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Beyond “Brussels So White!": Towards an EU of Epistemic Justice and Inclusive Diversity



Executive Summary

The European Union (EU) has advanced in gender equality and anti-discrimination, yet its institutions still lack visible racial and ethnic diversity. The phrase #BrusselsSoWhite captures this gap and raises questions about whose perspectives inform EU policymaking. While progress is clear — through the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, the Anti-Racism Action Plan, a more gender-balanced Commission, and fully paid traineeships — challenges remain. Across policy areas, from migration and disability to climate and higher education, groups most affected by EU decisions are often underrepresented in shaping them. To strengthen both legitimacy and effectiveness, the EU must move beyond symbolic diversity. Opening recruitment pathways, engaging a wider range of civil society actors, and embedding intersectional analysis across policies are key steps forward.

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Brussels is one of Europe's most diverse capitals — yet step inside the EU's institutions and that diversity seems to vanish. Senior positions in the Commission, Council, and Parliament are still dominated by white Europeans, with racialised minorities barely visible in leadership roles. While gender parity has rightly become a priority, other dimensions of diversity — race, ethnicity, class, and migration background — remain far less systematically addressed.

Why does this gap persist? Pathways into EU institutions often privilege the already privileged. Recruitment relies heavily on elite universities and professional networks, making it difficult for candidates from less represented backgrounds to break through. Until recently, unpaid internships placed Brussels out of reach for many, and even now the high cost of living continues to limit access. Informal networks — “who you know” — still play a strong role in career progression, reproducing a familiar profile of Brussels insiders.

The consequences go well beyond appearances. A policy environment that lacks diversity risks narrowing the perspectives that shape European decision-making. It reinforces assumptions rooted in limited experience, which can weaken the Union's ability to design policies that speak to its own citizens and resonate with partners abroad. Closing this gap is therefore not only about fairness. It is about improving the quality, legitimacy, and global credibility of EU policymaking.

The Whiteness of Brussels

Despite persistent gaps, the EU has not stood still. Over the past decade, important initiatives have started to shift the landscape and demonstrate that change is possible. **The Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025** has set out clear priorities to close pay gaps, improve work–life balance, and increase women's participation in leadership. Alongside this, the **Anti-Racism Action Plan** marked the first time the EU openly acknowledged structural racism within its own borders — a symbolic step that has opened the door to more concrete measures.

Representation at the top has also improved. The current **College of Commissioners** is the most gender-balanced in EU history, signalling that parity is achievable when it is prioritised. Efforts to widen entry points are also paying off: the flagship **Blue Book** traineeship programme is now fully paid, helping to reduce long-standing barriers for young people from less privileged backgrounds. Beyond institutional reforms, new strategies are emerging across policy areas. **The Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030** has brought visibility and coordination to disability rights, while the European Green Deal has enshrined the principle of a “just transition,” committing the EU to balance climate action with social fairness.

These initiatives are not yet transformative, and progress is uneven. But they provide proof of concept: when political will aligns with institutional reform, inclusion can move from aspiration to practice. The challenge now is to ensure that these gains are sustained, deepened, and extended across all dimensions of diversity.

Sings of Progress

Policy Lessons Across Sectors

The underrepresentation of minority and racialised voices in Brussels institutions has direct policy consequences. Without diverse perspectives in the room, policies are shaped by limited assumptions — often reinforcing Eurocentric or gender-blind frames. In **migration**, for instance, debates continue to present women as passive beneficiaries of EU protection rather than political actors. The absence of migrant women's perspectives inside EU institutions contributes to these narrow portrayals and leaves lived realities underrepresented in policy design.

In **disability policy**, European personal assistance models transferred to Latin America show how solutions built within a narrow Brussels policy frame can overlook community-based and indigenous practices. A more diverse policymaking community could better anticipate such risks. **Climate debates** illustrate similar dynamics. Opposition to the **Nature Restoration Law** drew on masculinised framings of farming and food security. Limited representation of alternative voices in Brussels meant these narratives were not effectively countered at the EU level. In **higher education**, EU equality policies focus strongly on gender parity but rarely address how race and gender intersect. The near invisibility of racialised women in Brussels-based policymaking helps explain this blind spot.

External action and **reproductive rights** also demonstrate the consequences. EU support for **feminist activism** in Tanzania has sometimes prioritised professional NGOs over grassroots movements, while Polish activists pioneering new epistemologies of abortion have struggled to have their knowledge recognised. Both reflect a broader pattern: without racialised, migrant and grassroots voices in Brussels, policy frameworks risk overlooking vital local expertise.

These examples show that Brussels' whiteness is not just symbolic. It has substantive effects, narrowing the EU's ability to see problems fully, to design inclusive solutions, and to engage credibly with citizens and partners.

Moving Forward

Addressing the “Brussels So White” challenge requires going beyond symbolic gestures to embed diversity and epistemic inclusion into the heart of EU policymaking. This is not only a matter of justice but also of policy effectiveness: without the perspectives of racialised communities, migrants, women, people with disabilities, and Global South partners, EU policies risk reproducing narrow Eurocentric assumptions and undermining their own credibility.

First, representation must improve at all levels of EU institutions — from internships and staff recruitment to senior decision-making. A diverse Brussels bubble can bring alternative knowledges into the mainstream and avoid blind spots such as gender-only framings that ignore racialisation, or Eurocentric disability and climate models that cannot travel well beyond Europe.

Second, epistemic inclusion must be institutionalised. EU policymaking should systematically create channels for engaging with grassroots activists, migrant and racialised communities, and feminist and decolonial thinkers from both within Europe and beyond. This would allow policies on issues such as migration, higher education, reproductive rights or climate to reflect lived realities rather than detached assumptions.

Third, policy evaluation should track diversity outcomes. Just as gender mainstreaming introduced accountability mechanisms, Brussels needs clear benchmarks for measuring racial and ethnic diversity in its workforce and the inclusivity of its policymaking.

Finally, the EU must lead by example internationally. If Europe aspires to be a global leader on equality, it cannot export models that remain internally exclusive. Demonstrating progress inside Brussels — by making diversity visible in institutions, policy frames, and decision-making cultures — will strengthen the EU’s credibility abroad and build more genuine alliances in the Global South.

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