



**ESDN** Discussion Paper

**SDGs AND HUMAN RIGHTS,  
20TH ESDN WORKSHOP**

—  
Discussion Paper

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# INTRODUCTION

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This discussion paper provides input on the European Sustainable Development Network's (ESDN) Workshop, entitled "SDGs and Human Rights", which will take place online on 23 November 2022. This ESDN event is organized by the ESDN in cooperation with the Luxembourgish Ministries of the Environment, Climate and Sustainable Development and for Foreign and European Affairs. The Workshop will be a 1-day event that will bring together policymakers and experts from different stakeholder groups from all over Europe to learn, exchange, and share their experiences.

The Workshop will focus on specific topics relating to the SDGs and Human Rights. The topics and discussions will include three panels: one on SDG 5's Impact on Human Rights of Women and Girls, one on Human Rights Defenders, and one on Financing and Governance for Human Rights and the SDGs. In addition to the keynote speakers' presentations, there will be ample time to discuss and reflect upon discussion topics and the experiences that have been shared throughout the Workshop.

This Discussion Paper provides an overview of how each SDG is related to human rights and which specific issues it

touches upon (Chapter 1). To support the preparation of the discussion, it gives background information on the topics related to each panel session and is structured as follows: (Chapter 2) SDG 5's Impact on Human Rights of Women and Girls, (Chapter 3) Human Rights Defenders, and (Chapter 4) Financing and Governance for Human Rights and the SDGs.

# CHAPTER 1

## OVERVIEW OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

### GOALS RELATED HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are essential to achieving sustainable development that leaves no one behind. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) “seek to realize the human rights of all”, and more than 90% of the targets directly reflect elements of international human rights and labour standards. The pledge to “leave no one behind” mirrors the fundamental human rights principles of non-discrimination and equality (The Danish Institute for Human Rights 2017).

#### How SDGs address the human rights:

**SDG 1. No poverty** – End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

- Right to an adequate standard of living
- Right to social security
- Equal rights of women in economic life

**SDG 2. Zero hunger** – End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.

- Right to adequate food
- International cooperation

**SDG 3. Good health and well-being** – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages.

- Right to life, particularly of women and children
- Right to health, particularly of women and children
- Special protection for mothers and children
- Right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its application
- International cooperation, particularly in relation to the right to health and children’s rights

**SDG 4. Quality education** – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all.

- Right to education, particularly in relation to children, persons with disabilities, and indigenous peoples
- Equal rights of women and girls in the field of education
- Right to work, including technical and vocational training

**SDG 5. Gender equality** – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

- Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls, particularly in legislation, political and public life, economic and social life, and family relations
- Right to decide the number and spacing of children
- Special protection for mothers and children
- Elimination of violence against women and girls
- Right to just and favourable conditions of work

**SDG 6. Clean water and sanitation** – Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

- Right to safe drinking water and sanitation
- Right to health
- Equal access to water and sanitation for rural women

**SDG 7. Affordable and clean energy** – Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

- Right to an adequate standard of living
- Right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its application

**SDG 8. Decent work and economic growth**

– Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

- Right to work and to just and favourable conditions of work
- Prohibition of slavery, forced labour, and trafficking of persons
- Equal rights of women in relation to employment
- Prohibition of child labour
- Equal labour rights of migrant workers

**SDG 9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure**

– Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation.

- Right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its application
- Right to access to information
- Right to adequate housing, including land and resources
- Equal rights of women to financial credit and rural infrastructure

**SDG 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries**

- Right to equality and non-discrimination
- Right to participate in public affairs

- Right to social security
- Promotion of conditions for international migration
- Right of migrants to transfer their earnings and savings

(UN, 2022)

## The 2030 Agenda

Human rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are inextricably linked. The 2030 Agenda is explicitly grounded in international human rights. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) seeks transformative ambition “to realize the human rights of all” and is firmly anchored in human rights principles and standards, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the international human rights treaties. The 2030 Agenda puts the principles of equality and non-discrimination at its heart, with a commitment to ‘leave no one behind’ and ‘reach those furthest behind first’ and two dedicated goals on combating discrimination and inequalities (SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 10 on inequalities within and between countries) as well as a cross-cutting commitment to data disaggregation. (OHCHR 2022)

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## CHAPTER 2

# SDG 5 – ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

The SDG 5 aims to achieve gender equality by ending all forms of discrimination, violence and any harmful practices against women and girls in the public and private spheres. It also calls for the full participation of women and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of political and economic decision-making. (EUROSTAT 2022)

The balanced participation of women and men in education and training, the labour market and in leadership positions is crucial for gender equality in the EU. Equal access to quality education, especially tertiary education, is expected to improve chances in life for both men and women. However, women continue to be over-represented in lower paid sectors and occupations, and experience constraints in their professional choices linked to care responsibilities and gender stereotypes. The persistent employment gap is mirrored in the significant gender pay gap. Closing gender gaps in employment and pay is an urgent economic and social objective for the individual and for society as a whole. In addition, promoting equality between women and men in decision-making has been a key objective of European policy for many years. Another important

objective is the elimination of gender-based violence and protecting and supporting victims. (EUROSTAT 2022)

European policies to achieve gender equality:

- [The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025](#) presents policy objectives and actions to make significant progress towards a gender-equal Europe by 2025.
- [The Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training \(2021–2030\)](#) prioritises improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and sets a monitoring framework via policy targets to be achieved by 2030.
- [The EU Strategy on victims' rights \(2020–2025\)](#) which guarantees that all victims of crime can fully rely on their rights, no matter where in the EU the crime took place.
- [A proposal on pay transparency is aimed](#) at ensuring women and men in the EU receive equal pay for equal work.
- [The Work-life Balance Directive](#) aims at helping women and men reconcile work and caring responsibilities and promote gender equality.



## Current situation in the EU:

Although inequalities still exist, the EU has made significant progress in gender equality over the last decades. This is the result of:

- equal treatment legislation
- gender mainstreaming, integration of the gender perspective into all other policies
- specific measures for the advancement of women

Encouraging trends are the higher number of women in the labour market and their progress in securing better education and training. However, gender gaps remain, and, in the labour market, women are still over-represented in lower paid sectors and under-represented in decision-making positions.

In 2021, the gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis continued to manifest itself. The disproportionate impact on women threatens to reverse decades of progress on gender equality. This concerns, in particular, the greater care burden brought by lockdowns, the lost income, and the steep increase in domestic violence.

Despite these setbacks, the last year brought about important European legislative developments that can

become game changers for gender equality. This concerns, in particular, women's pay. Barely nine months after its presentation in March 2021, the European Commission's proposed directive on pay transparency secured a general agreement in the Council, paving the way for negotiations with the European Parliament and final adoption. In a similar vein, the proposal on minimum wage has already reached a decisive stage of negotiations with the co-legislators. The year 2021 was also a busy period for taking forward initiatives to help combat violence against women. The Council reached a general approach on the proposal for a Digital Services Act, which would help to remove illegal content and protect women users online. Furthermore, 8 March 2022 the Commission adopts a [proposal for a directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence](#). With this legislation, the EU will improve the prevention of violence, strengthen the protection and support of victims and facilitate their access to justice.

**The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025** has a goal to create a European society, where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are free to pursue their chosen path in life, have

## Currently



**33% of women** in the EU have experienced **physical and/or sexual violence**



**22% of women** in the EU have experienced **violence by an intimate partner**



**55% of women** in the EU have been sexually harassed and women are more likely to experience **online sexual harassment** than men

equal opportunities to thrive, and can equally participate in, and lead, the EU.

The key objectives are ending gender-based violence; challenging gender stereotypes; closing gender gaps in the labour market; achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy; addressing the gender pay and pension gaps; closing the gender care gap and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics. The Strategy pursues a dual approach of gender mainstreaming combined with targeted actions, and intersectionality is a horizontal principle for its implementation. While the Strategy focuses on actions within the EU, it is coherent with the EU's external policy on gender equality and

women's empowerment. (Report on gender equality in the EU, 2022)

**Ending gender-based violence** (Image 1) will be addressed by concrete actions, including:

- freeing women and girls from gender-based violence and harassment
  - by ensuring that EU accedes the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, or takes alternative legal measures to achieve the objectives of the Convention
  - by clarifying internet platforms' role in addressing illegal and

*Image 1. Source: Gender Equality Strategy Factsheet*

- harmful content to make the internet safe for all their users
- by improving awareness and collecting EU-wide data on the prevalence of gender-based violence and harassment and challenging gender stereotypes in society
- by launching an EU-wide awareness raising campaign, focusing on youth

### Closing gender gaps in the labour market

(Image 2) is addressed by concrete actions, including:

- improving the balance between women and men in decision-making positions, including on company boards and in politics
  - by adopting EU-wide targets on gender balance on corporate boards
  - by encouraging the participation of women as

voters and candidates in the 2024 European Parliament elections

- encouraging a more balanced participation of women and men in all work sectors for more diversity in the workplace
  - by promoting the EU Platform of Diversity Charters in all sectors
  - by addressing the digital gender gap in the updated Digital Education Action Plan

Image 2. Source: Gender Equality Strategy Factsheet - Striving for a Union Of Equality. The Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025



Only **7.5%** of board chairs and **7.7%** of CEOs are women



Only **22%** of AI programmers are women



**39%** of Members of the European Parliament are women

## CHAPTER 3

### HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

[“Human rights defender”](#) is a term used to describe people who, individually or with others, act to promote or protect human rights in a peaceful manner. Human rights defenders seek the promotion and protection of civil and political rights as well as the promotion, protection and realization of economic, social and cultural rights.

Human rights defenders address any human rights concerns, which can be as varied as, for example, summary executions, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, female genital mutilation, discrimination, employment issues, forced evictions, access to health care, and toxic waste and its impact on the environment. Defenders are active in support of human rights as diverse as the rights to life, to food and water, to the highest attainable standard of health, to adequate housing, to a name and a nationality, to education, to freedom of movement and to non-discrimination. They sometimes address the rights of categories of persons, for example women’s rights, children’s rights, the rights of indigenous persons, the rights of refugees and internally displaced persons, the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersexual people, the rights of persons with

disabilities and the rights of national of linguistic (UN Human Rights office of the High Commissioner, 2020).

#### The UN Special Rapporteur

In 2000, the Commission on Human Rights asked the Secretary-General to establish a mandate on human rights defenders, to give support to the implementation of the Declaration on human rights defenders and also to gather information on the actual situation of human rights defenders around the world.

This mandate was created to:

- promote the effective implementation of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in cooperation and dialogue with Governments and other actors
- study developments and challenges on the right to promote and protect human rights and seek, receive and respond to information on the situation of human rights defenders
- recommend effective strategies to better protect human rights defenders
- integrate a gender perspective and pay particular attention to women human rights defenders

Current mandate holder is Ms. Mary Lawlor. She is the Special Rapporteur on

the situation of human rights defenders since 1 May 2020 (OHCHR 2022).

## EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders

Support to human rights defenders (HRDs) is one of the major priorities of the EU's external human rights policy. The EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders (2008) have confirmed that HRDs are our natural and indispensable "allies" in the promotion of human rights and democratisation in their respective countries. Assistance to human rights activists is probably the most visible of the EU's human rights activities, having a direct impact on individuals. Since the adoption of the Guidelines, a growing number of common initiatives within the EU to protect and support HRDs is being reported and HRDs and civil society organisations are increasingly being recognised as key interlocutors of EU missions (EU 2022).

In parallel, the European Parliament (EP) has also positioned itself as an important actor as regards support to HRDs. The EP's Subcommittee on Human Rights regularly organises hearings and discussions with HRDs in view of the adoption of reports and resolutions. In 2010, the Report on EU policies in favour of human rights

defenders ("[Hautala Report](#)") took stock of the hitherto implementation of the Guidelines and tabled several proposals for a more effective policy towards HRDs. Since 1988, the EP's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought has been awarded to individuals or organizations that have made an important contribution to the fight for human rights or democracy. In 2005 the prize was awarded to Hauwa Ibrahim, a Nigerian campaigner for girls' education. (EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders 2016)

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## CHAPTER 4

# FINANCING AND GOVERNANCE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE SDGS

As the international community becomes more serious about addressing climate change, there has been increased attention put on the financial resources needed to help developing countries mitigate and adapt to climate change (climate finance). The governance and distribution of climate finance have implications for the full range of human rights, including the rights to life, health, food, water, housing, and culture, among others. A human rights-based approach to climate finance will help to ensure that countries avoid or minimize the human rights impacts of mitigation and adaptation measures, and to promote sustainable and equitable low-carbon development (CIEL 2022).

### COP26 (United Nations Climate Change Conference)

At COP26 (United Nations Climate Change Conference), various decisions were taken concerning climate finance. None of these decisions, however, explicitly connected climate finance to human rights. Both the COP26 and the CMA (signatories to the Paris Agreement) cover decisions explicitly consider human rights obligations in their preambles, providing some guidance in regard to the interpretation of those decisions. However,

human rights are not mentioned anywhere else in the decisions. In this context, it is critical that climate finance decisions focused on improving financial mechanisms to increase economic cooperation to protect vulnerable countries and populations. (GNHRE, 2021)

**The Glasgow Climate Pact** expressly recognises the need for adaptation finance. It emphasises the insufficiency of current funds to respond to ‘worsening climate change impacts in developing country parties’. This attention to adaptation finance reflects the parties’ concern for the human rights of inhabitants of the most vulnerable countries, who lives are threatened by climate change impacts. (GNHRE, 2021)

The Glasgow Climate Pact also recognises the need to ‘scale up financial resources’ of those countries ‘particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change’. One of the main goals of human rights law is to protect vulnerable groups, including those particularly threatened by climate change. Thus, even when there is no explicit mention of human rights in the cover decisions, there is an emphasis on protecting the most vulnerable countries, demonstrating a non-discriminatory



approach that is an essential element of human rights. (GNHRE, 2021)

[EU increases support](#) to the protection of human rights defenders worldwide. Human rights are increasingly under threat worldwide. Against this global backdrop, reconfirming the European Union's strong support to human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy, and their defenders worldwide, Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen signed €30 million, a substantial increase, for the new phase of the EU Human Rights Defenders Mechanism, in the presence of civil society organisations and human rights defenders, for the period 2022–2027. The EU Human Rights Defenders Mechanism is a critical EU programme for supporting human rights defenders around the world, a key priority of the €1.5 billion Global Europe Human Rights and Democracy programme. The Mechanism is managed by [ProtectDefenders.eu](#), a consortium of 12 human rights NGOs. (EU 2022)

#### Support to Human Rights Defenders at risk

The EIDHR support to human rights defenders (HRD) at risk (individuals, organisations and groups) is the basis for the EU world leadership in HRD support.

The EIDHR provides emergency grants, physical/digital protection, legal and medical support, urgent relocation/sheltering, training or permanent (24h/7) helpline, psychosocial assistance for and support to family members of human rights defenders at risk so that they are able to continue their important work.

- [ProtectDefenders.eu](#), the first EU comprehensive HRD Mechanism set up in 2015, extended in 2018, with an unprecedented budget of EUR 19.95 million over four years and bringing together a consortium of 12 independent civil society organisations specialised in HRD protection with worldwide coverage;
- [EU Emergency Fund for HRDs at Risk](#) (EUR 4.3 million from 2015 to 2019) providing fast emergency grants of up to EUR 10,000 to human rights defenders under threat.

Both projects were renewed for a period of three years: [ProtectDefenders.eu](#) in November 2019 (budget of EUR 15 million) and the [EU Emergency Fund](#) in December 2019 (budget of EUR 3.3 million). Between 2014 and 2019 6 005 HRDs at risk have been supported mainly by these two programmes.

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# ESDN

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