rid of gender stereotypes, differences between how men and women behave in society would evaporate.

However, there is a certain dogmatism in asserting with so much certainty that we can never demonstrate a link between certain biological differences and certain behaviours. It would be more honest to admit that, given the current state of scientific studies on innate and acquired, and given the complexity brought to this debate by epigenetics and brain plasticity, we are unable to reach definitive conclusions on the matter.

On the other hand, why not dig deeper into the potential social impact of physical differences between the sexes, which are themselves unmistakable? I am referring here to the following differences: most women are generally smaller, lighter and have less muscle mass, but are also less strong and slower than men. Another fundamental difference is obviously in distinct reproductive physical roles. Such differences matter from a feminist point of view, because they often turn out to be vulnerabilities that need to be compensated for socially.

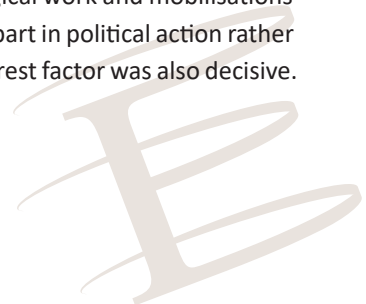
Another type of objective difference to be taken into account lies in the current living conditions of women. If the goal is to speak to women in the here and now, then we cannot avoid their concrete experience: generally, more precarious socio-economic conditions, motherhood for a majority of them at one time or another in their lives, greater involvement in the education of children, concentration in certain professional roles, specific discriminations, etc. An alternative discourse must take into account this different experience. Differences in terms of perception also have to be taken into account: the dominant discourse on gender norms very much imbues our minds, whether we like it or not.

Starting from these representations by transforming them for emancipatory purposes would make it possible to talk to ordinary women, rather than to a minority of militant feminists.

The groups having an interest in such progress have to get involved and mobilise and they have to do so in a particular structural context. If other groups and individuals can play a role too, progress will not happen without a mobilisation of those who have an interest in seeing it happen. This applies to political, cultural and socio-economic struggles as well as to gender-related ones.

For instance, women got the right to vote because a substantial part of the female population mobilised for it. There were leading movements (such as the famous suffragette movement) and a few rare men agreed with this fight but it was mainly because women themselves fought for that right that they ended up obtaining it. Certainly, changes in ideas helped trigger such mobilisations but only because they were in tune with the interests of women to be able to elect their representatives. And it was also that interest that pushed women to change the dominant view about public participation. In that respect, female politicians played a key role – in many countries, women could be elected before actually being able to vote.

In other words, for a progress as decisive as female vote to happen, a combination of ideological work and mobilisations had to take place. The new approach to womanhood that stated that women could also take part in political action rather than stay confined to the domestic realm was instrumental in mobilising women. But the interest factor was also decisive.



Women wanted to express their views politically so that policies could reflect their interests.

More generally speaking, ideas do not float in the air, detached from battles of interests. On the contrary, dominant ideas often defend the interests of dominant groups and it is only when alternative ideas reflect the interests of dominated groups in a convincing way that they can help trigger substantial mobilisations. Yet, without such movement, no significant social and political progress can happen.

The statement that gender stereotypes *justify* gender inequalities rather than *explain* them may seem like an irrelevant or excessively subtle nuance, but it is actually essential in the attempt to build an alternative to current gender inequalities. If stereotypes are the cause of those injustices, then removing them appears as the logical solution. We did examine the unquestioned postulates underlying this approach.

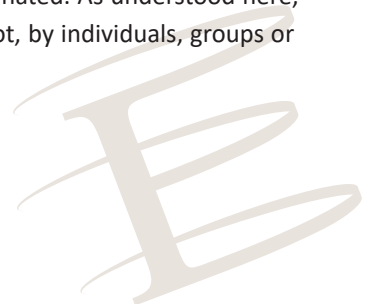
On the other hand, if stereotypes are *justifications* for gender inequalities, then a more dynamic strategy needs to be adopted: certainly, we need to deconstruct those dominant ideas – and the work done by the EU in that respect is excellent – but this is not sufficient. People will not all of a sudden start acting towards gender equality just because these stereotypes have been unveiled. One of the obstacles being that those ideas seem very ingrained in society – several studies are quoted in the campaign against stereotypes. Besides, a Platonist and elitist approach assuming only a few enlightened leaders can change institutions and laws will always be received with scepticism by a majority of individuals.

The work towards more gender justice needs to be done by everyone, at different levels. And it particularly needs to be supported by women themselves. Yet, in order for women to support alternative concrete policies, we need a discourse linking these policies to a broader vision. The question to be asked here is the following: what is the just society we want and what does it mean for gender relations? This long-term vision has to be enticing, particularly for women, if it is to mobilise them. And this utopia also has to be realistic in the sense that it needs to be in tune with the perceived interests of a majority of women. This means that it has to resonate outside purely educated and feminist circles. This is a long-term work, but it seems that a realistic utopia centred around the idea of “real freedom” could motivate a majority of women. The EU campaign against stereotypes and the gender equality strategy does insist on individual freedom as its main goal. The postulate that this will be achieved by getting rid of dominant norms on the feminine and masculine is however problematic. The purpose should be to reach a society in which individuals can build their own vision of the good life in a free manner and in which they can build their own personal approach to gender. If this does suppose more equality between men and women in most fields, it does not necessarily mean getting rid of certain aspects of so-called gender stereotypes. In order to reach that purpose, one also needs to acknowledge the differences (as explained above) that characterise people’s lives according to their sex and compensate for those differences when they represent vulnerabilities.

### INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM AS LONG-TERM GOAL

I would like to end this analysis and reflection by re-emphasizing the radical liberal objective that guides many progressive writings on gender and that is definitely at the core of the EU Gender Equality Strategy. The main purpose of the Gender equality strategy is equal freedom, and we could hardly disagree with such a noble objective.

In our societies, women still undergo many disadvantages that make them more likely to be alienated and therefore not free.<sup>30</sup> Women suffer from many disadvantages that make them more likely to be dominated. As understood here, domination refers to a capacity to interfere in the lives of others, exercised effectively or not, by individuals, groups or institutions exercising an authority likely to become arbitrary.<sup>31</sup>



Of course, the essentialist approach that gender experts oppose is clearly contrary to individual freedom. These views assert that there are biological and innate feminine and masculine “essences” that guide individuals’ identities, needs, and social roles. In addition to being impossible to demonstrate, this approach easily marries conservative discourses that denigrate individual freedom. According to such a perspective, the meaning of being male or female does not depend on individual choice or social construction but only on natural biological inheritance. These currents often manipulate existing scientific data to pretend to prove what they are, for the moment, incapable of proving. As we have mentioned above, the current science of biological “differences” between men and women and their impact on behaviour is extremely embryonic. The extrapolations of the essentialists therefore mainly seem to serve an ideological purpose.

Nonetheless, in the other camp, the constructivist one, individual freedom is also too often neglected and obscured by unproven postulates and practical recommendations contrary to the freedom of each individual. Thus, the constructivist perspective imbuing many gender experts is often combined with a rigid and unproven vision of gender inequalities – the explanation by stereotypes – and with alternatives focused on the elimination of gender norms. In this way, individual freedom is not sufficiently valued. Justice is supposed to reside in a society “beyond gender”, beyond the “masculine” and the “feminine”, or at least beyond their dominant interpretation. This approach is present in the EU campaign against stereotypes: as we saw, they are pinpointed as the main causes for gender inequalities and therefore have to be abolished.

This monolithic approach can frighten ordinary individuals, who are not only steeped in these dominant norms but are also immersed in experiences that often oppose the pundits chanted by gender experts. Moreover, it neglects the potential for individual diversity in self-expression.

For example, women who focus on their home and children would contribute to reinforcing stereotypes and would be wrong. Just as those who conform or attempt to conform to the dominant ideal of the “feminine”. Similarly, men who excessively abide by the dominant view of the “masculine” risk being perceived as domineering male oppressors. And all individuals who do not fully conform to these stereotypes but try as best they can to cobble together individual perspectives of what it means to them to be male or female, risk being considered ignorant and in need of enlightenment. And when these “ordinary” individuals feel influenced by biology, they are immediately labelled as retrograde essentialists.

These two dominant trends are contrary to women’s interest in equal freedom and, to a lesser extent, also oppose men’s interest in being able to freely express their individuality. A just society would aim to guarantee everyone’s freedom. This requires radical transformations at the socio-political level – among other things, the creation of effective sovereignty at a relevant level.<sup>32</sup> Without real sovereignty, those in power are indeed incapable of implementing the necessary measures to abolish the barriers to freedom and put in place the conditions to guarantee it.

While many of these measures apply to the majority of individuals regardless of gender, some of them should apply directly to women. We have attempted to highlight the main principles on which such measures should be based.

The guiding goal would be effective individual freedom. Obstacles to these that specifically affect women should therefore be strongly reduced or radically compensated. These include certain unmistakable physical characteristics, the unequal experiences of women today, and the stereotypes justifying the latter. Once these obstacles have been reduced or compensated, we can hope that women will then be able, as free individual subjects, to choose and implement their own conceptions of the “good life”.



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## Endnotes

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- 15 See for instance: *Gender Equality Index 2023*, op. Cit. P 25; however the European Institute for Gender Equality has an unclear or confused approach to the link between stereotypes and inequalities because it sometimes admits that stereotypes are the *consequence* of inequalities rather than their *cause*: “Widespread gender segregation continues to restrict life choices and the education and employment options of women and men, determine the status of their jobs, drive the gender pay gap, reinforce gender stereotypes, and perpetuate unequal gender power relations in the public and private spheres”, Ibid., p 26.
- 16 “Discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes limit women’s professional agency because they are often expected to undertake most of the unpaid care and domestic work”: Ibid., p 27; “figures reveal the extent of gender stereotypes, which provide fathers with better possibilities to participate in the labour market if living in couples.”: Ibid., p 28.
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to progress towards gender equality pervades the academic literature on the subject. See for instance: Loes Meeussen, Aster Van Rossum, Colette Van Laar, Belle Derks, "Gender Stereotypes: What Are They and How Do They Relate to Social Inequality?", In: Yerkes, M.A., Bal, M. (eds) *Solidarity and Social Justice in Contemporary Societies*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022; Naomi Ellemers, "Gender stereotypes", *Annual Review of Psychology*, Volume 69, 2018.

- 23 For example, in France, the "Interministerial Convention for Equality between Girls and Boys, Men and Women" in the education system signed in France in February 2013 led to a training program for national education staff "ABCD of Equality of Girls and Boys in Primary School". The interministerial committee of March 2018 extended these initiatives with several objectives, particularly in terms of training the educational community in "the deconstruction of prejudices". The "Interministerial Convention for Equality between Girls and Boys, Women and Men in the Education System" from 2019 to 2024 is part of a similar perspective ; Ministère de l'éducation nationale, de la jeunesse et des sports, Egalité entre les filles et les garçons, [www.education.gouv.fr](http://www.education.gouv.fr)
- 24 See above
- 25 *Gender Equality Index 2023*, op. Cit. p 25
- 26 On this, see the first two chapters of Sophie Heine, *Souveraineté européenne. Réalisme et réformisme radical*, Louvain-La-Neuve, Academia, 2021.
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- 29 Fine, 2010, op. cit.
- 30 Sophie Heine, *Genre ou liberté. Vers une féminité repensée*, Academia, Louvain-La-Neuve, 2015, Philip Pettit, *Républicanisme: une théorie de la liberté et du gouvernement*, Gallimard, Paris, 2004. It should be noted that if I take up this definition of Pettit and other so-called neo-republican authors, I do not adhere to the whole of republicanism as a political theory. Admittedly, its Anglo-Saxon version is closer to liberalism. But my approach to freedom is much more in line with a radical interpretation of political and philosophical liberalism that avoids the perfectionist and communitarian dangers present in republicanism.
- 31 Pettit, op. cit.
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