



## SCIENCE FOR POLICY BRIEF

# Gender Attitudes in the EU: Uneven Progress and Partial Polarisation

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Gender attitudes in the EU and their change over time are domain specific and uneven: these need to be studied as a multidimensional phenomenon.
- On leadership, EU citizens feel increasingly comfortable with having women in the highest decision making roles since 2009. This trend is particularly pronounced for young men in Northern and Southern EU countries.
- In the area of economy, the belief that the family suffers when mothers work full-time has become less common over the past decade. However, the beliefs of young men lag behind, leading to an attitude polarisation compared with young women. Large country differences exist.
- The large majority of EU citizens does not accept acts of physical and sexual violence against women.
- There are higher rates of acceptance for online violence, such as non-consensual image sharing and sexist, demeaning or abusive comments.
- Young men are more likely to accept violence than older men in particular contexts.
- Policy recommendations include addressing stereotypes about gender roles in the economy as well as raising awareness about all forms of violence against women, especially among young men.

## BACKGROUND

Gender-equality has progressed in several domains over the past decades in Western democracies [1,2]. Traditional gender-roles have generally diminished to a certain extent. Women have increasingly entered the labour force and held political office. However, gendered stereotypes on the 'natural abilities' of men and women persist, which contribute to the low number of women in top positions, the gender pay gap and men's lower contribution to unpaid care and domestic work. These dynamics often put a double burden on women who are expected to both engage with public life and to do care and unpaid work. Furthermore, large regional differences exist in how

these dynamics have developed, with Northern EU countries being closer to gender equality [3].

Progress has also been made in addressing gender-based violence, with most European citizens rejecting overt acts of violence. However, there is also a sizeable minority who hold hostile views such as accusing women of exaggerating claims of sexual violence, and accepting men's economic control and online violence against women.

Yet, recent media discussions, particularly based on a UK poll [4], have raised concerns about divides in gender attitudes of young women and men, perhaps mirroring trends in political ideology which show women have shifted to the left [5]. Research on **polarisation of gender attitudes between**

**women and men and across generations is an emerging topic.** This Policy Brief will shed light on the situation by examining the current state and developments in gender attitudes in the EU.

In this context, gender attitudes are organised along the three dimensions of the [EU's Gender Equality Strategy](#):

- 1) Leading equally throughout society;
- 2) Thriving in gender-equal economy, and
- 3) Free from violence and stereotypes.

Studying gender attitudes by domain is appropriate given the complexity of the issue [2] and the notion that **gender attitudes are multidimensional by nature** [6]. Gender attitudes are understood to include gender related norms and beliefs.

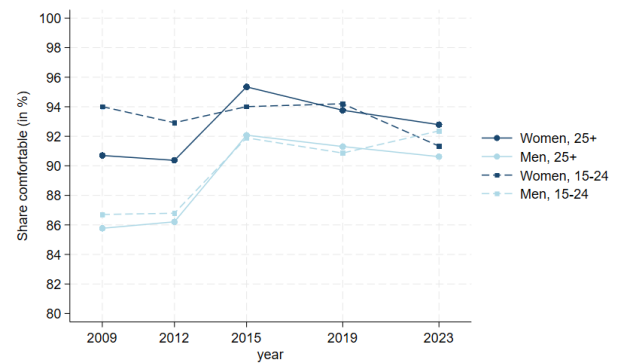
The analysis builds on the data from recent Eurobarometer surveys on Gender Stereotypes, Gender Equality and Discrimination (see Quick Guide for more details). The main research questions are the following:

- 1) How do gender attitudes differ between men and women, young and older generations in the EU? Have gender attitudes become more egalitarian over time?
- 2) To what extent can polarisation of gender attitudes be observed in the EU over time?

## LEADING EQUALLY THROUGHOUT SOCIETY

The **EU Gender Equality Strategy** puts an emphasis on [gender balance in decision making with concrete action points](#). Gender equality in leadership is far from being achieved in the EU. However, some progress has been made in improving female representation in decision making positions and in politics [7]. Also the acceptance of female political leaders has improved among both men and women. **Figure 1** shows that more than 90% of EU citizens were comfortable with having a female head of government in 2023. This share has increased for men since 2009 and stayed more constant for women over the same time period, so that the gender gap in this perception has decreased. This is true in particular for young people below the age of 25, among which more men than women report to be confident with a female political leader.

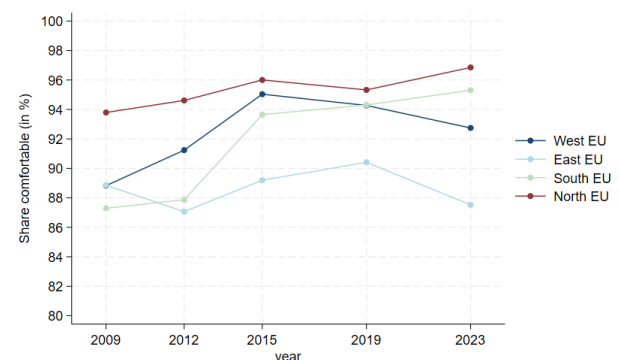
**Figure 1** – Share of people comfortable with a female head of government, EU 2009-2023



*Note: share of people feeling comfortable with having a woman in the highest elected political position in country (in %). The graph refers to the EU average excluding Croatia and the UK. Source: authors' calculation based on Special Eurobarometer 317, 393, 437, 493 and 535.*

When looking at how the agreement has evolved across EU macro regions, a geographical gap can be observed particularly between Northern and Eastern EU countries in 2023. From 2009 to 2023, people in Southern EU show the largest increase in the share of people being comfortable with a female head of government. The share of agreement increased in Western EU countries until 2015 after which it has slightly declined. Based on a more detailed analysis, the gender divide in opinion was smaller in Northern and Southern EU compared to Western and Eastern EU in 2023. **The increasing share of young men in Northern and Southern EU regions who reported to feel comfortable with a female political leader explain why gender differences in opinion have decreased overall in the EU** as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 2** – Share of people comfortable with a female head of government, by EU macro region, 2009-2023



*Note: share of people feeling comfortable with having a woman in the highest elected political position in country (in %) by macro region. The macro regions are defined in the "Quick Guide" and do not reflect any official regional categorisation by the European Commission. | Source: authors' calculation based on Special Eurobarometer 317, 393, 437, 493 and 535.*

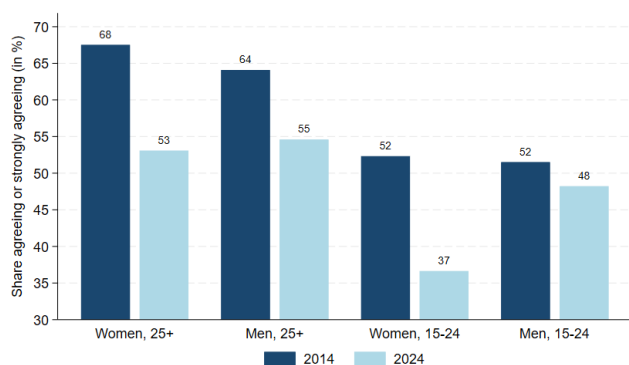
## THRIVING IN A GENDER-EQUAL ECONOMY

In the EU, attitudes towards women's participation in the labour market have become more positive [8]. Gender equality in the labour market is also one of the key areas of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and the EU has actively implemented [policies to promote women's employment](#). However, in the past 10 years these attitudes have changed more for women than for men, especially within younger generations, for which a gender divide has emerged.

**About half of both female and male Europeans in 2024 believed that the family suffers if the mother works full-time.** In 2014, this share was almost 10 pp higher among men and 15 pp higher among women. The overall share of Europeans who agree has therefore decreased substantially, showing a decrease in support for gender-segregated roles and responsibilities in paid and care work.

The decrease was large for younger (15-24) women (from 52 to 37%) but only slight among young men (from 52 to 48%). Therefore, as shown in **Figure 3**, in 2024 one can observe a large gap where young men's perceptions resemble more those of older men and women, while the views of young women are the most egalitarian (by 10 percentage points).

**Figure 3** – Share of people agreeing that family suffers if the mother works full-time (% agreement), EU27, 2014 and 2024

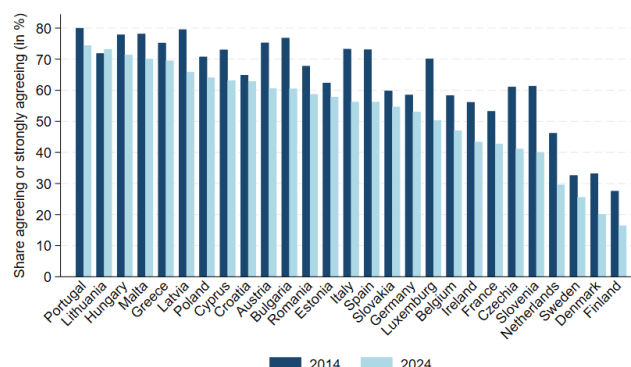


Note: share of people agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement: "All in all, family life suffers when the mother has a full time job" (% agreement). | Source: authors' calculation based on Special Eurobarometer 428 and 545.

Overall, the averages mask large differences across countries, as shown in **Figure 4**, with shares of agreement of 20% or less in Denmark and Finland and 70% or more in Lithuania, Malta, Hungary and Portugal. However, shares of agreement have decreased (by an average of 11%) in all countries but Lithuania, suggesting that regardless of the country differences, **attitudes towards the labour market**

**participation of mothers has become more egalitarian across nearly the entire EU.**

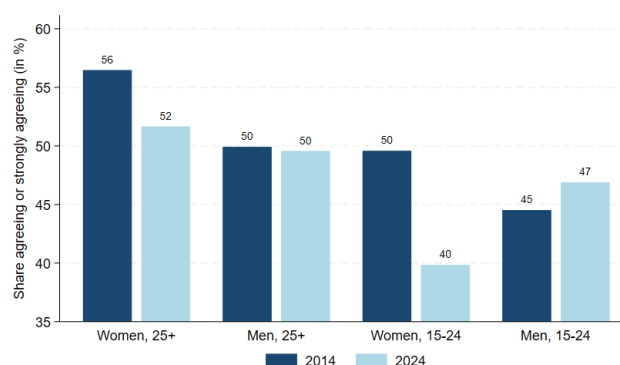
**Figure 4** – Share of people agreeing that family suffers if the mother works full-time (% agrees), by country



Note: share of people agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement: "All in all, family life suffers when the mother has a full time job" (% agreement). | Source: Source: authors' calculation based on Special Eurobarometer 428 and 545.

Another side of the gender division of labour concerns unpaid work. **The share of Europeans who believe that men are naturally less competent than women to perform household tasks has barely decreased between 2014 and 2024 (Figure 5).** Whereas no change in the agreement was observed among older men, more young men agreed with the statement in 2024 compared to 2014 (from 45% to 47%). In contrast, young women have substantially more egalitarian views in 2024 compared to a decade before. As a result, a large gender gap has emerged among Europeans aged 15-24.

**Figure 5** – Share of people agreeing that men are naturally less competent than women to perform household tasks (% agreement), EU27, 2014 and 2024



Note: share of people agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement: "Overall, men are naturally less competent than women to perform household tasks" (% agreement) | Source: authors' calculation based on Special Eurobarometer 428 and 545.

## FREE FROM VIOLENCE AND STEREOTYPES

Violence against women is a serious human rights violation. The EU combats gender-based and domestic violence through legislation and practical measures. The EU signed the [Istanbul Convention](#), the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, in 2017. The first ever [EU legislation](#) on combating violence against women was adopted in 2024.

The analysis of attitudes on gender-based violence in the EU, however, has been limited by the lack of comparable data. **The new Eurobarometer data (2024) contributes to this gap by providing a snapshot of EU citizen's current attitudes towards gender-based violence.**

Based on the new EU-wide data, **few (5%) Europeans believe that acts of physical or sexual violence against women are acceptable**, such as a man slapping his partner or having sex with a partner without consent.

The low percentage of Europeans who accept physical or sexual acts of violence is good news; however, the average also hides important differences between men and women, age groups and countries. Therefore, the authors implemented regression models to control for differences in gender, age, country of residence, occupation, place of residence (urban/rural) and education. When reporting results of these models, they represent an 'as if' scenario, where these factors are held equal across the groups compared. For example, when comparing across countries, the influence of different proportions of individuals with different levels of education, age and gender are accounted for.

According to the statistical models, across all statements considered in the Eurobarometer data, **the probability for acceptance of violence is around two times higher among men compared to women**. Education has a consistent effect in reducing the acceptance of violence against women. Place of residence (urban/rural) does not appear as an important factor while occupation barely plays a role.

**Age is an important factor. Sexual and physical violence or men controlling women's lives are less accepted by older than younger age groups.** For example, over 10% of young men believe it is acceptable to have sex without the partner's consent (**Figure 6**). Over 15% of young men believe it is acceptable for men to control their partner's finances.

The acceptance rate is lower for older men, below 10% for both statements, thus reversing the usual age trend where one would expect younger respondents to be more progressive than older ones.

Higher shares of acceptance are found when it comes to statements **on sexist treatment online and challenging or denying sexual violence claims**.

For instance, around 30% of Europeans believe women should accept eliciting sexist, demeaning and/or abusive replies when sharing an opinion on social media. Around 25% of citizens agree with a more severe statement, that women exaggerate claims of rape or abuse, and around 20% of citizens agree that women are partly responsible if they suffer sexual violence while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

On these questions, the statistical models also show **polarization in young age groups: young (15-24) men have less egalitarian views than older (40+) men**. At the same time, **young women are more egalitarian than older women**. For example, up to 40% of young men believe women should accept eliciting sexist, demeaning and/or abusive replies when sharing an opinion on social media. Younger men are also more likely to agree to the statement that women exaggerate claims of abuse or rape compared to older men. Meanwhile, younger women have similar rates of agreement to this statement as older women (**Figure 6**).

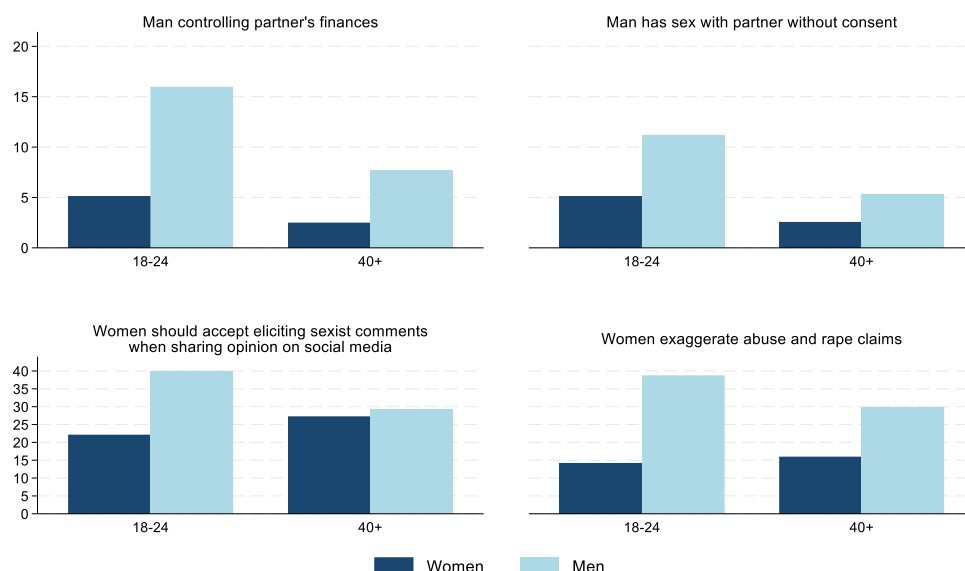
The statistical models reveal **cross-country differences**. However, these are question dependent. For example, 10-15% of all men agree that "it is acceptable to have sex without the partner's consent" in Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark and Lithuania, while the share is less than 5% among men in Croatia, Luxembourg, Malta and Portugal.

Large country differences exist when it comes to sexist treatment online. For instance, 50-60% of men in Bulgaria, Czechia, Latvia and Lithuania agree that women should accept eliciting sexist, demeaning and/or abusive replies when sharing an opinion on social media. The shares in Austria, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Sweden and the Netherlands are between 10-20% of men.

In all, overt forms of violence are almost universally rejected. However, many European citizens still accept sexist verbal behaviour and attitudes denying sexual violence. The rates of acceptance on these statements are polarised among the young: they are highest in younger men and lowest in young women. The rates of acceptance can vary considerably across countries as well, particularly for online sexist verbal

abuse. In some countries it is accepted by only a few, whereas in other countries it is accepted by a majority of men and women.

**Figure 6** – Gender and age differences for statements on violence (% probability to agree with the statement), EU 27, 2024



Note: The figure shows the probability (in %) that men/women (totally) agree with statement or find acceptable the situation described, while controlling for education level, occupation, place of residence (urban/rural) and country. | Source: authors' calculation based on the Flash Eurobarometer 544 from 2024.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of gender attitudes along the three dimensions of the EU Gender Equality Strategy provides a mixed picture of progress and persistent challenges. Gender or age polarisation of views was not systematically found across different areas, highlighting the need to study **gender attitudes as a multidimensional phenomenon with uneven progress**.

Regarding the area of **leadership**, the majority of EU citizens report being comfortable with a female head of government, and the views among men and women are less divergent in 2023 compared to 2009. This trend is mainly powered by increasingly progressive views of young men in Northern and Southern EU countries where the opinion changed the most. The result illustrates advancements in more egalitarian attitudes on women's and men's competences overall [9], yet important regional differences in attitudes remain.

Attitudes on **women's participation in the labour market** show progress towards more egalitarian views but also that men's attitudes are lagging behind. In terms of progress, fewer Europeans agree that the family suffers if the mother works full time

in 2024 compared to 2014. The result aligns with the EU labour market becoming more gender equal in the last decade [8]. At the same time, an increasing share of young men believe that men are naturally less competent than women to perform household tasks. The findings reflect the **uneven changes in the gender system**: gender equality has progressed in the public sphere, e.g. women's labour market position, while at the same time traditionally female activities like care work and homemaking have remained devalued and not taken up to the same extent by men [3]. The analysis reveals large country variation, pointing to the geographical gradient as part of the picture of gender attitudes in Europe [10].

The uneven changes in the gender system have wide ranging implications. Even if there is a greater acceptance of women's participation in politics and the labour market, there are still barriers in place, such as gendered roles and stereotypes, to prevent women from taking those positions. For instance, the incongruence between leadership stereotypes (assertive and control) associated with men and the caring stereotype associated with women may contribute to the low representation of women as heads of government, political party leaders, CEOs, or board members. Acknowledging this dynamic is



important as it helps explain both advances in and challenges to gender equality.

There is wide consensus among EU citizens that acts of **physical and sexual violence** against women are wrong. However, there is higher acceptance when it comes to sexist treatment online and challenging or denying claims of sexual violence. Across all statements, men are more likely to accept any form of violence than women.

There is evidence of a polarisation of views between young men and young women in several domains. When it comes to gender roles at home and work, young men's views are more similar to older men and women while young women have the most egalitarian views. When it comes to sexist treatment online and denial of sexual violence claims, young men are more likely to accept these forms of violence than older men while young women are the least accepting of all EU citizens.

The gender-age polarisation in attitudes on violence against women is an alarming finding given the progress made in legislation, policy and awareness in the past few decades. However, findings indicating higher acceptance among young men predate current debates on the gender divide, with some studies suggesting a U-shaped pattern over the life course [11]. Possible explanations for young men's greater acceptance include exposure to peer dynamics and media narratives that promote traditional masculine norms valuing toughness and control [12]. Economic uncertainty and shifting cultural narratives may also contribute [13].

Some recent studies found a larger polarisation in gender attitudes among young people in regions with recent increases in unemployment and with a reversal of the gender gap in education in favour of women, suggesting that men's economic difficulties and perceived job competition may in part explain the observed polarisation in attitudes [14,15].

Early adulthood is also recognized as a formative period for gender attitudes, rendering young men particularly susceptible to influences that normalize violent behaviour [11]. Furthermore, young people's gendered beliefs regarding physical strength, compulsory heterosexuality, and biological determinism may facilitate the acceptance and justification of violence against women [16]. The context of violence against women also makes a difference, with violence online being much more accepted than in the home, workplace or public spaces [17].

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A better understanding of gender attitudes among younger and older generations, men and women, can help design and implement policies relevant for gender equality. Policy recommendations include the need to address gender stereotypes of women's and men's abilities and promote equal participation in the private and public sphere. This could include parental leave policies that support men's roles as active caregivers, for instance.

It remains essential to raise awareness about different types of violence against women and beliefs that challenge or deny claims of sexual abuse and violence, especially among young men. Research and policy should identify where and how these beliefs are fostered in younger generations to find ways to counteract harmful narratives through sensitisation and education, for example. The new Eurobarometer data also shows that countries markedly differ from each other in the extent to which these beliefs and behaviours are held to be true or acceptable, suggesting that knowledge sharing and learning from best practises in the EU remains one way to address specific issues.

Overall, the results show that EU countries have successfully addressed many traditional gender beliefs. However, the findings also indicate that more effort needs to focus on breaking stereotypes on the 'natural abilities' of men and women in the society. Lastly, the fact that young men are more accepting of some forms of violence, even during times when awareness of these issues is high, indicates that new narratives have emerged in response to the progress made on gender equality which need to be addressed.

## RELATED WORK

This policy brief is part of a series of activities related to the 'Gender Equality Monitoring Portal' project jointly implemented by the Directorate General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST) and the Joint Research Centre (JRC). With the project, the JRC regularly produces policy briefs analysing gender-related issues and providing policy recommendations. More information can be found at [Knowledge for Policy – Gender Equality Strategy Portal](#).

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## QUICK GUIDE

The data used in this policy brief comes from different Eurobarometer surveys. Figures 1 to 4 use data from Special Eurobarometer surveys, which are surveys based on random (probability) sampling targeting the population of EU citizens aged 15 years and over in each EU member state. The sample of each survey covers approximately 1 000 participants per country, except for Germany (ca. 1 500) and Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta (ca. 500 each). Figures 1 and 2 are based on Special Eurobarometer 317, 393, 437, 493 and 535 on Discrimination in the European Union which were conducted in 2009, 2012, 2015, 2019 and 2023, respectively. Answers to the question on feeling comfortable with having a woman in the highest elected political position in country were on a 1 (not at all comfortable) to 10 (totally comfortable) scale. Values of 6 to 10 were aggregated to denote feeling comfortable. EU countries are grouped in 4 macro regions: West EU (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands); East EU (Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia); North EU (Denmark, Finland, Sweden); and South EU (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain). Figures 3, 4 and 5 are based on Special Eurobarometer 545 on Gender Stereotypes and Special Eurobarometer 428 on Gender Equality.

Figure 5 is based on data from the flash Eurobarometer survey 544. The survey was conducted in early 2024 and targeted the general population aged 18 years and above in all 27 EU member states. The sample covers approximately 1 000 participants per country except for Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta (ca 500 each). Respondents were selected from online panels. Sampling quotas were set based on age (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and 65+ year-olds), gender and geographic region (NUTS1, 2 or 3 depending on the size of the country and the number of NUTS regions). Response categories vary depending on the question. Situations with response categories “I find it unacceptable”, “I find it acceptable under certain circumstances” and “I find it acceptable”: A man controlling his wife’s/partner’s finances; A husband or boyfriend can have sex with his wife or girlfriend without her consent; A man occasionally slapping his wife/girlfriend. Statements with response categories “totally disagree”, “disagree”, “agree” and “totally agree”: If women share intimate pictures of themselves with someone, they are at least partially responsible if the image is shared online without their consent; If a woman suffers sexual violence while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, she is at least partially responsible; If women share their opinion on social media, they should accept that they elicit sexist, demeaning and / or abusive replies; Women often make up or exaggerate claims of abuse or rape.

Statistics reported are weighted by age, gender, urbanisation and region of residence using sampling weights based on the EU-27 population in Figures 1-3, country-specific sampling weights in Figure 4. EU averages presented in Figure 5 are weighted according to the size of the 18+ population of each country. Non-response categories (‘don’t know’ or invalid answers) of all variables employed are excluded from the figures.

More information about the surveys can be found in the reports available on the [Eurobarometer website](#).

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## DISCLAIMER

This policy brief has been prepared by Francesco Berlingieri, Elizabeth Casabianca, Minna Nurminen and Oscar Smallenbroek, JRC Unit S.3, in collaboration with Paula Zuluaga from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. The opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors and cannot be attributed to the European Commission or any of its Member State.

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