



Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU – High Level Conference on Equality

The EU's Equality Advantage:

How equality powers competitiveness, innovation and social cohesion

Dublin 8–9 September 2026

- Do more equal societies have stronger economies?
- Does inequality compromise competitiveness?
- Can we afford not to close the equality gaps that remain?

As the Presidency of the Council of the EU, the Government of Ireland is proud to convene a one-day international conference on Equality and Competitiveness in Dublin on Tuesday, 8 September and Wednesday, 9 September 2026. The Conference is hosted by Ireland's Equality Minister, Norma Foley, and will feature high level speakers from the business, political and civil society sectors. Participants will hear from leading researchers on the relationship between equality and economic performance, and what this means for the Europe of the future.

The EU has transformed people's wellbeing across Europe. Through legislation and collective action, it has built a social model that reduces inequality, enhances quality of life, and improves working conditions. The gender pay gap has reduced¹, it is estimated that over 50 million jobs are supported by intra-EU trade², and workplaces have never been safer.

But important work remains to be done. Inequality and exclusion continue to carry a real economic cost—women still earn around 11% less than men, people with disabilities face employment gaps of over 25 percent, and some within our Union feel they must hide who they are to be safe. This exclusion can cost economies up to 3–7% of GDP. This leaves talent untapped, our competitiveness compromised, and Europe's full economic potential unrealised.

¹ [EU gender pay gap | Statista](#)

² [Non paper The Single Market at 30.pdf](#)



This event will explore the link between equality and competitiveness. It will showcase evidence of a positive correlation between equality and competitiveness, spotlight businesses harnessing the EU's equality advantage, and debate data that illustrates how inequality is influencing the EU's adoption of digital innovation. The conference will hear from social partners on how EU legislation that realises equality and enhances competitiveness can be effectively implemented, supervised and enforced.

The morning session will focus on gender equality, with an address from Ireland's Equality Minister, a keynote address from an international speaker, and a plenary format panel discussion to explore the relationship between gender equality and economic performance.

The afternoon session will broaden the conversation to other intersecting equalities, including ethnicity and disability. Parallel panel discussions will explore the themes of 1) The Care Economy; 2) AI and Digital Transformation; and 3) Diversity in Leadership. Panel speakers from Ireland and across the EU will debate the relationship between equality and competitiveness across these three areas, explore emerging data, and address concerns around the cost of equality measures.

Delegates will include government representatives, EU member states, policymakers, social partners and practitioners representing those who are interested and active in the equality and economic arenas. Contributions are expected to include senior representatives from Member States, the European Commission, the European Institute for Gender Equality, Eurofound, International Organisations, industry, social partners and academics.

This conference will be of interest to the equality and the competitiveness policy communities both in Ireland and across the European Union. Its deliberations will inform Council Conclusions on Equality and Competitiveness, which the Irish Presidency has recently proposed.