

Bohmann, Sandra; Targa, Matteo

**Article**

## Women increasingly identifying as part of a discriminated group

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## AT A GLANCE

# Women increasingly identifying as part of a discriminated group

By Sandra Bohmann and Matteo Targa

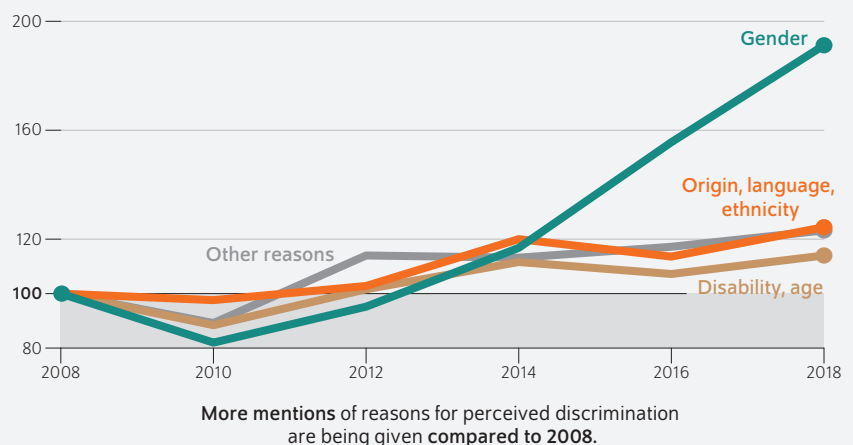
- Fewer than one in ten respondents in 17 European countries analyzed feels they are a discriminated group member
- However, the share of those who do increased by a quarter from 2008 to 2018; perception of discrimination has increased, in particular among European women
- Origin, language, ethnicity, and religion remain the most important causes of perceived discrimination
- Experience of multidimensional discrimination doubled between 2008 and 2018
- Results show that perception of discrimination has increased and a base has been laid to combat discrimination

## Few Europeans feel they belong to a discriminated group, but the share of those who do due to their gender or sexual orientation has doubled

More mentions of reasons for perceived discrimination are being given compared to 2008



Source: Authors' own depiction.



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## FROM THE AUTHORS

*“Policymakers and society can only successfully combat discrimination when people are also aware that certain groups or people experience discrimination. Discrimination can only be addressed when it is recognized and acknowledged. This is why our results are also encouraging.”*

— Matteo Targa —

## MEDIA



**Audio Interview** with Stefan Liebig (in German)  
[www.diw.de/mediathek](http://www.diw.de/mediathek)

# Women increasingly identifying themselves as part of a discriminated group

By Sandra Bohmann and Matteo Targa

## ABSTRACT

Policymakers have been attempting to combat discrimination at all levels for a long time. However, the measures they take can only be successful if there is general awareness of the discrimination experienced by certain groups or people: Discrimination can only be addressed when people also recognize and acknowledge it is happening. Therefore, it is important to measure the extent to which the population is aware of discrimination. This Weekly Report examines which individuals feel they belong to a discriminated group in 17 European countries from 2008 to 2018. Overall, not even one in ten respondents feels part of a group that is discriminated against. However, the share of those who view their group at risk of discrimination has risen by a quarter in the decade observed. Women in particular have become increasingly more likely to feel part of a discriminated group. Moreover, the experience of multidimensional discrimination doubled between 2008 and 2018. Other data sources show that the general population perceives discrimination to be declining. This is why the perspective of those affected is important.

In summer 2008, the European Commission passed multiple measures to promote equal opportunities and combat discrimination in the EU. This included, for example, that the principle of equal pay for men and women should be applied more uniformly in the member states.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the Commission presented a directive prohibiting discrimination based on age, disability, sexual orientation, religion, or beliefs outside the workplace.<sup>2</sup> The reception of such measures depends crucially on how aware the population is of discrimination. Discrimination can only be addressed when it is also acknowledged. Therefore, it is important to measure to what extent the overall population is aware of discrimination. Legal steps can usually only be initiated by the affected persons themselves. Therefore, raising awareness among those potentially affected is particularly important.

This Weekly Report complements the reports<sup>3</sup> on discrimination in the EU by the European Commission, which are based on special Eurobarometer surveys (Special Eurobarometer<sup>4</sup>), by analyzing survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS) from 2008 to 2018 (Box 1).<sup>5</sup> The ESS questions focus on whether the respondents identify as members of a discriminated group. Hence, the ESS complements the Eurobarometer in terms of content, as it concentrates on the subjective perception of discrimination in the population. The aim of this Weekly Report is to provide a descriptive

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, *Tackling the pay gap between women and men* (Brussels: 2007) (available online; accessed on January 26, 2022. This applies to all other online sources in this report unless stated otherwise); European Parliament, *Resolution of 18 November 2008 with recommendations to the Commission on the application of the principle of equal pay for men and women* (Strasbourg: 2008) (available online).

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *Non-discrimination and equal opportunities: A renewed commitment* (Brussels: 2008) (available online).

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, "Discrimination in the European Union: Perceptions, Experiences and Attitudes," *Special Eurobarometer 296* (2008) (available online); European Commission, "Discrimination in the EU in 2009," *Special Eurobarometer 317* (2009) (available online); European Union, "Discrimination in the EU in 2012," *Special Eurobarometer 393* (2012) (available online); European Commission, "Discrimination in the EU in 2015," *Special Eurobarometer 437* (2015) (available online); European Commission, "Discrimination in the European Union in 2019," *Special Eurobarometer 493* (2019) (available online).

<sup>4</sup> The Eurobarometer is a repeated cross-sectional survey. At least 1,000 people per EU country are surveyed. More information on the Eurobarometer is available here.

<sup>5</sup> As of publication, the 2020 survey data is not yet available. More recent data from waves 1 to 3 from 2002 to 2006 were not used here because some indicators for this period are unavailable.

Box 1

Data

The European Social Survey (ESS) is a repeated cross-sectional survey using a representative sample of the population over the age of 15 that is conducted every two years across European countries. A part of the question catalog always remains the same. Although the group of participants changes in each survey, averages for countries can be compared over time to reveal general trends.<sup>1</sup> However, not every country participates in every survey wave. Therefore, the analyses in this report are based on information from 193,715 respondents from 17 countries that consistently participated in the survey from 2008 to 2018: Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Slovenia, and Switzerland.

The ESS also asks questions about discrimination. An evaluation of these questions is useful for complementing and validating the results of the Eurobarometer. One advantage of the ESS compared to the Eurobarometer is the larger number of respondents per country. This is particularly important when analyzing discrimination because the share of those who belong to certain discriminated groups, many of which are minorities, is relatively small. Therefore, the measurement of subjectively perceived discrimination is considered to be more accurate the more people in a country are surveyed.

<sup>1</sup> The data structure of the ESS is thus relatively similar to that of the Eurobarometer.

summary of the development of perceived discrimination and its determinants across Europe over the 2010s. Thus, it also contributes to assessing whether efforts from policy-makers and civil society to increase awareness of discrimination are reaching those people most potentially affected by discrimination.

### More and more people feel they belong to a discriminated group

As a part of the European Social Survey, participants are asked every two years if they view themselves as part of a group that is discriminated against in their country.<sup>6</sup> Overall, only a small share of respondents feel they belong to one or more discriminated groups: Between 2008 and 2018, fewer than one in ten Europeans responded with a yes.<sup>7</sup> However, this share has increased over time (Figure 1): In 2008, 6.6 percent of the total population felt like they belong to one or more discriminated groups. In 2018, the same share rose to

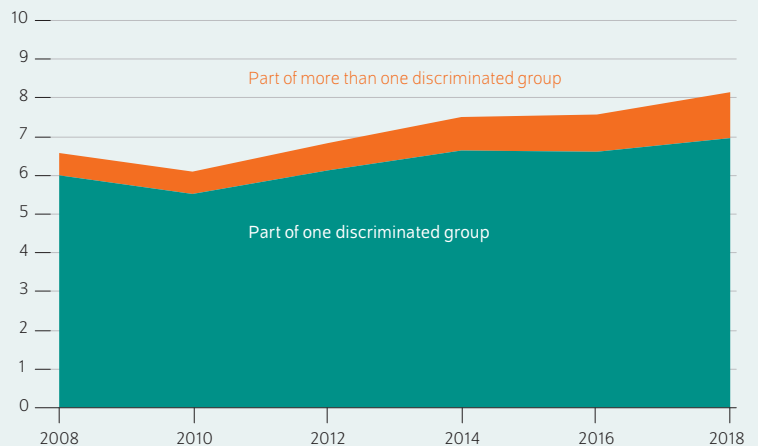
<sup>6</sup> The exact question in the survey is "Would you describe yourself as a member of a population group that is discriminated against in [COUNTRY]?" The respondents could answer with "yes," "no," or "I don't know."

<sup>7</sup> In comparison, about twelve percent of respondents felt they belonged to a minority group in the 2009-2019 Eurobarometer surveys.

Figure 1

### Change in perceived discrimination in Europe

Share of respondents who view themselves as a member of one or more discriminated groups; in percent



Source: ESS waves 4-9, select countries (see Box 1); weighted values.

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More and more people view themselves as members of one or more discriminated groups.

8.1 percent, a 24-percent increase over ten years.<sup>8</sup> Possible explanations for this increase will be explored later.

There are also differences in the subjective perception of discrimination within Europe. It is higher in Northern and Western Europe than in Southeastern Europe (Figure 2): In 2018, an especially large share of people felt they belong to a discriminated group in Iceland (16 percent), the United Kingdom (16 percent), Montenegro (15 percent), and France (14 percent), while the figure was much lower for Lithuania (three percent) as well as Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Italy (four percent each).

### Increase primarily driven by the gender and sexual orientation dimension

Respondents who identify as members of a discriminated group are asked on what ground their group is discriminated against and permitted to give multiple reasons. For the following analyses, the response options skin color, nationality, religion, language, ethnic minority, and ethnic group were combined into the origin, language, and ethnicity dimension. Gender and sexual orientation comprise another dimension, as do age and disability.

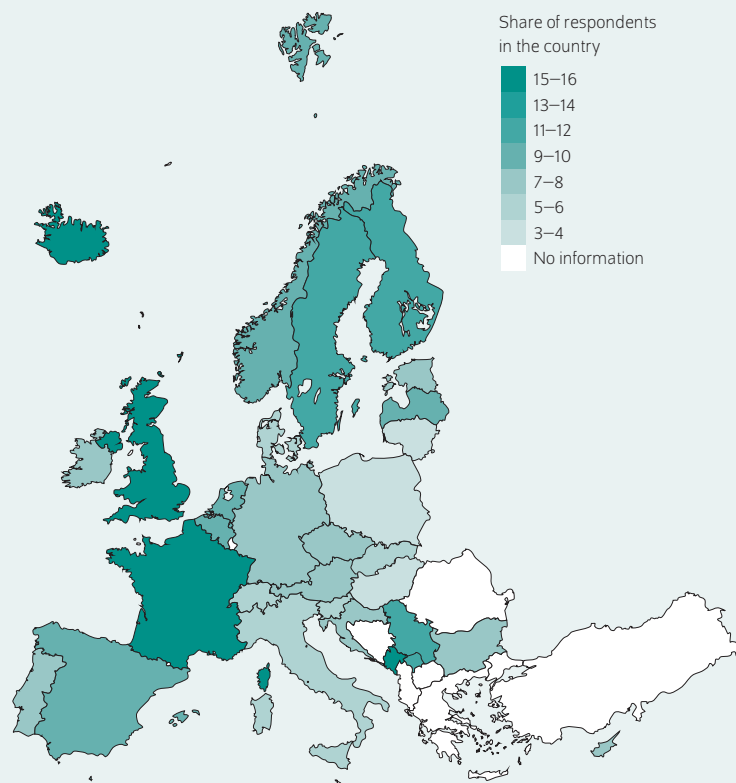
When the answers are clustered according to these dimensions, it is clear that the increase in the share of those who feel they are a discriminated group member is primarily due to an increase in answers from the gender and sexual orientation dimension. Between 2008 and 2018, the share of those

<sup>8</sup> The difference is statistically significant.

Figure 2

### Perceived discrimination in 2018 in a European comparison

Share of respondents of the respective countries who view themselves as a member of one or more discriminated groups; in percent



Source: ESS wave 9 (v 3.1); weighted values.

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Perceived discrimination is greater in Northern and Western Europe than in South-eastern Europe.

who belong to a group that is discriminated against due to gender or sexual orientation had almost doubled (Figure 3). However, the share of this group of the overall population is relatively small: In 2008, just 1.1 percent of the population felt they belonged to a discriminated group due to their gender or sexual orientation. In 2018, it was 2.1 percent. In the origin, language, and ethnicity dimension, the increase was 24 percentage points, from 3.5 percent in 2008 to 4.3 percent in 2018. The smallest increase (15 percent) was observed for discrimination due to age or disability.

### Origin, language, and ethnicity dimension is the most frequently named cause of discrimination

The fact that subjective awareness of discrimination nevertheless increased on average by only 24 percent is due to the composition of the group of those subjectively affected by discrimination (Figure 4). Over the entire observation period, the origin, language, and ethnicity dimension is the most important dimension of discrimination involving between 43 and

49 percent of the respondents that felt they are a member of a discriminated group. In contrast, only 13 to 21 percent of those affected by discrimination reported reasons from the gender and sexual orientation dimension. About a fifth reported reasons relating to age or disability.

### Women became more likely to identify as part of a discriminated group over time

The increase in the gender and sexual orientation group is due to changes in the answering behavior of women in particular (Figure 6). Both migrant<sup>9</sup> and non-migrant women's awareness of discrimination increased between 2008 and 2018. However, women with a migration background feel they belong to a discriminated group three times as often as women without a migration background. The share of men who view themselves as members of a discriminated group remains stable over time independent of migration background.

These results were scrutinized using a multivariate model that analyzes the extent to which certain personal characteristics affect the likelihood that respondents identify as a member of a discriminated group when all other personal characteristics are equal. The multivariate model was calculated for each year separately.<sup>10</sup> Using multivariate models makes it possible to make more precise statements about the influence of individual personal characteristics and their evolution through time. The results (Figure 5) confirm that women, unlike men, have become more aware of discrimination: In 2008, there was no statistically significant difference between men and women. In 2018, however, there was a 1.3 percent higher likelihood that women would consider themselves part of a discriminated group than men. In contrast, people with a migration background have a higher likelihood of viewing themselves as a member of a discriminated group over the entire observation period. Their perception of discrimination against their own group also increased. There are different effects in terms of age: While the likelihood to view oneself as a member of a discriminated group increased slightly for younger respondents (20 to 30 years old) compared to middle-aged respondents (40 to 50 years old), older respondents had a lower likelihood. Moreover, the analyses show that low-income earners and those who have been unemployed identify as members of a discriminated group more frequently than middle-income earners and those who have never been unemployed. Thus, discrimination is often perceived where different forms of disadvantages occur simultaneously.

<sup>9</sup> The definition used here includes second-generation immigrants. This means individuals who were born abroad or whose parents (or one parent) were born abroad are considered to have a migration background.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically, a multinomial probit model is estimated. Whether or not a person considers themselves part of a discriminated group is the dependent variable. The independent variables are the respondent's gender, migration background, and age. The model controls for the respondent's educational background, household income, family status (married, children in household), and earlier experiences with unemployment. Furthermore, country dummies are used to control for the fact that observations of individuals from one country can no longer be considered independent of each other.

## Discrimination is increasingly understood as multidimensional

Between 2008 and 2018, the share of respondents who felt they belong to multiple discriminated groups doubled from 0.6 percent to 1.2 percent (orange area in Figure 1). The concept of multidimensional discrimination<sup>11</sup> has long been a topic of academic and political discussion. It seems that the European population is becoming increasingly aware of this discourse on multidimensional discrimination, also known as intersectional discrimination.<sup>12</sup> This discourse points to the shortcomings of discrimination policies targeting each dimension of discrimination separately without accounting for the interplay of the individual dimensions. It is argued that this practice disadvantages those who experience specific forms of discrimination that only arise from the interplay of the various dimensions. For example, transgender people with a migration background might experience different forms of discrimination than transgender people without a migration background. Thus, by only considering different dimensions of discrimination in isolation, there is a danger of overlooking the forms of discrimination that only arise in combination with each other. To combat all forms of discrimination, political actors must also be aware of complex forms of discrimination that result from an interplay of the various dimensions.

Previous analyses have highlighted the importance of the origin, language, and ethnicity dimension as well as the gender and sexual orientation dimension for perceived discrimination in Europe. Therefore, the following analyses focus on the interplay of these two dimensions. The multivariate analysis showed that the likelihood of a person to identify as a member of a discriminated group is correlated with other personal characteristics, such as income or (previous) unemployment. This means that difference in the subjective perception of discrimination between men and women and between people with and without a migration background might be driven by the fact that these groups differ in terms of other characteristics such as age, education, employment status, or income. To better understand how gender and origin interact in subjective perceptions of discrimination, a Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition was performed (Box 2). This method makes it possible to compare the share of people that identify as members of discriminated minorities between two population sub-groups (e.g., men vs.

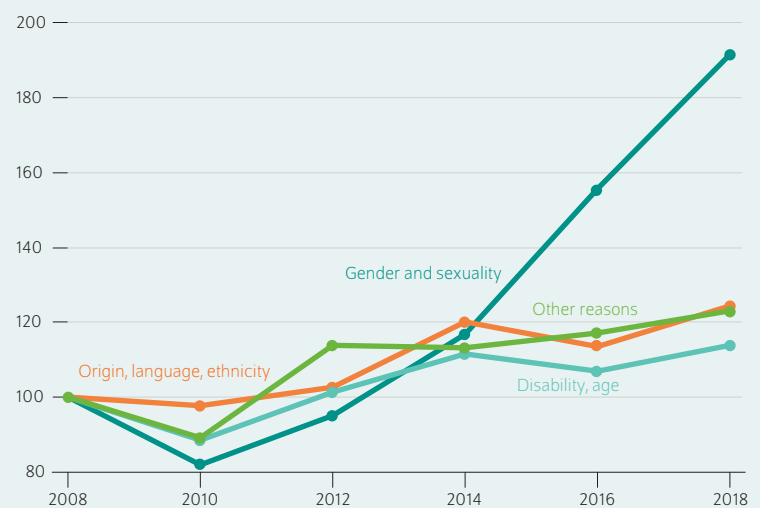
**11** Multidimensional discrimination is used here as an umbrella term for various subtypes. Building upon a conceptualization put forth by legal scholar Timo Makkonen, multidimensional discrimination is often understood to encompass different subtypes: Multiple discrimination, in which a person experiences discrimination for several reasons but experiences the different reasons for discrimination one at a time; compound discrimination, in which the different grounds for discrimination are simultaneously affecting a person; and intersectional discrimination, in which a person experiences specific forms of discrimination that only come into existence through the interplay of different reasons of discrimination. See Timo Makkonen, *Multiple, Compound and Intersectional Discrimination: Bringing the Experiences of the Most Marginalized to the Fore* (2002) (available online).

**12** While Kimberlé Crenshaw developed intersectional theory with regard to the discrimination experienced by Black women in the United States, it is now defined more broadly in American discourse. In the German discourse, too, the term “intersectionality” is usually defined more broadly to encompass the interactions of multiple dimensions of inequality.

Figure 3

### Reasons for discrimination in Europe

Mentions of different reasons for perceived discrimination relative to 2008



Source: ESS waves 4-9 for select countries (see Box 1); weighted values.

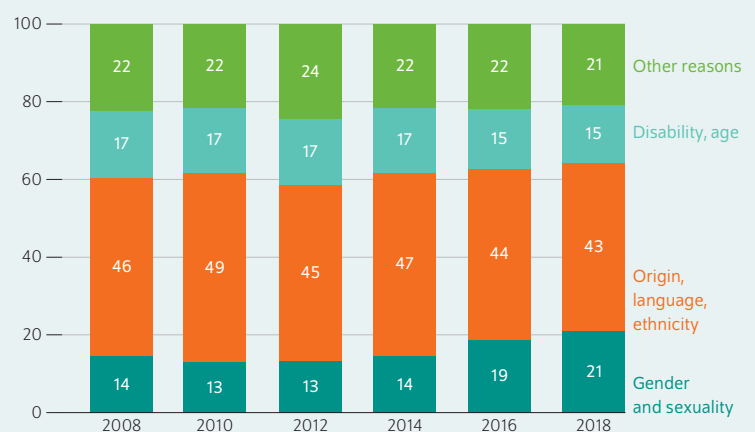
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The share of those who feel they belong to a discriminated group due to their gender or sexual orientation has doubled.

Figure 4

### Composition of the group of those who identify as discriminated group members

Shares in percent



Source: ESS waves 4-9 for select countries (see Box 1); weighted values.

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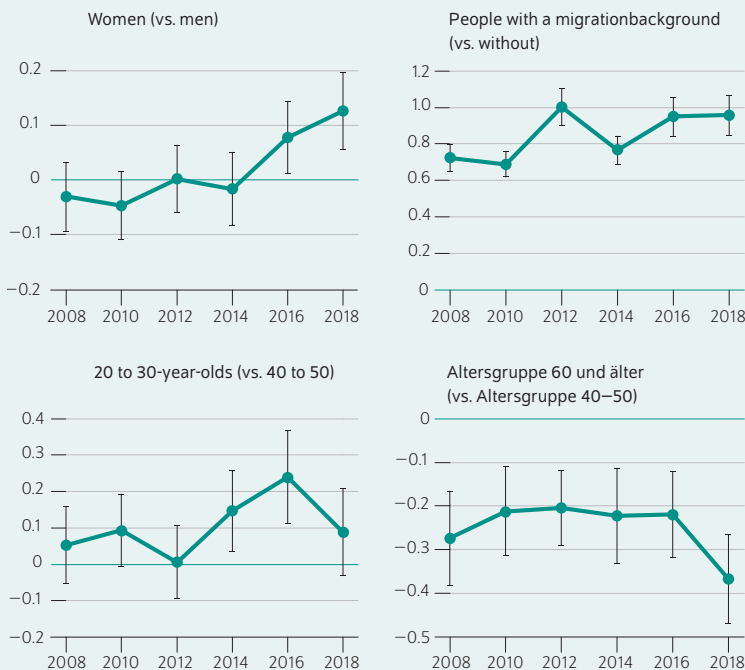
The majority of those who identify as part of a group that is discriminated against in their country, state reasons connected to their nationality, language, or ethnicity.



Figure 5

### Influence of personal characteristics on perceived belonging to a discriminated group over time

Difference in the likelihood for a person to identify as a discriminated group member compared to the comparison group, in percent



Source: ESS waves 4-9 for select countries (see boxes); weighted values.

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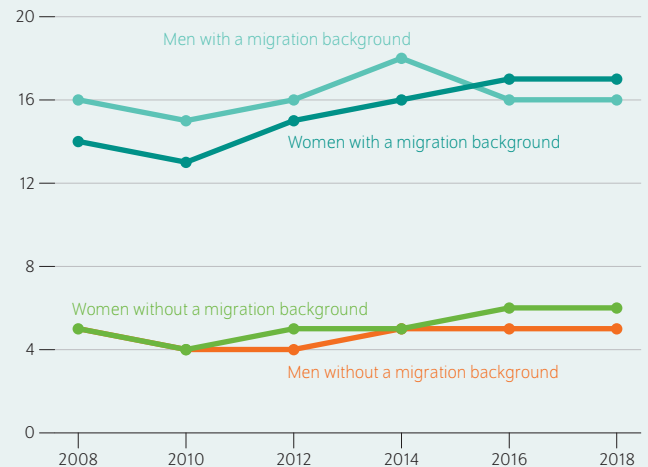
Women, people with a migration background, and younger people are more aware of discrimination against their own group.

women, individuals with vs. individuals without migration background) and disentangle two components that explain this gap. The first component is termed composition effect. The composition effect measures how much of the difference in the discrimination ratio between the two population sub-groups is due to differences in the distribution of their characteristics. The second component, which is called the coefficient effect, measures how much of the gap in the discrimination ratios is due to differences that arise because individuals belonging to the two population sub-groups perceive discrimination differently, independently from differences in their characteristics. For example, it could be that differences in the perception of discrimination between women with and without a migration background are due to the fact that both groups differ in terms of other characteristics (composition effect), such as age, level of education, employment status, or household income. However, it could also be that women with a migration background are more aware of discrimination than women without a migration background because they are discriminated against due to their migration background (that would simply be an effect of the migration background). Or that other characteristics, such as experience with unemployment, affect the awareness

Figure 6

### Share of respondents who identify as part of a group that is discriminated against in their country of residence

Share of respondents in percent, by gender and migration background



Source: ESS waves 4-9 for select countries (see Box 1); weighted values.

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The share of women who feel they are a member of a discriminated group has increased since 2008.

of discrimination of women with and without a migration background differently (this would be the coefficient effect).

The results of the decomposition analysis show that in both origin groups, the different likelihoods of men and women to consider themselves part of a discriminated group (upper panel of Figure 7) is largely due to coefficient effects and has less to do with how other characteristics, such as level of education and income, are distributed between women and men.

This means that women react to perceived discrimination differently than men. In other words, women have a greater level of perception of discrimination against their own group than men. Over time, women's perception of discrimination has even increased. Among respondents with a migration background, the increase in the difference between the genders is more pronounced than among respondents without a migration background.

While in both cases gender gaps are expanding, the increase has been more pronounced among respondents with a migration background than among respondents without a migration background. Specifically, within the population with migration backgrounds in 2008, women had a significantly lower likelihood than men to report discrimination. This was not the case for non-migrant women who reported similar discrimination rates as non-migrant men. Our findings, however, show a clear trend over time,

Box 2

## Blinder–Oaxaca Decomposition

The Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition is a statistical method based on the method of ordinary least squares (OLS). This method reveals what share of an observed difference in a dependent variable between two groups is due to different characteristics in the two groups (composition effect) and what share of the difference is due to different influences of these characteristics on the dependent variable between the two groups (coefficient effect). Econometrically, the effects are identified as follows:

Assuming two mutually exclusive groups ( $G = 1, 2$ ), the relationship between an outcome ( $Y_{it}^G$ ) and a set of explanatory (independent) variables  $X_{it}^G$  can be estimated using linear regression as:

$$= X_{it}^1 \beta^1 + \varepsilon_{it}^1 \xrightarrow{OLS} \bar{Y}^1 = \bar{X}^1 \hat{\beta}^1$$

$$= X_{it}^2 \beta^2 + \varepsilon_{it}^2 \xrightarrow{OLS} \bar{Y}^2 = \bar{X}^2 \hat{\beta}^2$$

$\bar{Y}^G$  then denotes the expected value of the dependent variable in group  $G$ . By exploiting the properties of linear regressions, it can be derived that the expected difference between the two groups  $\Delta Y_t$  is:

$$\Delta Y_t = \bar{Y}^1 - \bar{Y}^2 = \bar{X}^1 \hat{\beta}^1 - \bar{X}^2 \hat{\beta}^2$$

In the Blinder–Oaxaca decomposition, this equation is transformed to be able to distinguish between composite and coefficient effects. This is achieved by introducing a hypothetical comparison group: What expected value would result when the coefficient from group 2 ( $\hat{\beta}^2$ ) is applied to group 1 characteristics? This is achieved by adding and subtracting the term  $\bar{X}^1 \hat{\beta}^2$  to the right side of the

equation (3). The difference between the hypothetical expected value and the expected values of groups 1 and 2 can then be used to conclude which part of the difference in the expected value between the groups is due to differences in the combination of characteristics in the groups (composition effect) and which part of the difference between the groups is due to different responses to these characteristics (coefficient effect).

$$Y_t = \underbrace{\bar{X}^1 \hat{\beta}^1 - \bar{X}^2 \hat{\beta}^2}_{\text{Composition effect}} + \underbrace{\bar{X}^1 \hat{\beta}^2}_{\text{Coefficient effect}} = (\bar{X}^1 - \bar{X}^2) \hat{\beta}^2 + (\hat{\beta}^1 - \hat{\beta}^2) \bar{X}^1$$

A decomposition method is used here, which is suitable for probability models with binary (yes/no) dependent variables.<sup>1</sup> The dependent variable in the analyses is the share of men and women with and without a migration background who feel they belong to a discriminated group. Specifically, two differences were analyzed: differences in awareness of discrimination by gender, each for people with and without a migration background (top part of Figure 7) and differences in awareness of discrimination by origin for men and women (bottom part of Figure 7). Positive values for differences in gender mean that women have a higher likelihood to feel they belong to a discriminated group than men. Positive values for differences in origin mean that people with a migration background have a higher likelihood of feeling discriminated against than people without a migration background.

<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Fairlie, "An extension of the Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition technique to logit and probit models," *Journal of Economic and Social Measurement* 3 (2005): 305–316.

where both women with and without migration background increasingly report higher discrimination rates. Women with a migration background especially reversed the trend observed in 2008 such that in 2018, the gender difference in the subjective perception of discrimination was the same for both origin groups.

Differences in perception of discrimination due to one's origin (lower panel of Figure 7) also reflect differences in perception towards discrimination rather than differences in group composition. Here, too, there is a difference between the genders: While the difference in the perception of discrimination between men with and without a migration background is relatively stable over time, an increase can be observed among the women. This increase can be attributed to both composition and coefficient effects. This means that over time, women with a migration background compared to women without a migration background have become more aware of discrimination. This could indicate that women with a migration background experience specific forms of discrimination, of which they have become increasingly aware over the ten years observed.

## Conclusion: Perception of discrimination has increased among European women

Overall, only a relatively small share of Europeans feel at risk of discrimination. Fewer than one in ten considers themselves part of a group that is discriminated against in their country of residence. Of those who do, they indicated their origin, language, ethnicity, or religion as the main causes. Since 2008, the share of those who identify as belonging to a discriminated group has increased by almost a quarter. This growth is strongly driven by an increased feeling of discrimination among women; the increase was especially strong among women with a migration background. While this effect could be due to an increase in actual discrimination, it could also indicate that perception of discrimination has increased. Much indicates the latter. After all, trends in various indicators of discrimination, such as the gender pay gap, tend to indicate actual discrimination is constant or slowly declining.

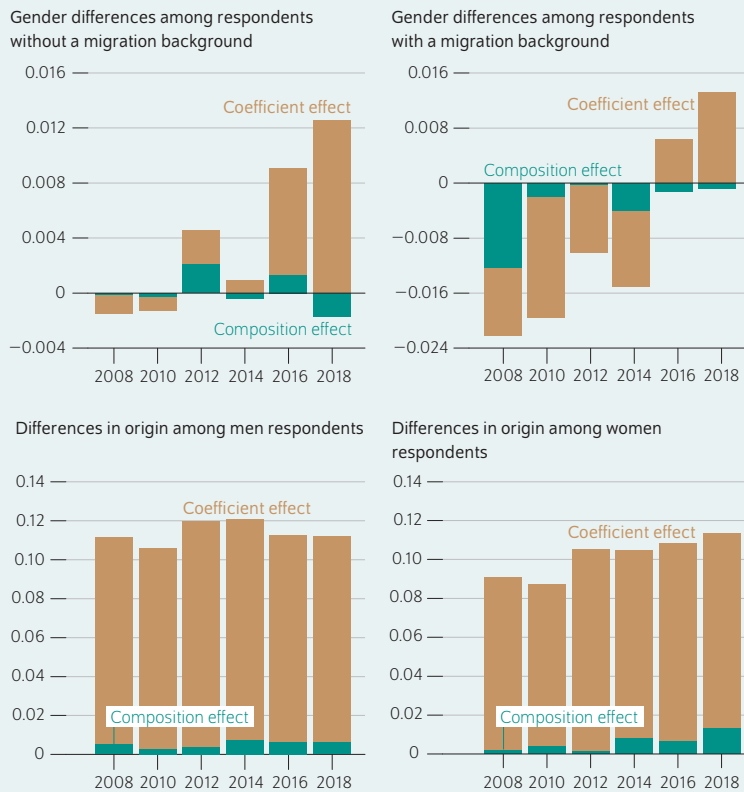
That individuals potentially affected by discrimination are increasingly aware of it indicates that the problem persists.



Figure 7

### Perceived discrimination by composition and coefficient effects

Difference in the share of people that identify as members of discriminated minorities between population sub-groups



Source: ESS waves 4-9 for select countries (see boxes); weighted values.

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The perception of discrimination has increased among European women.

The information gained here can be used to design more efficient and more effective anti-discrimination policies; knowing which parts of the population perceive their own group to be especially at risk of discrimination provides information on where political action is needed. Using this information, more precise and effective measures against discrimination can be developed. Furthermore, the results also stress the increased importance of understanding discrimination as a complex phenomenon and to consider the interplay of different dimensions of discrimination.

The analyses presented here focus on the perception of discrimination of those potentially affected by discrimination. For discrimination policy measures to be successfully implemented, however, it is crucial to increase awareness of different forms of discrimination in all parts of the population. The two most recent surveys of the Eurobarometer indicate that discrimination in different areas is perceived as declining. Particularly against this background, it is important to repeatedly emphasize the discrimination that still remains in all its complex forms in public and political discourse. Giving the affected themselves a voice is one important means of doing so.

**Sandra Bohmann** is a research associate at the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) at DIW Berlin | [sbohmann@diw.de](mailto:sbohmann@diw.de)

**Matteo Targa** is a research associate at the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) at DIW Berlin | [mtarga@diw.de](mailto:mtarga@diw.de)

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**Keywords:** perceived discrimination, multidimensional discrimination, Europe

## PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION

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DIW Berlin — Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung e. V.  
Mohrenstraße 58, 10117 Berlin

[www.diw.de](http://www.diw.de)

Phone: +49 30 897 89–0 Fax: –200

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