



RETHINKING EU/ CIVIL SOCIETY GENDER EQUALITY POLICY INITIATIVE THROUGH HISTORICAL BACKCASTING

Odorige Cathérine Enorédia and Saleh Saleh Ali Mohamad

Introduction

Gender equality has gained recognition as both a fundamental human right and a prerequisite for sustainable social, political, and economic development (United Nations, 2015). The unintended consequences of patriarchy are the major contributors to the exclusion of women in spheres of endeavour (Hani, Obeisat, & Hweidi, 2026). This results in gender inequalities manifested in the exclusion of many women from employment, underemployment, the gender pay gap (Zhu, Gawel, & Toikko, 2026), exclusion of several women in political participation, affected educational attainment, income generation and distribution, access to resources, and exposure to gender-based violence globally (World Economic Forum, 2024). Consequently, gender equality has become a central objective of regions' international development agendas, public policy frameworks (Burgos, 2026; Volodzkiene & Balezentis, 2026), and civil society interventions that have become active shapers of community cohesion. (Balázs, András and Rajcsányi-Molnár – In this volume) Gender equality is an important focus area.

Goal 5 (SDG 5) of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda reflects the importance of gender equality. While SDG 5 explicitly aims to achieve gender equality by closing the gender gap and empowering all women and girls, scholars and policymakers increasingly recognize its interconnected relationship with other development goals, including poverty reduction, health improvement,



quality education, decent work, and reduced inequalities (United Nations, 2015; EIGE 2020; Kabeer, 2016). Gender equality is therefore not merely an isolated policy objective but a catalyst for broader sustainable development outcomes.

In Europe, gender equality occupies a prominent place in policy discourse and institutional planning. Even in the early days of her integration into the EEC (European Economic Community), the Equal Treatment legislation, intended to improve working conditions and ensure equal pay between men and women, was set out in Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome in 1957. Followed by the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997, which declares gender equality a fundamental human right. Validating the European Union (EU) for consistently identifying gender equality as a core value and strategic priority, and integrating it into its legal frameworks, development strategies, and funding mechanisms (European Commission, 2020). Mainstreaming gender Chaney, 2016; Bosnak, 2021 The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) estimates that achieving gender equality could increase the EU's gross domestic product per capita by approximately 9.6 percent by 2050, generating economic gains valued at over €3 trillion and creating millions of additional jobs (EIGE, 2020). In pursuit of these objectives, the European Union has allocated substantial financial resources to gender-related initiatives, including support for civil society organizations working to address gender disparities across member states. The long history of the role of civil society organizations emerging to fill the gaps created by the failures of the market economy, the state, and the family. And by the account of Tocqueville, the French thinker who could not help but be amazed during his visit to America in the 1830s, how civil society rallied to found schools, hospitals, churches, and countless institutions that are given as the government's jurisdiction and promoting democratic principles in the process (Heffner 2001). The democratic rules mean every voice would be heard, bringing about the diversity of contributions to the topic of gender equality, posing also a challenge for a holistic engagement with gender equality. Managing the diversity of perspectives on gender equality calls for strategic approaches that lead progressively to closing the gender gap across endeavours. Civil society represents core instruments for the EU's accession processes (Muresan 2024) and the construction of the gender equality regime (Boşnak, 2021), but managing the divergent perspectives brought in by democratic principles of governance of, for and by the people born out of the principles of individual liberty and freedom, the American view of community (Tocqueville) impression representative of the *modus operandi* of civil society in today's EU except of course in member states where they are regulated.

The present results for gender equality are not commensurate with the policy commitments and financial investments; progress toward gender equality remains uneven and incomplete. Persistent inequalities continue to characterize labor market outcomes, with the gender pay gap in the EU still strong at 11.1%. Other challenges are political representation, leadership positions, unpaid care work, and experiences of violence and discrimination (European Commission, 2024; World Economic

Forum, 2024). Projections are also not enthusiastic about the future, suggesting that achieving full gender equality remains a long-term challenge requiring sustained intervention and institutional commitment. These realities have generated renewed scholarly interest in evaluating the effectiveness of existing policy frameworks and the need to identify innovative approaches to accelerate progress.

Scholarship has therefore begun to illuminate the assumptions that underpin gender-equality interventions and their design. Feminist scholarship has historically emphasized the necessity of women-centered policies to address structural inequalities and correct historical patterns of exclusion (Walby, 2011; Verloo, 2018). However, a growing body of literature argues that some contemporary interventions, such as data collection (Baptista, 2023; Cookson & Fuentes 2026), may unintentionally contribute to social polarization; other studies argue that when women are engaged primarily as beneficiaries while positioning men predominantly as obstacles, perpetrators, or passive observers within the process of change (Flood, 2019; Casey et al., 2013). Such critiques do not reject the importance of addressing women's disadvantages but instead advocate for more relational approaches that engage both women and men as stakeholders in achieving gender equality. From this perspective, sustainable transformation is more likely to emerge through cooperation, mutual accountability, and inclusive participation than through adversarial constructions of gender relations.

Contemporary debates frequently draw upon modern feminist theories and policy frameworks; historical perspectives on gender relations remain comparatively underexplored as sources of policy insight (Cin & Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 2021). Renaissance Europe provides a particularly valuable context for examining alternative approaches to gender inequality. The works and approaches of these authors are instructive because they made an impact even in an era characterized by significant restrictions on women's educational and social participation. Several female humanist scholars developed sophisticated critiques of gender-based exclusion while simultaneously promoting dialogue and intellectual engagement across gender boundaries. Among the most influential were Christine de Pizan (1364–1430), Isotta Nogarola (1418–1466), and Laura Cereta (1469–1499). Their writings challenged prevailing assumptions regarding women's inferiority while advocating recognition of women's intellectual capabilities, moral agency, and social contributions (King & Rabil, 1983; Cereta, 1997; de Pizan, 1999). Importantly, their arguments often combined critical engagement with efforts to foster understanding rather than antagonism, offering a relational framework for addressing gender inequalities. The potential relevance of these historical perspectives to contemporary gender-equality policy remains insufficiently examined within existing scholarship. While numerous studies have explored the contributions of Renaissance women humanists to feminist thought, relatively little research has investigated how their approaches might inform current policy debates regarding inclusion, stakeholder engagement, and social cohesion. This gap is particularly significant given contemporary concerns regarding polarization,



the many waves of feminism, and the long-term effectiveness of gender-equality interventions. Needless to say, the various feminist waves look like two ends of an extreme, with one end looking like creating a world where only women exist, and others making public declarations distancing themselves from feminism. *I am not a feminist!* Because the term has become contentious and stigmatized (Walby 2011).

This study highlights contemporary civil society intervention approaches in mitigating gender inequality in the EU against the backdrop of a historical backcasting analysis of the works of Christine de Pizan, Isotta Nogarola, and Laura Cereta. By examining points of convergence and divergence between contemporary policy frameworks and Renaissance perspectives, the study seeks to identify principles that could inform more relational and inclusive approaches to gender equality. Ultimately, the paper argues that revisiting these historical intellectual traditions can enrich contemporary policy discussions and provide valuable insights for refining European Union funding strategies to civil societies aimed at achieving sustainable and socially cohesive gender equality outcomes.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page et al., 2021). The systematic review approach was selected because it provides a transparent, rigorous, and replicable method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing scholarly evidence. The study combines contemporary literature on gender-equality policies and funding mechanisms with historical scholarship examining the writings and gender perspectives of Renaissance humanists Christine de Pizan, Isotta Nogarola, and Laura Cereta.

The review attempts to answer the following question:

Amidst the restrictive environment of Renaissance women humanists, they made inroads in a patriarchal male dominated field. What lessons can contemporary actors in gender equality learn for the development of more relational and inclusive gender-equality policy frameworks within contemporary European Union funding mechanisms that guide CSOs accessing the funding for a more impactful intervention?

To address this question, the study integrates systematic literature review procedures with a historical backcasting approach. Backcasting involves examining historical ideas and practices to identify principles that may inform future policy development (Robinson, 1990).

A comprehensive literature search was conducted via Scopus and Google Scholar document search platforms, leading to multiple academic databases in cases where the article needed to be retrieved from the source to ensure broad coverage of

peer-reviewed research and policy literature linked to other databases, including Springer Link, JSTOR, Web of Science, Taylor and Francis, and Sage Journals. Also, institutional publications from the European Commission, European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), United Nations, and OECD were consulted to capture relevant policy documents. The search was limited to publications written in English or translated into English. The search strategy employed combinations of keywords connected through Boolean operators (AND, OR).

Examples included:

- Contemporary Gender Policy Literature: “gender equality” AND “European Union”
- “gender mainstreaming” AND policy “gender equality funding” “women-only interventions”
- “engaging men in gender equality” “gender transformative approaches” “CSO and gender equality” Historical Literature “Isotta Nogarola” “Christine de Pizan” “Laura Cereta” “Renaissance feminism” “women humanists” “Renaissance gender discuss” Integrated Searches: “inclusive gender equality,” “relational approaches to gender equality,” “Historical perspectives on gender equality”

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure relevance and quality, studies were assessed against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria: Studies were included if they:

- a. Examined gender equality policies, programs, or funding mechanisms.
- b. Addressed stakeholder engagement in gender-equality/mainstreaming initiatives.
- c. Discussed the role of men and women within gender-equality interventions.
- d. Examined the writings of Christine de Pizan, Isotta Nogarola, or Laura Cereta, or scholarly perspectives on their work; publication date was not pinned on recent publication because of the historical nature.
- e. Were peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, book chapters, or official policy reports.

Exclusion Criteria: Studies were excluded if they:

- a. Focused solely on technical gender indicators without policy implications, without addressing gender relations or stakeholder engagement.
- b. Were nonacademic, opinion pieces, blogs, or unpublished manuscripts.
- c. Publications not peer-reviewed.
- d. Duplicated records.



Study Selection Process. The study selection process followed the four stages recommended by PRISMA:

- Identification: Database searches generated an initial pool of records. Additional studies were identified through reference-list screening and citation tracking.
- Screening: Duplicate records were removed. Titles and abstracts were then screened to assess relevance to the research question.
- Eligibility: Full-text articles were reviewed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria.
- Inclusion: Only studies meeting all eligibility requirements were included in the final synthesis.
- The PRISMA flow diagram was used to document the number of studies identified, screened, excluded, and included at each stage.

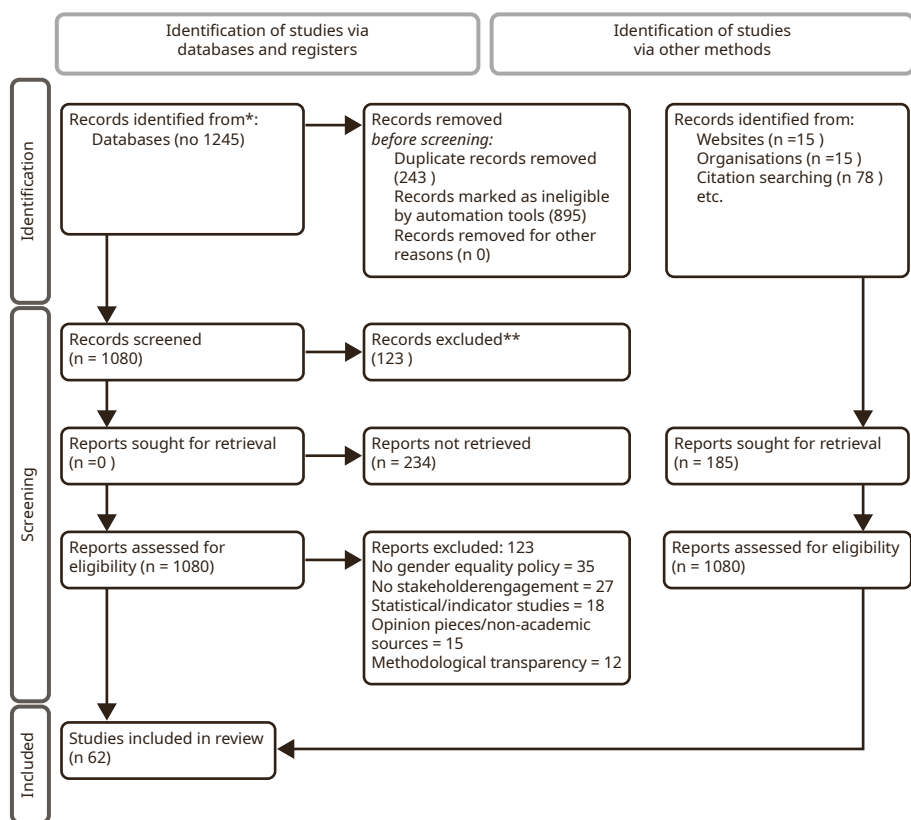


Figure 1. Source: Data created based on PRISMA 2020 model

Data Extraction: A standardized data extraction table was developed to ensure consistency across studies. Literature was extrapolated according to abstract relevance, publication year, country or institutional context, research objectives, policy recommendations, treatment of gender relations, and relevance to relational

approaches. For historical sources, additional categories included: Conceptualization of gender relations, Views on dialogue and inclusion, critiques of social structures, proposed mechanisms for social change.

Data Analysis and Synthesis: The analysis employed thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Findings from contemporary policy literature and historical texts were coded inductively and grouped into recurring themes.

Three analytical stages were undertaken:

- **Contemporary Policy Analysis:** Literature on gender-equality interventions and EU funding mechanisms was examined to identify dominant approaches, assumptions, strengths, and criticisms. The resulting synthesis informed the development of a conceptual framework for more relational and inclusive approaches to gender-equality funding within the European Union.
- **Historical Backcasting Analysis:** The writings of Christine de Pizan, Isotta Nogarola, and Laura Cereta were analyzed to identify principles relevant to gender relations, social inclusion, accountability, and dialogue.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Following the rigorous PRISMA strategy requirements for exclusive use of publicly available secondary sources and historical documents, no human participants were involved. Consequently, no ethical validations were needed nor violated. Nevertheless, principles of academic integrity, transparency, and accurate representation of source material were maintained throughout the review process.

Findings and Results

This PRISMA-guided literature review included 62 studies comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, and historical texts. The contemporary literature focused primarily on European Union gender-equality policies, gender mainstreaming strategies, women's empowerment initiatives, and stakeholder engagement approaches. Historical sources consisted of primary and secondary analyses of the works of Christine de Pizan, Isotta Nogarola, and Laura Cereta (King & Rabil, 1983; Cereta, 1997; de Pizan, 1999).

Navigating Gender Equality as a Societal Rather than Sectoral Objective

These studies were consistent with gender equality as a foundational condition for broader social and economic development. Studies demonstrate positive associations between gender equality and economic growth, educational attainment, public health outcomes, poverty reduction, and social stability (Kabeer, 2016; EIGE, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2024). Gender equality, according to these reports and



studies, is a precursor to growth, not merely a women's issue but a societal objective affecting entire communities and institutions. European Union policy documents similarly frame gender equality as a cross-cutting priority that contributes to multiple strategic goals, including social cohesion, democratic participation, and sustainable development (European Commission, 2020; European Commission, 2024). This aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals framework, which recognizes gender equality as both an independent objective and an enabler of progress across other development domains (United Nations, 2015). Nonetheless, intersectional frictions around gender are identified that may undermine progress in gender equality

The Benefits and Limitations of Women-Centered Approaches

Here, scholars highlight the effectiveness of women-centered interventions in addressing marginalization perpetuated by a patriarchal system. Evidence shows programs targeting women's historical marginalizations resulting in measurable gains in education, employment, political representation, and access to leadership opportunities (Walby, 2011; Verloo, 2018). These are apt responses to longstanding structural inequalities. However, a recent and growing body of scholarship identifies several limitations associated with exclusively women-focused approaches. These scholars argue that women-only interventions that largely exclude men from participation may unintentionally reinforce perceptions of competition between genders (Flood, 2019; Casey et al., 2018). Others suggest that these approaches may overlook the relational nature of many social institutions, including families, workplaces, educational systems, and communities (Cornwall, 2000; Greig, Kimmel, & Lang, 2000). It is important to view these critiques not as a challenge to the legitimacy of women-focused interventions, but rather as the sustainability of long-term outcomes when broader stakeholder engagement remains limited (Casey et al., 2018).

Relational Approaches to Gender Justice

Relational frameworks regard gender as a system of interconnected social relationships that influence the experiences of both women and men, not as conflicting or opposing groups. (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Fletcher, 1999). In contrast to an exclusive focus on power imbalances, relational approaches seek to understand how cooperation, dialogue, accountability, and mutual recognition can contribute to social transformation (Jordan et al., 1991). The main argument of these scholars is that enduring progress requires both structural reform and the cultivation of constructive social relationships (Fletcher, 1999; Pease, 2017). It is not to undermine the existence of discrimination or unequal power structures. Instead, it proposes that addressing such inequalities may be more effective when

interventions simultaneously promote inclusion, participation, and shared responsibility (Cornwall, 2000; Flood, 2019).

CIVIL Society Approaches to Gender Equality in the EU.

Like several other governance challenges, gender inequality is addressed through supranational and intergovernmental frameworks in the EU, regulated under the Amsterdam Treaty and equal opportunity regulation. Civil society has been an agent of transformation, as evidenced in the EU's partnership for crucial issues like the accession of prospective member countries into the European Union, offering substantial financial and strategic support through various funding instruments and guidelines designed to enhance civil society's engagement in policymaking and reform processes (DG NEAR Report 2022, Muresan 2024). Gender equality principle by an EU member state is a core criterion for assessing compliance with the principle of liberal democratic value (Khoma & Kozma 2021). Achieving "democratization through integration" (Dimitrova and Pridham 2004), with civil society as instruments for change through the EU funding frameworks in transforming gender norms in the European Union, hoping to reverse extremist and populist tendencies (Bayer 2002). While democratization processes have been achieved, the manipulative use of the defects of democracy is on the rise, blurring the boundaries of rights in democratic co-existence. The positive side of this integration and collaboration with civil society is the rise in women's organizations and feminist groups as driving forces for change, through advocacy and the advancement of legislation and mechanisms to promote greater women's participation across spheres of endeavour (Lopez, Ferreira, Ferreira and Coelho 2015). A juxtaposition of the definition of gender equality: equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for women and men, girls and boys, individuals with responsibilities and opportunities that will not depend on whether they are born male or female EIGE 2020. and feminism: a theory and/or movement concerned with advancing the position of women through such means as achievement of political, legal, or economic rights equal to those granted to men (Offen 1988). While these two definitions emphasise closing the gaps between men and women, the emphasis on women within feminism is due to the black hole that patriarchy has entrenched through the many years of practice; gender balance must always be weighed against the percentage of men and women, which cannot be overlooked to breach the gap if gender equality is to be achieved. Offen (1988) historical account of feminist groups and individuals espousing divergent theories of feminism and agendas for change categorizing themselves and their rivals through the practice of exclusionary classification, by adding qualifying modifiers as well as by forming separate organizations and publications. By 1900, a veritable taxonomy of self-described or imputed feminisms had sprung into being: „familial feminists,” „integral feminists,” „Christian feminists,” „socialist feminists,” „radical feminists,” and „male feminists,” among others. Giving room



for the exploitative expressions of the defects of democracy, a direct consequence of polarization. Haggard and Kaufman (2021) define political polarization as a process through which political elites and publics become increasingly divided over public policy and ideology. In extreme circumstances, cross-cutting cleavages become submerged by a single, reinforcing cleavage that pits “us” against “them” on a range of issues. Scholarly research around the changing landscape of politics, policy, and governance has yielded descriptions such as democratic backsliding, democratic deconsolidation, regression, and erosion. (Bogaards 2018; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Kazankov 2026), an incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that result from the actions of duly elected governments. Social and political polarization contribute to government dysfunction and lack of trust in institutions, and it increases the risk that incumbent parties move towards extremes, and the new anti-systems will gain traction. The dysfunction around the concept of feminism is good reason for some to avoid murky waters and distance themselves from the term with claims of *I am not a feminist* or pronouncing the death and obituary of the term (Walby 2011), even when, by definition, their activities of breaching the gap between male and female make them one. Also, the intergovernmental arm of the EU, the Council of Europe, the continent’s leading human rights organization, brings together governments to advance human rights, democracy, and justice. The Council cites civil society as an important element in its mission of Gender mainstreaming; an approach to policy-making that takes into account the interests and concerns of women and men in all their diversity (Lombardo & Meier 2006; Lombardo E, Meier, & Verloo 2017; Lodovici, 2020). Under its umbrella, some terminology and definitions have been contentious among member states of the council and civil society organizations, as these definitions do not align with their missions and visions. Terms like gender, diversity, intersectionality, etc. For example, the Russian Federation rejects the use of the term “gender”, as Russian legislation does not contain the concept of “gender,” also in view of the fact that there is no commonly accepted definition of the term “gender” on the international level. Furthermore, the Russian Federation considers that intersex and trans persons do not fall under the scope of the recommendation (COE 2019)¹. Just like member states, mission, vision, support, and service provision for members and beneficiaries of CSOs are intersectionally conflicting in certain areas (Howell, 2007). For example, the EU maintains permissiveness for prostitution as work (with countries like Germany, Switzerland, Amsterdam, and Belgium among others) providing legal frameworks for its regulation. According to these countries and civil society organizations that support legalizing and regulating prostitution, the goal is to make the trade safer for sex workers, helping them access critical health and government services, but by most accounts, it has resulted in a major industry with hotel-sized brothels, brothel chains, and a cash cow of tax revenue. And a taking advantage of the vulnerable, especially since the majority of sex workers are from low-income European countries and other

¹ <https://rm.coe.int/cm-rec-2019-1-on-preventing-and-combating-sexism/168094d894>

migrants escaping poverty or coerced/trafficked into the trade. Other anti-prostitution CSO's see prostitution as outright violence against women, emboldening pimps and traffickers and giving them legitimate ground to continue to perpetuate violence against women. The many conflicting voices among CSOs, feminist and nonfeminist groups alike, have led to adversarial communication and engagement in the European environment over the definitions, framing, support, and approaches to achieving gender equality, adding to the stalemate in progress. Searching for a way out of this polarization (Olaskoaga-Larrauri, Ranilla Arija, & Cilleruelo, 2026) is why a backcasting historical inquiry is advocated in this article, considering the harsh environment of public bans on the voices of women; these Renaissance women were able to make their voices heard regardless. What can the EU and CSO's learn from them to blur the lines of divisiveness and progressively surge forward on gender equality?

Historical Insights from Renaissance Women Humanists

Christine de Pizan, Isotta Nogarola, and Laura Cereta revealed several recurring principles relevant to contemporary gender-equality discourse. The legal and political environment before and during the Renaissance was a stumbling block to women speaking and speaking about women's issues, let alone achieving progress, yet they made inroads at this crossroads of gender equality. Turning to their work for some wisdom will be useful for the polarized environment in which civil society organizations operate in the European Union and globally.

Christine de Pizan

Europe's first acclaimed woman of letters, Christine de Pizan, challenged prevailing assumptions regarding women's intellectual inferiority while advocating recognition of women's capabilities and contributions (de Pizan, 1999). She established herself as a person of letters, pulling strongly on her pen in a male-dominated field in an era where women were only expected to pull their weight on the needle and the spindle. As the Aristotelian virtue prevailed on not acting against her nature by being eloquent. She did not only write for sustenance, being the sole provider of her three children, widowed at an early age. She gained the esteem of the aristocracy, many of whom became her patrons, and of the intellectuals of her day, with whom she engaged in philosophical debate. She was recognized as an accomplished lyric poet, and she became a highly respected and widely influential advocate of women's rights and of political theory. She used her writings to counter harmful stereotypes through reasoned argumentation rather than social antagonism. Christine wove women's stories into her work intentionally to emphasize their strength and contribution to the fabric of society, all the while remaining engaged with popular literary



conventions such as the epistolary advice genre of *Epistre d'Othea*. She emphasized justice, education, and mutual respect as foundations for social improvement (Richards, 1982). „The Book of the City of Ladies” critiques historical misogyny and aims to restore the reputations of women overlooked by historians. In addition to her feminist advocacy (Strandness, 2024). Emphasizing that “historical tradition” has, in fact, been shaped by the motives and biases of its writers (males) and their interpretations of historical reality, which have equal epistemological validity to any other. Thus Christine takes it on herself to rewrite history, restoring the lives of virtuous women neglected by history and vindicating the reputations of women maligned. She invokes Christian tradition (an important source of public discussion at that time) in support of her arguments for educational and social advances for women. Referring to Genesis 1:27, she argues that women, like men, were made in God’s image and consequently were endowed by the Creator with the same moral, intellectual, and spiritual aptitude; hence, men and women are equally educable. Suggesting that Christian marriage is based on the model of Christ’s caring for his church, the Bride of Christ, Christine argues that Christian marriage calls for the highest degree of moral commitment between a man and woman. She does not condone or permit institutionalized domination. Christine’s second major feminist work, *Le Livre des trois vertus* (1405; *The Book of the Three Virtues*, 1985), a companion volume to *The Book of the City of Ladies*, is a didactic work providing guidelines for women aspiring to achieve the “nobility.” it is one of the first works in European literature written by a woman for women intended for women of all ages, circumstances, and social classes. The reader encounters Reason, Righteousness, Justice, and Wisdom; the four provide women with instruction in moral precepts as well as in practical matters with specific counsels according to their social and marital status and role in life. Christine’s position shows that unless she can portray herself, and indeed all women, as unfairly attacked, she cannot justify her literary counter-attack (Laennec 1993). In all three texts, de Pizan argues that since women cannot by nature defend themselves, they must be defended; she emphasised that women are deceived because they are simple and do not think to assume the worst. She warns her readers against the snares set by men to trap women. The gold in the fire symbolizes women who are mistreated by being „blasmees.” Not only is suffering an indication of their essential worth, but de Pizan exploits the metaphor to connote also a kind of glorification of victimization. One important element of this metaphor is the semantically loaded word „blasmer” „attack”; „blame”). She implicitly argues that innate, feminine weakness is a sign of her intellectual superiority (Margolis, 1986).

Isotta Nogarola

Jardine (1985) captured succinctly the environment in which Renaissance women operated with this statement. “The names of Isotta Nogarola and Cassandra,

Fedele survive in the histories of humanism precisely because they corresponded with great male humanists. Some of their letters therefore find a place amongst the surviving works of these men". Nogarola was aware of this fact; hence, her intention to engage collaboratively is evident in her letters to Ermolao Barbaro, written before publishing her books, in which she engages him in the very tool of his trade: being a famous orator. Applying the *argumentum ex auctoritate*, paraphrasing Cicero's *Brutus*, using grammar and style beyond the societal cap placed on women, while reflecting arguments, irony, and persuasion in her discourse, in which the addressee must acknowledge her as not a woman of little means. The first layer contains conventional self-depreciation and, in turn, praise of Ermolao. "Isotta hardly dares to write to such a great man, whom „nature has endowed . . . with innumerable gifts," who possesses „the greatness and nobility of a divine mind." In contrast, her writing is „her foolishness" and she uses every opportunity to apologize for her garrulity, writing „... it may be very difficult to find a silent woman . . .," and „... my writings should seem to you to be too verbose. This, of course, creates a Socratic irony, imitating the knowledgeable Socrates, feigning ignorance of the letters (Boršić & Karasman, 2015). She addressed gender-based prejudice through intellectual dialogue and critical inquiry. Her work demonstrated how discriminatory assumptions could be challenged through scholarly engagement and ethical reflection (King & Rabil, 1983; Nogarola, 2004). Rather than promoting division, she encouraged critical engagement of inherited beliefs and social norms. The account by Hendrickson & Tadel (2024) of the book *The Defense of Eve* reveals three major things. The exact date of the exchange of letters between Lando and Nogarola, the issue of the privacy of letters until it is made public either by reading them in the Saloons or other events, and the place of male involvement in the publicity and publishing of text.

Laura Cereta

Laura Cereta's (1469–1499) family foundation reveals her father ensuring she was educated at an early age (Amendolar, 2025). It can become an explorative tool in defense of gender equality, with particular reference to personalizing the involvement of stakeholders in the support for gender equality. In her contribution to literary thought, she emphasizes personal responsibility, education, and the active participation of women in intellectual life (Cereta, 1997). She openly criticized barriers faced by women, and she simultaneously promoted self-development and constructive engagement with society. Her writings reflected a commitment to accountability without hostility (Robin, Larsen, & Levin, 2007). She regards learning as growing out of virtue, the external manifestation of an inward state. In effect, she is saying that those who do not love learning have no inner direction of their own but are directed by things outside them. In her study and analysis of Laura Cereta's



letters, Mastrantonio (2022) shares results showing how her writings play a fundamental role in feeding humanism, the Republic of Letters, and gender rights much before any organized thought could be conceived by society (Mastrantonio, 2022). Highlighting a period in history of socially embedded epistolary exchange both of fiction and non-fiction, with the most important correspondence of her time, both questioning and criticising the status quo and societal positioning of the female in her time. As much as letters were set in private circumstances, reading letters out in saloons and events (a practice of the time) allowed Laura's letters to bring intimate confidences to humanist texts addressing rights and virtues. The historical difference recovery and discussion of women's letters have made to the narrative about the importance of women in society. The works of Laura provide a counter-narrative to the societally endorsed account of men like Boccaccio's misogynistic catalogue of famous women's lives, side by side with a revision of these accounts with Christine de Pizan's catalogue of women's lives on topics like women and marriage and women and education (Robin 1997). Considering the environment she was writing in at that time, it is no wonder that her work came under attack, accused of plagiarism. In response, she asserts that her work is the product of her personal commitment to learning efforts and virtue. She responds to their obvious fear of her by asking „Look, do you tremble from fear alone of my name? I am savage neither in mind nor in hand. (a narrative from Christine de Pizan) What is it your fear?" A question that needs to be echoed along the corridors of politics and policy in today's fight for gender equality. Why is there a sudden need for a new definition of a woman? Does this definition not blur the lines of analysing progress on gender equality? What social challenges will a resolution of the gender pay gap bring? What social loss will we suffer if we have equal representation of men and women across boards, parliaments, municipalities, agencies and institutions for the sake of economic and social progress?

Laura Cereta had to argue that her intellect was not an exception, but a human capacity. Reason, learning, and writing are indeed aspects that can change the life of a woman, and Laura is another leader in wishing to take these aspects to all women – creating a large path of knowledge and virtuosity (Mastrantonio 2022). These thinkers advocated forms of resistance that challenged exclusion while maintaining the possibility of dialogue and social cooperation (King & Rabil, 1983).

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The juxtaposition of contemporary and historical literature revealed notable areas of convergence. Both bodies of literature recognize the importance of addressing structural inequalities and expanding opportunities for women (Walby, 2011; Verloo, 2018; de Pizan, 1999). However, the Renaissance humanists place a stronger emphasis on relational engagement, dialogue, and shared moral responsibility than is often

evident in contemporary policy discourse (King & Rabil, 1983; Cereta, 1997). The capped environment in which they worked may have necessitated their approach. The slow progress to realising gender equality, regardless of the focused institutional support, suggests that the old perceptions are still predominant and therefore need education, restructuring, and engagement by all stakeholders to accelerate progress to realising gender equality. This fusion suggests that current debates concerning stakeholder inclusion and social polarization may benefit from greater attention to these historical perspectives. Specifically, the principles of inclusive participation, constructive accountability, mutual recognition, and non-antagonistic engagement emerged as common themes with potential relevance for contemporary policy development (Flood, 2019; Pease, 2017; Richards, 1982). Enos and Robinson (2016) aver that women, at the time of Cereta, discovered different means of persuasion, often based in their daily contexts. Thus, women redefined and subverted the traditional means using argumentation and persuasion.

Implications and Recommendations

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the growing body of literature that seeks to move beyond dyadic and adversarial understandings of gender relations. While contemporary gender-equality research has successfully highlighted structural inequalities and power imbalances, the findings suggest that greater attention should be given to the relational dimensions of social change. The study contributes to existing theoretical discussions regarding stakeholder engagement, social cohesion, and inclusive approaches to equality. It further demonstrates the value of historical backcasting as a methodological tool for policy analysis. Rather than treating historical texts solely as intellectual artifacts, the study illustrates how historical perspectives can provide conceptual resources for addressing contemporary social challenges. The Renaissance humanists examined in this review offer alternative frameworks that combine critique of inequality with dialogue, accountability, and mutual recognition, thereby enriching current debates on gender-transformative approaches.

Finally, the proposed Relational Gender Equality Model offers a new conceptual perspective on gender-equality scholarship by emphasizing the interconnectedness of gender relations and the importance of shared responsibility in achieving sustainable social transformation. However, relational models of political and social thought are not novel; the 1990s brought about a relational turn in feminist literature (Koggel, Harbin, & Llewellyn, 2022).



Policy Implications

The findings have important implications for gender-equality policy within the European Union and other international development contexts. Current funding frameworks have played a significant role in addressing women's historical disadvantages and remain essential for promoting equal opportunities. However, the review suggests that policies focusing exclusively on women as beneficiaries may not fully capitalize on opportunities for broader societal engagement. A relational approach is complementary and does not diminish the importance of women-centered interventions. By encouraging policies that recognize both women and men as stakeholders in achieving gender equality. Such an approach may contribute to reducing social polarization, increasing public support for gender-equality initiatives, and strengthening the long-term sustainability of policy outcomes. The findings also suggest that gender-equality policies should be assessed not only according to outputs such as participation rates and representation but also according to their capacity to foster social cohesion, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving. Incorporating these dimensions into policy evaluation frameworks could provide a more comprehensive understanding of program effectiveness.

Practical Implications for CSOs

For civil society organizations, educational institutions, and development practitioners, the findings indicate the importance of designing interventions that encourage meaningful participation between men and women. We must acknowledge that patriarchy is a system that conditions both men and women, boys and girls. A re-engineering of the mental programming of all can bring about more accelerated cooperation toward gender equality. Regardless of being intentionally exclusive, programs addressing gender inequality may achieve greater impact when they create opportunities for cooperation, dialogue, and shared learning rather than focusing solely on separate beneficiary categories. Educational initiatives may particularly benefit from incorporating relational perspectives into curricula, leadership training, and community engagement activities. Such approaches can help participants develop empathy, mutual understanding, and collaborative problem-solving skills while remaining attentive to issues of discrimination and inequality. For practitioners implementing donor-funded projects, the study highlights the value of integrating mechanisms that promote constructive engagement between stakeholders. These mechanisms may include joint workshops, dialogue forums, community partnerships, mentorship programs, and collaborative advocacy initiatives.

Recommendations for European Union Funding Frameworks

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed for strengthening future European Union gender-equality funding mechanisms.

1. **Introduce Relational Impact Criteria:** Funding calls should include evaluation criteria assessing how proposed interventions foster constructive engagement among diverse stakeholders. While acknowledging the need for safe spaces in several women-centered issues, like gender based violence. A progressive impact indicator mechanism should be in place. In addition to measuring benefits for target groups, projects should demonstrate how they contribute to dialogue, cooperation, and shared responsibility for gender equality.
2. **Encourage Inclusive Stakeholder Participation:** Applicants should be encouraged to demonstrate how both women and men, where appropriate, are engaged in project design, implementation, and evaluation. Particular attention should be given to initiatives that promote collaboration while maintaining a clear focus on addressing existing inequalities.
3. **Expand Monitoring and Evaluation Indicators:** Current monitoring frameworks often emphasize quantitative measures such as participation rates, employment outcomes, and leadership representation. While these indicators remain important, additional measures should be developed to assess: Social cohesion, Stakeholder engagement, Perceptions of inclusion, Collaborative decision-making, and community-level support for gender-equality objectives
4. **Support Dialogue-Based Interventions:** Dedicated funding streams could be established for projects that promote constructive dialogue and mutual understanding across gender groups. Such initiatives may be particularly valuable in educational institutions, workplaces, local communities, and youth programs.
5. **Incentivize Partnership Models:** Funding frameworks should encourage partnerships among civil society organizations, educational institutions, community groups, men's engagement organizations, women's rights organizations, and public authorities. Multistakeholder approaches may enhance the sustainability and scalability of interventions.
6. **Incorporate Historical and Cultural Perspectives:** Policy development processes should draw upon a broader range of intellectual traditions when designing gender-equality interventions. Historical perspectives, including those offered by Renaissance women humanists, can provide valuable insights regarding inclusion, accountability, and social transformation.



Conclusion

Gender equality remains one of the most important and complex objectives within contemporary sustainable development agendas. As the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5), it is widely recognized not only as a matter of social justice and human rights but also as a catalyst for economic growth, poverty reduction, improved health outcomes, and social cohesion. Reflecting this significance, the European Union has committed substantial financial and institutional resources to promoting gender equality through legislation, policy frameworks, and funding mechanisms. Despite these efforts, persistent inequalities and projections indicating slow progress toward full gender equality suggest that additional approaches may be needed to complement existing interventions.

This study sought to examine whether historical perspectives from Renaissance women humanists could contribute to contemporary debates concerning gender-equality policy and funding frameworks. Through a PRISMA-guided systematic literature review and a historical backcasting analysis, the study explored the relationship between current gender-equality approaches and the writings of Christine de Pizan, Isotta Nogarola, and Laura Cereta. By bringing these bodies of literature into dialogue, the research addressed a gap in existing scholarship and demonstrated the continued relevance of historical intellectual traditions to contemporary policy challenges.

The findings indicate that contemporary gender-equality interventions have generated important advances in addressing structural inequalities affecting women. However, the literature also reveals growing concerns regarding stakeholder engagement, social polarization, and the long-term sustainability of certain intervention models. In particular, scholars increasingly emphasize the importance of involving diverse actors, including men, in processes of social transformation. The review suggests that sustainable progress is most likely when gender equality is understood not solely as a matter of redistributing opportunities and resources but also as a relational project involving cooperation, dialogue, accountability, and shared responsibility.

The historical analysis revealed notable parallels between these emerging concerns and the perspectives advanced by Renaissance women humanists. Although writing within profoundly unequal social contexts, Christine de Pizan, Isotta Nogarola, and Laura Cereta challenged discriminatory assumptions that women were incapable when the enabling environment for them to thrive had not been created. The evidence from these women highlights the education of women and girls so that they can have a mind of their own. Cereta regards learning as growing out of virtue; she says in effect that those who do not love learning have no inner direction of their own but are directed by things outside them. They simultaneously promote dialogue and intellectual engagement; Nogarola feigns ignorance, but as soon as a platform for engagement is granted her, intellectual prowess becomes undeniable

even to her adversaries, revealing humility as a virtue. Christine de Pizan exhibited high-level moral accountability along with social inclusion; she earned her livelihood in the male-dominated trade due to her intellectual commitment and moral currency. Their writings demonstrate that resistance to inequality need not rely exclusively on adversarial frameworks. Instead, they illustrate how strategic, constructive critique and cooperation can coexist as complementary mechanisms for advancing social change.

Based on the synthesis of contemporary and historical literature, the study proposed a Relational Gender Equality Model centered on four interrelated principles: inclusive participation, constructive accountability, dialogue and mutual recognition, and shared responsibility. The model does not seek to replace existing feminist, rights-based, or gender-mainstreaming approaches. Rather, it offers a complementary framework that strengthens these approaches by addressing the relational dimensions of gender equality. By recognizing both women and men as stakeholders in social transformation, relational approaches may contribute to greater social cohesion, broader public support, and more sustainable policy outcomes.

The study makes three principal contributions to scholarship and practice. First, it contributes to gender-equality research by introducing a relational perspective grounded in historical scholarship. Second, it demonstrates the value of historical backcasting as a methodological approach for generating policy-relevant insights from historical sources. Third, it offers practical recommendations for enhancing European Union gender-equality funding frameworks through greater emphasis on stakeholder engagement, collaborative approaches, and relational indicators of success.

These findings have particular relevance for policymakers, funding agencies, civil society organizations, and researchers seeking innovative responses to persistent gender inequalities. Future gender-equality initiatives may benefit from combining structural interventions with approaches that cultivate dialogue, mutual understanding, and collective ownership of equality goals. Such an approach recognizes that meaningful and lasting change depends not only on transforming institutions but also on transforming relationships. Ultimately, this study argues that the pursuit of gender equality should not be understood as a zero-sum contest between social groups but as a shared societal project.

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