

Unfinished Business: Review of the EU's Policies on Gender Equality in Education

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Abstract:

This article presents a broad historical review of the European Union (EU)'s policies on gender equality in education. The review shows that the EU's policies on gender equality in education have gone through four stages: germination, foundation, formation and deepening. Though the EU has sought to call for greater gender equality in education and made some progress and achievements, gender equality in education is still an unfinished business because its success largely depends on enforcement, regulation and a gender equality culture in society. In reality, the EU, as a supranational organization, does not have enough enforcement power or regulation of its policies, and the patriarchal culture still exists and has a hidden legitimacy in society.

Keywords: gender equality, policy, education, EU, history



1. Introduction

Gender equality is a fundamental human right. As UNESCO noted, education has enormous potential to challenge and transform unequal social and gender relations, norms and practices, and to foster the acceptance of gender equality as a fundamental value and human right (UNESCO, 2019). Each additional year of primary education can increase a woman's wage level by 10-20% (UNESCO, 2020a). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have also made commitment to gender equality in education, which is mainly represented in SDG4: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*, SDG5: *Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*, and their sub-targets (4.1-4.7).

The European Union (EU)¹ is a global leader in gender equality, and the task of promoting equality between women and men in all its activities was written in the Treaties (European Commission, 2020b). The Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2022) shows that the smallest gender gap in the world is in Iceland, followed by Finland, Norway, and Sweden, Ireland, Germany fifth, ninth and tenth respectively. Most of the top-ranking countries are members of the EU, and the EU gender equality programs rank particularly high on the list of measures available to the EU (Ahrens, 2019), which shows that the measures taken by the EU are exemplary in the world.

Though we have seen considerable progress in gender equality in education since the second wave of feminism brought girls' education right to light, deep-rooted inequalities still persist. Instability, fragility, conflict, climate change, environmental degradation, migration and forced displacement severely exacerbate inequalities (European Commission, 2020a). Gender discrimination and sexual harassment continue to impede girls' educational experience. For example, overall European women are excelling in higher education, and yet, women represent only a third of researchers and around a fifth of top-level academics (Salinas & Bagni, 2017). In addition, its improvement has slowed or even stalled recently. Anti-gender mobilization has been observed in Europe since at least 2010.

The previous studies about gender equality in education mainly focus on the primary and higher education level, including investigating the inequality in admission access, school culture, and teaching approaches in schools (Silander et al., 2013; Myyry, 2022; Lee & Mahmoudi-Gahrouei, 2020). As for the studies of relative policies, most of them are mainly focused on the general gender policies in the EU or its member states, especially the policies after "Gender Mainstreaming" (GM), whereas the policies on gender equality in education are seldom reviewed (Walby, 2004; Stratigaki, 2005; Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000). Moreover, it remains unclear why the EU's policies on gender equality in education face such embarrassing and controversial problems, for there are many debates on the nature and goals of its policies (Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Lemke & Rogers, 2022; Elomäki, 2015), and such an "equality leader" has suffered the most anti-gender mobilization, especially in education.

¹ The European Union began as the European Coal and Steel Community, then the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community. It eventually became the current European Union. For the sake of convenience, we use the term "European Union" as a collective term.



To fill these research gaps, it is necessary to review the historical development of its policies. We attempt to address the following questions: 1) What policies on gender equality in education have been enacted by the EU, and how have they advanced? 2) What measures have been adopted by the EU to implement these policies? 3) What are the progress and challenges of the policies? Answer to these questions can clarify the intrinsic ideas and values of the EU's policies on gender equality in education and provide insights into their current state and future direction.

2. Conceptual Framework

The concept of “policies on gender equality in education” is widely contested and multi-dimensional, including various theories about gender equality and education equality. Many scholars and international organizations have discussed its nature and dimensions.

On the gender dimension, its concept and nature are still undergoing theoretical debates. As gender equality began as a product of the feminist movement for equal rights, the key arguments are within the feminist theories, and mostly focus on the different views on “gender”. Walby reviewed some classical perspectives and divided them into three models. One is the debate on sameness (equal opportunities or equal treatment) and difference (special programs) prevails, which contains the most typical arguments about difference, universalism and particularism (Walby, 2005; Benschop & Verloo, 2006). The second model distinguishes gender equality between “inclusion, reversal and displacement” and “tinkering inequality, tailoring inequality and transformation” (Rees, 1998; Squires, 2000). They respectively correspond to an individual focus on formal equality and equal opportunities, requiring to fit the needs of disadvantaged groups, and an institutional focus on transforming gendered organizational structures, redistributing power and creating a new standard for both men and women. The third typology mainly discusses about equal treatment perspective, women's perspective and the gender perspective (Booth, 2002). In short, these theoretical debates are mainly about what is truly gender equality.

As for education equality, its concept and constitutions are clearer. Education equality is usually divided into three types as “equal access to education, equality within education, and equality through education” (Subrahmanian, 2005), or the equality of education opportunities, processes and outcomes. Some scholars focus on the scope of education equality and insist that it contains equality of opportunity (free choice and no political, legal, economic, social or cultural constraints), equality for all and equality on average across social groups (Espinoza, 2007), or hold the views that education equality means “expanding needs, rights, and capabilities” (Fennell & Arnot, 2007).

According to these classifications, we adopt the typical one from each dimension and construct an analysis framework about gender equality in education (see Table 1).



Table 1. The Framework of Gender Equality in Education

	Sameness	Difference
Equal access to education	Free and parity education access to men and women	Expand the education access of under-representatives
Equality within education	Parity learning experience between men and women	Fit the learning needs of under-representatives
Equality through education	Parity outcomes between men and women with similar background	Expand the capabilities of under-representatives

3. Methodology

This paper applies the document-based approach as the research method. We select historical political documents related to gender equality in education, which were published by the EU as data resources, including Directives, Commission communication, Council resolutions, Council decisions, Commission staff working documents, official statistics and so on. However, there are very few policies that are directly titled as gender equality in education, and most of them are integrated into education policies and gender policies. Therefore, we choose both gender equality policies included in the field of education, and the education policies included in the field of gender equality. Meanwhile, only the documents, that were written in English and published from the 1960s to 2022, are selected. Although there exist a small number of policies on gender equality in education that were published in the sector of employment or health, we did not include them in the analysis, given our intentional focus on education. In the end, we collected 78 documents for analysis. At the same time, we added some academic studies as supplement references to help investigate the background of the relevant policies. They provide the basis for the division of stages and the historical evolution and stage characteristics of the policy development were presented at a macro level.

After the data collection, we took a thematic qualitative approach to deal with the text data. First, we generated a topical category according to the framework of gender equality in education. Then, we analyzed the content and the changes of these policies based on the category, and identified the key events mentioned in relevant studies to divide the EU's policies on gender equality in education into distinct stages or periods.

4. The Evolution of Policies on Gender Equality in Education in EU

The policies on gender equality in education in the EU have covered all academic levels. According to the framework above, the development of the EU's policies on gender equality in education could be divided into the following periods. It has gradually shifted from equality in education outcomes to equality at the education starting point and process for women. In other words, it changes from a passive policy that ensures women's rights and guarantees equal opportunities to a proactive policy that strengthens gender



care and stimulates women's potential, which also means that the policies changed from eliminating the disparities among different genders to admitting their differences and giving the disadvantages extra care.

4.1 Germination: an extension of gender equality in employment (1950s-1970s)

The EU has long pursued and focused on gender equality since the 1950s. However, as the EU initially started its union for economic development, its early policies were focused on economy, labor and employment, which means education policies were not emphasized. Therefore, the policies on gender equality in education at this time were more of a response to the issue of gender equality in employment.

In March 1957, the *Roman Treaty* was signed. The treaty emphasized the equal rights and responsibilities of the member states, with economic integration at its core (Dai, 1993). Therefore, it has little to say about education and does not detail any specific competencies of the EU. Only Article 128 mentioned transnational vocational training, which established ten general principles on vocational education and training and committed to making appropriate training accessible to all. Concerning gender equality, Article 119 guarantees the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value. These articles show that the treaty mainly focuses on gender equality in employment and the workplace. Though economically motivated, the treaty also brought attention to the unequal status of women and men in society. It served as the basis for most of the gender equality policies and laws that followed, paving the way for the promotion of gender equality in education.

It is evident that the importance of education and gender equalities were initially demonstrated in this phase. The core of the policies focuses on economic integration (i.e., the lifting of trade barriers and the economic development) and rarely touches on the topics of gender and education. However, these policies outline a limited and preliminary framework for gender equality in education, which provides basic guidance for the future development of the EU's policies on gender equality in education.

4.2 Foundation: chasing the same access and outcomes (1970s-1994)

Throughout the 1960s, the general principle laid down in *the Roman Treaty* was not recognized as legally binding by the majority of member states. It was regarded only as a sacred principle. However, after the 1970s when the severe depression caused by the oil crisis led to a significant increase in youth unemployment throughout Europe, the EU reconsidered the role of vocational education and training. In this phase, the dominant concern was to increase gender parity in enrollment and outcome, particularly at the primary and secondary levels.

The second-wave of feminist movements and the increasing entry of women into the EU's legislative institutions led to a focus on gender equality. With the creation of the Education Committee in 1974, the influence of the EU began to be felt at all levels of education, leading to a growing number of initiatives and programs in education. In 1976, the Council published a resolution, starting to implement its first action program in the field of education. The resolution acknowledged the problems in relation to educational equality, and states:



The achievement of equal opportunity for free access to all forms of education is an essential aim of the education policies of all the Member States and its importance must be stressed in conjunction with other economic and social policies, in order to achieve equality of opportunity in society (European Council, 1976).

It is clear that the resolution mainly focuses on the same educational opportunity, advocating to provide equal access to education for all. However, it didn't explicitly mention the gender in 'all'. In other words, it considers gender as the same. After the 1980s, several positive action programs that support the role of women in European society have been developed (Preti & di Bella, 2023). The positive actions are more likely to give help or preferential treatment to the groups that are regarded as underrepresented in their education, employment, etc. (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2008). It is described as a new outbreak that goes beyond legislation on [equal treatment](#) by promoting substantive equality (equality of outcomes), for example, by addressing structural disadvantages rather than merely aiming for equality of opportunity or prohibitions on discrimination (Eurofound, 2024).

1982 saw the launch of the *Equal Opportunities Action Programme 1982-1985*. This action program focused on equal opportunities and suggested reducing obstacles on the road to equality of opportunity in education, while expanding women's rights (European Commission, 1982). Moreover, *the third action programme (1991-1995)* began to take measures to raise public awareness of gender equality and the participation of women in the decision-making process at all levels in all areas of society (including education area) to empower women rather than only focus on their opportunity (European Council, 1991; Preti & di Bella, 2023). The characteristics of these programs are that they have seen the disadvantage of women's access to opportunities but advocate for the same opportunities and achievements as men.

Beyond policy content, the structure of the EU became more conducive to gender equality in education during this period, with *the Treaty on European Union (the Maastricht Treaty)* formally recognizing education as a competence of the EU in 1991. This also laid the foundation for the EU's education and training programs for the next generation. Article 119 of the Treaty states that all member states must ensure equal rights for men and women in education, training and vocational guidance (EU, 1992). Importantly, it significantly extends the powers of the European Parliament, which has long been one of the leading advocates of gender equality. Together with the increased influence of the European Commission's Working Party on Equal Opportunities and the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights, a relatively comprehensive framework for gender equality in education in the EU has emerged, both in terms of policy content and institutional structure.

Generally speaking, the EU's remit has expanded well beyond the relatively narrow boundaries of the economy to include the field of education. In addition to equal opportunities for all, the EU's policies on gender equality in education have gradually paid extra attention to the underrepresented, including women's achievements, roles in the field of education, and especially women's participation in the field of research and other aspects that are susceptible to discrimination and prejudice against women. The policies on gender equality in education and its system are gradually taking shape.



4.3 Formation: gender mainstreaming in education policy (1995-2010)

In 1995, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women put forward the idea of “Gender Mainstreaming” (GM) in the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, calling for the integration of a gender perspective into all stages of the policy life cycle. The following year, GM was officially introduced in the EU. “To eliminate differentials in areas such as nutrition, literacy, education and training, employment and access to primary health care” (European Commission, 2004a) became an urgent priority for GM in the EU. In the same year, the European Commission issued a special incorporation to map out the future of GM in education and training (European Commission, 2004b). In particular, the *Treaty of Amsterdam* formally endorsed this new approach and committed the EU to work toward integrating GM into all its policies in the future. Article 3 proclaimed that “in all its activities the Community shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women” (European Commission, 1997).

During this period, all major EU documents agreed on taking some basic dimensions of GM into account. GM transcends the liberal feminist approaches of equal treatment and equal opportunities for it addresses fossilized norms and complex power relations rather than reproducing simple notions of disadvantage (Benschop & Verloo, 2006). It requires an integrated approach to be implemented in any activities and strengthen the relevance and coherence among policies on gender equality in education. In the late 1990s the European Commission decided to grant GM an especially strong position within the EU Structural Funds, and the regulations on spending EU money introduced ambitious and relatively strong provisions on gender equality (Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000). Meanwhile, the 1995 accession of three new member states, Sweden, Austria and Finland, which had a long-standing commitment to gender equality, also brought more positivity to the EU and its policies on gender equality in education.

The Framework Strategy for Gender Equality (2001-2005), adopted by the Commission in 2000, sets out more complete and specific requirements for education (European Commission, 2003). The strategy emphasizes eliminating prejudices and stereotypes. It calls on “raising awareness about gender equality. It is proposed in particular to boost efforts to eradicate stereotypical gender discrimination in education, for example in education and materials, and to develop good practices in this field” “overcoming gender stereotypes in and via relevant Community policies”.

In addition to the comprehensive policy content, the period also saw a further expansion of the EU’s influence in the field of gender equality in education. *The Treaty of Amsterdam amending the Treaty on European Union*, in its Article 6a (European Commission, 1997), approved the Commission’s “combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation”, giving EU the direct powers to enact legislation relating to equality and non-discrimination. *The Lisbon Conclusions of 2000* (European Commission, 2020c) set out a cooperation method through regular monitoring and peer review to evaluate member states’ progress.

Following this, *the Lisbon Treaty* requires the EU to incorporate European principles in member states’ and regions’ policies, mainly through the setting of specific objectives and the adoption of measures. Although under the principle of subsidiarity, member states are allowed to interpret and implement EU policies selectively. However, EU guidelines continue to have an increasing influence on national policies.



Furthermore, in 2007 the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) was established and it was integrated into the judicial work of the Commission as a specialized body contributing to gender equality, including gender equality in education. As a result, the scope of coverage and the degree of implementation of the relevant policies on gender equality in education have been subsequently increased.

With GM, EU policies on gender equality in education were improved. They not only integrate gender equality in education opportunities, outcomes and processes, but also synthesize the legal policies, data statistics, school practices, the relevant staff, and so on. It calls for overcoming gender stereotypes and discrimination in education, provides training for teachers to raise educators' awareness of gender equality and ensures that the principle of gender equality is integrated into education.

4.4 Deepening: creating an inclusive education culture (2010-present)

In 2010, the EU faced difficulties due to the unsatisfactory implementation of *the Lisbon Strategy* and the spread of the financial crisis. In 2015, the Commission and member states agreed on a new set of priority areas of work (European Commission, 2015). The strategy requires member states to prioritize gender equality in education and to ensure this principle is implemented in all areas of education. In addition, in 2019 the EU appointed its first female president of the Commission, giving an important boost to the deepening of gender equality in education. During this period, the EU's policies have shifted from being centered on the principle of parity between women and men to offering different concerns to different genders. At the same time, a more holistic approach to intersecting inequalities is adopted in the spirit of "gender inclusiveness".

Several documents, such as the newsletter on *the renewed EU agenda for higher education* and *the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)*, have been issued during this period, referring to the need to "building inclusive and connected higher education systems" and "developing and implementing integrated institutional strategies for inclusion, gender equality and study success from admission to graduation". In particular, in the process of building the European Education Area (EEA), improving the quality, inclusiveness and gender sensitivity of education are key objectives of the EEA (European Commission, 2020d).

The policies in this phase took more consideration on how the "combination of gender with other personal characteristics or identities" has a bearing on gender inequality, and "using intersectionality...as a cross-cutting principle" (European Commission, 2020b). Meanwhile, in the *Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025*, the expression "in all their diversity" is introduced "to express that, where women or men are mentioned, these are heterogeneous categories" (European Commission, 2020b). It seems to signal an earnest "commitment to leave no one behind and achieve a gender-equal Europe for everyone" and move toward a more inclusive and consistent regard (Weiner, 2023).

The emphasis reflects the development process of feminism. During this period, feminists rejected biological gender and used intersectionality, the combination of gender with other personal characteristics or identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination, as a cross-cutting principle. They believe that a universal perspective cannot completely address female inequality,



and the patriarchy is also expressed in hegemonic masculinity and its oppression of non-hegemonic men. Therefore, the policy must consider its intersectional compounding with race, ethnicity, region, and class beyond gender and promote the realization of women's interests in a spirit of inclusion. The spirit of gender inclusiveness implies a greater focus on the construction of gender equality culture in education, particularly gender stereotypes, intersectional inequalities and gender sensitivity in educational institutions.

This characteristic was especially represented in their emphasis on the culture of inclusion. The *Document on Gender Equality in Education 2022* mentioned four key problems, a) Gender gaps in education; b) Non-traditional career education and pathways; c) Textbooks and learning materials; and d) Gender-based violence in education. It also emphasizes that “More awareness-raising is needed for educational policymakers, practitioners (principals, teaching staff), parents and wider society concerning gender gaps in education” “Supporting long-term career counselling focused on promoting career choices free of gender bias can be an effective tool for promoting gender equality” “Regular reviewing of learning materials is necessary to assess the gender balance of the curriculum, identify absences and gaps, and identify gender stereotype” (European Commission, 2023).

In short, the EU's policies on gender equality in education in this period have deepened and gradually addressed the gender issues in the culture of education. Policies of this period emphasize “inclusiveness”, “discrimination” and “stereotypes” in education, and calls for deeper exploration and promotion of gender equality in education from the implicit dimensions of concepts, consciousness and culture, rather than focusing only on superficial data such as education enrollment rates. At the same time, the policies also incorporate consideration and requirements for men, not only by requiring them to join in, but also by proposing relevant measures to address their difficulties, making the policy more comprehensive and complete.

5. Prospect: What are the Progress and Challenges?

To promote the implementation of policies on gender equality in education, the EU has developed a large number of measures, including the establishment of a working group on equality and values in education and training, gender training for government staff and relevant stakeholders. However, there is still no consensus on the failure or success, with documentation in the public domain both fragmented and arbitrary.

It is undeniable that the EU's policies and measures for gender equality in education are advancing with substantial results. First of all, as mentioned above, many member states of the EU have the highest level of gender equality in the world, and their gender equality in education is also at a high level. Second, the EU's policies on gender equality in education have enabled women's potential and rights to be fully respected and realized. The EU is close to achieving gender parity in women's education enrollment and completion (equal or even more than the male ratio). Gender gaps in the education process and outcomes have also narrowed considerably. In the field of scientific research, women's academics are gradually growing faster than men (4.8% per year between 2005 and 2011, compared to 3.3% for men), meaning



that women's achievements in the field of research are gradually being recognized and they can catch up with those of men. In addition to helping women realize their potential, the EU is also making positive changes in its political institutions, with 39% female representation in the European Parliament in 2019. This is not only a reflection of the effectiveness of the past implementation of policies on gender equality in education, but also a guarantee to further gender equality in education.

In addition, the EU's policies on gender equality in education have driven a large number of member states to formulate relevant policies and take action. Under the guidance of the EU policy, nearly all EU member states have regarded the incorporation of a gender perspective into political commitments as a legal obligation, and many states have formulated relevant national strategies or action plans. France has emphasized synergies between its national policies and actions at the EU level, actively participating in the EU's Gender and Science Forum and explicitly affirming its commitment to combating gender inequality in higher education and supporting gender research (EIGE, 2024a). It also passed the Act on Higher Education and Research in 2013, which requires the implementation of the principle of gender equality in all research institutes and the nomination of gender officers in those institutes. At the same time, each member state has established a national agency of gender equality to coordinate, implement, monitor and evaluate policies. As shown in the EIGE, the Netherlands has established specialized equality offices within the education sector. Cyprus, Greece, Poland, and Spain even have observatories and research centers dedicated to investigating and monitoring gender equality-related topics (EIGE, 2024b). Croatia has set clear standards for textbooks, which must "prepare both sexes for effective and equal participation in all spheres of life" and "promote gender equality"; the Swedish government has invested SEK110 million in gender equality training for teachers; and the Polish government has supported a large number of women's training programs to study science and technology; the German government has funded an annual Girls' Day to help widen the range of career choices for women. By coordinating the progress of national policies, they promote the realization of gender equality in education throughout Europe.

However, gender equality in education is still an unfinished business, stuck in an awkward dilemma in the EU.

First, the effectiveness of their implementation varies. Women in the eastern and southern EU member states (36% of the EU population lives in this region) are in a situation of low achievement and high disadvantage (European Commission, 2024). The policies in these member states are facing a significant democratic deficit, that is, they are promoted without engaging a wider audience and elude parliamentary control (Rawłuszko, 2021). This is partly related to the cultural traditions of each country, as many member states have a long tradition of gender inequality and weak governmental interest in engaging gender equality in education. In Bulgaria, for example, the level of gender equality in education is lower than the EU average, and the gap with the EU is widening over time (UNESCO, 2020b). Although there are acts to emphasize non-gender discrimination in education, these policies are externally driven and have met with domestic public opposition (i.e., through "anti-gender campaigns"). This is partly because EU policy takes the form of flexible regulation. Under common guidelines, member states can design specific policies



according to their particular socioeconomic context, which to some extent facilitates GM across member states, but does not allow for uniformity in advancing the effects across countries.

In addition, policies related to gender are challenged by competition with more established organizational goals, as they tend to be sensitive to the power dynamic within the organization (Silander et al., 2024). Once the policymakers are less gender-sensitive, and women in the education sector are not involved in the development of policies, the progress of EU's policies on gender equality in education will face great danger. However, some studies find that the projects fostered by external international commitments and obscure bureaucratic measures may unintentionally provide the impetus for anti-gender mobilization, for the growing concerns about citizens' control over the state and its policies (Rawłuszko, 2021). It is unclear what the government of member states should do. Both the strict control and non-actions will cause resistance, resulting in a great dilemma.

Third, the policies on gender equality in education are embedded in the logic of the market, and their goals are to reduce poverty and increase productivity rather than fighting for women's rights. It is noticeable that the rationale of these policies has often been instrumentalist, drawing heavily on human capital perspectives concerned with the economic significance of getting girls into school, particularly in terms of poverty reduction (Unterhalter & North, 2011). Many studies have found that the goal of the economic competitiveness takes precedence over equality considerations in the EU (Unterhalter & North, 2011; Elomäki, 2015). Some researchers even described the task of mainstreaming gender in EU policy as rather "Sisyphean" (Benschop & Verloo, 2006). As gender equality is a rather complex issue, people often have different or even contradictory views of these policies. If we focus solely on the opinions of men and women, it seems that both of them are dissatisfied with these policies. Some blame the discounting of the man's question (Weiner, 2023), while others hold the belief that these policies only help women integrate into society and prepare them for a male-dominated culture (Lemke & Rogers, 2022).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Since the 1990s, gender has been a focus of global and local education policy reform (Khalid, 2023). Unterhalter (2007; 2023) has identified three overlapping streams of gender equality in education. First, interventions to secure women's access, progression and attainment at school; second, institution building to support women's education as part of the development of policy and practice for gender equality and women's rights in and through education; third, interactions around feminist advocacy and activism for a transformative politics. The general direction of the EU's policies on gender equality in education is broadly in line with this characterization. However, as Lahelma (2013) noted, gender and gender equality are difficult to grasp and politically sensitive, which means gender equality discourse has not achieved sustainable change. UNESCO recognizes gender equality as "equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for girls and boys, women and men" (UNESCO, 2022), and the EU emphasizes that it means "women and men, young and old, are free to pursue the path of their choice, have equal opportunities to strive for, participate in and lead our European societies on an equal footing" (European Commission, 2020b). Gender parity has always been the main metric of most formal definitions, especially as the



controversies over gender and LGBT equality still exist, and these policies are blamed for bringing inequality.

This article systematically reviewed the content of policies on gender equality in education at the EU level and focused on its historical evolution to identify the drivers. It can be summarized that the policies took the perspective of sameness about gender until the 1980s. The content changes from gender equality in access to education (access and early dropout of girls in poverty, rural areas and early pregnancy), gender equality in the learning environment (gender sensitivity of educational institutions, gender-based violence in schools, gender stereotyping in curricula and education materials), to gender equality in education outcomes (women's STEM education and digital competence, their status in scientific research) and so on.

This research is unique in terms of illustrating the development of the EU's policies on gender equality in education over a long-term historical lens. The framework of this article is descriptive in nature as the primary research question is the content of the EU's policies on gender equality in education. This article focuses on the changes in the meaning attached to the policies with a broad-brush. At the same time, this paper uses documents and academic research as the main materials and does not conduct empirical research nor obtain empirical data on the effects of the policies, which may lead to a partial flaw in the evaluation of the effects of the policies. Moreover, the EU's education gender policy is a huge system, which involves different institutions, female representation in the Parliament, social organizations and many other aspects. Due to the time constraints, this paper does not fully explain all of them. The availability and accessibility of confidential documents is also very limited, and some policies cannot be found in the complete text. Thus, future research is expected to include more empirical studies on the implementation of relevant policies in different member states, and focus more on how to solve the problems of the EU's policies on gender equality in education, especially on how to solve the conflicting needs of different genders and the difficulties in identifying hidden gender inequalities in education

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