The future of gender equality in the EU

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1. Introduction

« *N'oubliez jamais qu'il suffira d'une crise politique, économique ou religieuse pour que les droits des femmes soient remis en question* »[1] Simone de Beauvoir

Gender equality is a core value of the European Union (EU), a fundamental right enshrined in the EU Treaties and a key principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). A central policy instrument in this area is the Gender Equality Strategy (GES). Formulated as a five-year plan, it frames the European Commission's work on gender equality and sets out policy objectives and key actions. The 2020-2025 GES put forward objectives that included ending gender-based violence; challenging gender stereotypes; closing gender gaps in the labour market; achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy; addressing the gender pay and pension gaps; closing the gender care gap; and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics.

This period was a mostly favourable one for social policy, including gender policy, at EU level. Numerous legislative and other measures were introduced (described in detail in Section 2), targeting many GES objectives, with the first European Commission of Ursula von der Leyen giving them a much-needed impetus. This period also coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, a painful reminder of the challenges to achieving gender equality and the fragility of the progress made to date in addressing them (e.g. Rubery and Tavora 2021). Indeed, the pandemic exposed and even widened multiple gender gaps – including in unpaid care, income, job security and social protection (EIGE 2021; Eurofound 2022a, 2022b). Moreover, it increased the incidence of domestic violence, cyber violence and harassment, as well as of violence against frontline workers in the healthcare sector, the majority of whom are women (EIGE 2021). It also reminded that female-dominated jobs, including in essential services such as care and cleaning, have worse pay and working conditions (Müller 2019; Kirov and Ramioul 2014). The pandemic therefore underscored the necessity of the new legal and policy frameworks established during this period – but also that they are far from sufficient to achieve gender equality (Arabadjieva 2022).

This policy dynamic has, however, largely stalled during the mandate of the second von der Leyen Commission since 2024. With the policy focus placed

1. 'Never forget that all it takes is a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question.' (Automatic translation from French to English.) Simone de Beauvoir in conversation with Claudine Monteil, writer, diplomat and feminist activist, in 1974.

on boosting the competitiveness of the EU's economy in an uncertain (geo) political environment, social and gender equality seems to have been overtaken by other priorities (e.g. Piasna et al. 2025). Transposition of newly adopted measures is at risk of being carried out in the shadow of the deregulatory 'Omnibus' packages.[2] Moreover, no new proposals are on the horizon. The Roadmap for Women's Rights (announced in March 2025), which provides a peek into Commission plans for the near future, does not table anything novel, especially in terms of binding or effective gender-focused measures. This is highly concerning. Europe faces multiple crises – climate, energy, cost of living and geopolitical, among others – and the challenges of the green, digital and demographic transformations, all of which are expected to have gendered effects (e.g. Akgüç and Arabadjieva 2024; Koutselini 2024; Parker et al. 2026a; Sánchez-Mira et al. 2026). The return of austerity and cuts in social spending at Member State and EU level, either to reduce national budget deficits or to divert to new priorities such as defence, will also have negative repercussions for gender equality (Rubery et al. 2024). Women in the most vulnerable situations are likely to face the harshest impacts of crises, transformations and austerity (Karamessini and Rubery 2013). At the same time, many countries in Europe and beyond have seen a backlash against gender equality policies and women's rights, including reproductive rights (Kuhar and Patternote 2017; EIGE 2022; Roggeband and Kriszán 2024; UN Women 2025a). In some cases, this has even led to a legislative or judicial rollback of established rights, such as in Poland (Datta 2021; Kubal 2023).

Empirical analysis of employment and social conditions from a gender perspective shows some superficial signs of improvement, such as a closing of the gender employment and wage gaps, and this has informed an optimistic tone in some of the Commission's reporting. However, the more detailed and thorough analysis presented in this Report makes it abundantly clear that these advances are not underpinned by sustainable dynamics and, left unabated, will not produce socially desirable outcomes nor lead to upward convergence in gender outcomes in employment across Member States. Moreover, many gender gaps persist and have not as yet shown signs of a positive reversal.

It is time for more, and not less, EU action on gender equality. This Report aims to demonstrate the nature of the progress the EU has made towards gender equality in recent years, identify areas where further improvement is required and propose the most effective strategies for achieving genuine and lasting progress. Its analysis focuses on two areas: policy and regulatory changes; and labour market trends in the key aspects of gender inequality. The objective is to provide a comprehensive knowledge base on gender-related developments by synthesising key policy changes and providing rich empirical evidence to highlight the significant risks and concerns. The

2. Since February 2025 (and at the time of writing in November 2025), the European Commission has presented six regulatory simplification proposals, also referred to as 'omnibuses', to the Council and the Parliament for adoption. For more details see: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/simplification/

Report's overview of labour market trends provides nuance to the headline indicators cited in EU policy documents, revealing what underlies some of the observed changes and enabling a better understanding of the nature of the gender gaps, and identifies more effective ways of capturing inequalities between men and women. The evidence is then used to evaluate and engage critically with future EU-level policy priorities for achieving gender equality.

The findings from both areas of analysis presented here – policy and labour market trends – underline the need for greater action in the field of gender equality, creating high expectations for the new GES which is due to be announced in March 2026 and which will cover the period up until 2030. The extent to which the Strategy proposes binding measures and additional funding will largely determine the future of gender equality policy at EU level. To inform these efforts, this Report concludes by outlining broad policy recommendations and highlighting areas of particular concern for the future of gender equality in the EU.

This assessment is comprehensive but focused on the key policy areas and labour market data which highlight general differences in the situation of men and women. It is thus limited to inequalities across the dimension of gender or sex, without looking at the intersection with other sociodemographic characteristics (apart from age, on a few occasions). Space constraints preclude a detailed intersectional analysis. It must be acknowledged, however, that women subject to various forms of discrimination tend to be even more vulnerable to many of the challenges discussed here because of their unique, compounded experiences of prejudice and disadvantage (Crenshaw 1989; EIGE 2019; Akgüç and Arabadjieva 2024; Rubery 2026). Among others, this includes women with disabilities, migrant women, women from racialised communities, working class women, younger or older women and women from certain religious communities (for recent research on the intersections of gender with other dimensions of inequality see, for example, Rubery et al. 2026). Robust gender equality policy needs to take these factors into account, too, and data on the intersection of gender with other dimensions of inequality, and the implications of this for women's job quality and labour market outcomes, are much needed.

2. Gender equality in EU policy and legislative measures up to 2025

Equality between men and women has been an objective of EU law and policy for many decades and is firmly embedded as a constitutional principle of the EU in the Treaties and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, as well as the (non-binding) EPSR (Fiig 2020; EIGE 2022). The principle of equal pay between men and women for equal work, as laid down in the Treaty of Rome 1957, can be considered the first element of EU social law. Furthermore, the EU's legal frameworks on equal pay and sex discrimination since the 1970s – now consolidated in the Gender Equality Directive 2006[3] and several other instruments – have advanced and significantly shaped domestic law and policy and played a key role in the development of EU anti-discrimination law and EU law in general. Aside from this, legislation such as the Pregnant Workers Directive,[4] Part-Time Workers Directive[5] and Fixed-Term Work Directive[6] have helped to address some of the disadvantages faced by women workers. According to Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), the Union is also obliged to promote equality between men and women in all its activities – a provision that is widely understood as a gender mainstreaming duty.

Without doubt, the body of EU law and policy on gender equality has contributed not only to improving women's access to labour market opportunities and workplace rights, but also to shifts in workplace culture within the EU (Fiig 2020). Still, it is clear from the persistence of stark inequalities between men and women across multiple dimensions in the world of work and beyond – some of which are discussed below in Section 3 – that these measures are insufficient for addressing the problems at hand. Moreover, progress on gender equality across the EU seemed to slow in the 2000s and 2010s, affected by the Eurozone crisis and the austerity measures that followed it (Karamessini and Rubery 2013). This emphasised the need to scale up policy efforts, leading to one of the most productive periods for EU

3. Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (recast).
4. Council Directive 92/85/EEC of 19 October 1992 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding.
5. Council Directive 97/81/EC of 15 December 1997 concerning the Framework Agreement on part-time work concluded by UNICE, CEEP and the ETUC.
6. Council Directive 1999/70/EC of 28 June 1999 concerning the Framework Agreement on fixed-term work concluded by ETUC, UNICE and CEEP.

gender equality law and policy, both in terms of the number of instruments and their significance (Debusscher 2023).

The period immediately preceding the 2020-2025 GES, marked by the announcement of the EPSR in 2017, as well as the five-year implementation period of the Strategy itself, was generally viewed as a long-awaited positive turn in EU social policy. This shift towards greater social equality – which has been referred to as a 'social turn' in EU law and policy (Kilpatrick 2023; Piasna and Theodoropoulou 2024) – included a reinforced commitment to gender equality objectives. It was underpinned by a favourable alignment of political forces in the European Parliament and the overall positive economic climate of the post-2008 recovery. The symbolic role of the first female President of the European Commission may have also played a part (Debusscher 2023).

Whether it offered genuinely new initiatives or simply provided a much-needed boost to those that had been stalled in the EU legislative pipeline for years, the tangible result was the adoption of a significant number of new legislative measures that went beyond a traditional anti-discrimination approach (Debusscher 2023). Section 2.1 outlines the legislative instruments and main non-legislative initiatives that directly address gender equality issues, as well as some legislative initiatives that address them indirectly; while Section 2.2 reflects on some of the challenges and limitations to the potential of these initiatives to promote gender equality at work.

2.1 Gender equality initiatives since the European Pillar of Social Rights and under the 2020-2025 Gender Equality Strategy

Several major initiatives emerged in this period that *directly* targeted the challenges related to gender equality (see Box 1, p. 10), engaging explicitly with the unequal position of men and women in the labour market, in the familial setting and in wider society.

One of the first 'children' of the EPSR was the **Work-Life Balance Directive** of 2019[7] which lays down various workplace rights for parents and carers – an area where existing Member State provisions widely diverge (Janta and Stewart 2018). More specifically, the Directive requires Member States to guarantee two weeks of paternity leave (paid at the level of sick pay); four months of parental leave for each parent (where two months must be paid 'adequately' and only two months can be transferred to the other parent); five days of carer's leave; and a right to request flexible working arrangements such as telework, flexible working hours or part-time work. These provisions take a 'gender neutral' approach, covering all parents and carers, with

7. Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU.

the intention of providing much-needed rights for women workers while encouraging greater uptake by men (Chieregato 2020; Arabadjieva 2022). While some Member States already had more generous entitlements, in others the Directive raised the level of protection. For example, a few Member States offered only one week or less of paternity leave before the Directive (Janta and Stewart 2018).

Box 1 **EU legislative measures since the EPSR and under the 2020-2025 GES that directly address gender equality**

- **2019** EU Directive on Work-Life Balance: introduces minimum standards for family leave and a right to request flexible working arrangements for parents of young children, with the stated objective of promoting the equal sharing of care responsibilities between men and women.
- **2022** Gender Balance on Boards Directive: ensures minimum representation of the under-represented gender on the boards of listed companies, to promote culture change and to encourage women's leadership and representation in companies.
- **2023** Pay Transparency Directive: sets out specific actions to ensure the implementation of the principle of equal pay, including pay transparency before and during an employment relationship, employer reporting on pay gaps and various provisions to strengthen enforcement.
- **2024** Directive on Standards for Equality Bodies: seeks to strengthen their role in countering discrimination via minimum standards for their mandate, independence, resources, tasks and powers to fight discrimination on various grounds, including gender.
- **2024** Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence: recognises the gendered nature of this violence, requiring the criminalisation across the EU of certain forms of violence, and provides enhanced protection and support for victims.

The first legislative instrument to be adopted during the 2020-2025 GES was the 2022 **Gender Balance on Corporate Boards Directive**[8] – also known as the Women on Boards Directive – which had been blocked in the pipeline for a decade before its adoption. The Directive requires Member States to ensure that listed companies[9] are subject to either of these objectives: that members of the underrepresented sex hold at least 40% of non-executive director positions; or that members of the underrepresented sex hold at least 33% of all director positions, encompassing both executive and non-executive

8. Directive (EU) 2022/2381 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 November 2022 on improving the gender balance among directors of listed companies and related measures.

9. A 'listed company' is a company whose shares can be traded on a regulated public stock exchange. For the purposes of the Directive, such a company must also have its registered office in an EU Member State; see Article 3(1).

roles. Member States also need to make sure that listed companies which do not achieve these objectives adjust the process for selecting candidates for appointment or election to director positions. The Directive contains further provisions on the process of selecting candidates and on the reporting requirements for listed companies relating to gender representation on their boards. Again, while the instrument adopts gender-neutral language ('underrepresented sex'), it is clear from its Preamble that it is intended to promote *women's* participation on boards, and 'to have a positive spill-over effect on women's employment in the companies concerned and throughout the whole economy.'[10]

The **Pay Transparency Directive** followed in 2023,[11] responding to barriers in the enforcement of the principle of equal pay between men and women (Arabadjieva 2021). It puts in place requirements aimed at ensuring transparency in pay and pay structures, including a right for job applicants to receive information on prospective pay or its range; a right for workers to request information on their individual pay level and the average pay levels of men and women in the same category of workers; an obligation on employers with more than 100 workers to report on various gender gaps in pay across the organisation, including in the same category of workers; an obligation to conduct a joint pay assessment to identify and address any gap of more than five per cent in any category of workers; and a requirement for Member States to promote the exercise of the right to collective bargaining on equal pay. It also encompasses procedural provisions relating to enforcement, including on compensation, limitation periods, burden of proof and penalties, the possibility of hypothetical comparison and the setting-up of a specific monitoring body.

This Directive aims to contribute not only to the elimination of pay discrimination but, more fundamentally, to eliminate gender bias within pay structures including the undervaluation of work performed predominantly by women. It shifts the onus of uncovering and addressing unequal pay from individual workers to employers, and it moves from reliance on individual claims towards more collective solutions, including collective bargaining (Arabadjieva 2023).

In line with the approach of improving public enforcement of EU gender equality and non-discrimination legislation in general, the EU also adopted a **Directive on Standards for Equality Bodies** in 2024,[12] which contains various provisions to improve the functioning, effectiveness and independence

10. Recital 10 of the Preamble.

11. Directive (EU) 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms.

12. Directive (EU) 2024/1500 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on standards for equality bodies in the field of equal treatment and equal opportunities between women and men in matters of employment and occupation, and amending Directives 2006/54/EC and 2010/41/EU.

of equality bodies. The Directive aims to establish minimum requirements for equality bodies across the EU to strengthen their role in combating discrimination, promoting equal treatment and ensuring accessibility for all.

The fifth piece of gender equality legislation to emerge in this period was the **Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence**, also in 2024.[13] This Directive implements the EU's commitments under the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention (2011) on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The EU is a signatory to the Convention and ratified it in 2023, although not all Member States have done so individually. The adoption of the Directive was subject to significant controversy and resulted in the omission from the text of some crucial elements, notably a provision on the criminalisation of rape (Kasım 2024; Dell'Aquila 2024). Other elements left out of the final text concerned the world of work, and the Directive now only explicitly refers to the workplace in the context of sexual harassment; groups exposed to violence in the course of their work activity (public representatives, journalists, human rights defenders); orders to prevent offenders from entering a victim's workplace; and training for those who have supervisory functions in the workplace. Notwithstanding this, the Directive is a landmark piece of legislation on the elimination of violence against women (Kasım 2025). It requires Member States to criminalise various types of violence against women relating to sexual exploitation and computer crime, including cyber harassment and cyber stalking; to protect the rights of victims of violence against women or domestic violence before, during and after criminal proceedings; to put in place measures to support victims; and to promote the prevention of and early intervention in cases of violence against women and domestic violence. For the first time, both the Pay Transparency Directive and the Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence explicitly recognise the importance of an intersectional perspective (e.g. Howard 2024; EDF 2025).

Although not part of the original 2020-2025 GES, the European Commission additionally presented the **European Care Strategy** in 2022, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, with the aim of ensuring quality, affordable and accessible care services across Member States, especially for children, older people and people with disabilities (European Commission 2022a). The Care Strategy proposes various actions be taken by Member States including: revising targets on early childhood education and care to enhance women's labour market participation ('Barcelona targets'); drawing up national action plans to make care more available, accessible and of better quality; and improving working conditions and attracting more workers (particularly men) to the sector by promoting collective bargaining, education and training, and occupational safety and health (European Commission 2022b). While commentators have pointed out that it could have been more ambitious

13. Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence.

and detailed (Karamessini 2023; Thissen and Mach 2023), it was a positive development in an area that the EU had hardly touched previously and for which there is no explicit EU competence in the Treaties.

Beyond these direct measures, several legislative initiatives from this period can be seen as *indirectly* addressing gender inequality due to many women's disadvantaged position in the labour market. While not part of gender policy per se, they primarily aim to support vulnerable and precarious groups of workers in general. This is a reminder that gender equality does not only need to be pursued through specific law and policy, precisely because the issue is so pervasive and because women tend to be overrepresented among vulnerable and marginalised groups of workers.

Adopted in the same year as the Work-Life Balance Directive, the **Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive**[14] requires employers to provide workers with information on essential aspects of their employment relationship such as place of work and pay; offer predictable work patterns where possible (or otherwise information on the guaranteed number of hours they will work); and give advance notice of being required to work. It also includes requirements relating to probationary periods, minimum levels of work predictability and a right to request a form of employment with more secure and predictable working conditions after six months. These provisions benefit women workers who tend anyway to work in more precarious arrangements and for whom unpredictable work patterns are a particular issue due to them shouldering the bulk of unpaid care responsibilities (e.g. Mihăilă 2025; UN Women 2025b).

The **Adequate Minimum Wages Directive** of 2022[15] requires Member States to promote collective bargaining coverage and collective bargaining on wage setting and, for Member States with a statutory minimum wage, to put in place a procedure for setting and updating the minimum wage level in accordance with criteria that ensure its adequacy. According to Article 5, one of the aims of these criteria should be 'reducing the gender pay gap'. The Directive has already led to increases in minimum wages and Member State action to promote collective bargaining coverage (Müller 2025). This is good news for women workers since they are more likely than men to be in receipt of a minimum wage and because wage inequalities between men and women tend to be lower where wages are set by collective agreement (e.g. Zwysen 2024a; Milner 2025). As the Preamble to the Directive points out, improving the adequacy of minimum wages 'contributes to gender equality, closing the gender pay and pension gap, as well as elevating women and their families out of poverty'.[16] Aside from this, the Directive requires that any deductions and variations in statutory minimum wage levels for specific workers comply

14. Directive (EU) 2019/1152 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union.
15. Directive (EU) 2022/2041 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on adequate minimum wages in the European Union.
16. Recital 10.

with the principles of proportionality and non-discrimination. Groups of workers typically subject to these sorts of deductions or variations include some female-dominated professions such as domestic workers.

Finally, the provisions of the **Platform Work Directive** of 2024[17] – in particular the (rebuttable) presumption that platform workers are employees rather than self-employed in cases where the platform exercises significant control or direction over aspects of work, and the protection against dismissal based solely on algorithmic decisions – could improve the situations of highly precarious women carrying out platform work. This includes work done through platforms in highly feminised sectors such as care or cleaning (e.g. Bonifacio and Pais 2025).

These are the main legal and policy instruments to emerge since 2017 that promote gender equality directly or indirectly. However, due to the gender mainstreaming duty mentioned above – and the objective of gender mainstreaming set out in the 2020-2025 GES – gender equality or the position of women is mentioned throughout other instruments as well. These include the EU Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030; the Roma strategic framework on equality, inclusion and participation; the Performance Regulation 2021 (laying down common provisions for some key EU funds);[18] the Council Recommendations on fair transition to climate neutrality[19] and on minimum income;[20] the Just Transition[21] and Social Climate Funds;[22] the revised European Works Councils Directive;[23] and even the Net-Zero Industry Act.[24] Under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) – the mechanism created to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic – Member States were required to explain how the measures proposed in their national Recovery and Resilience Plans contributed to

17. Directive (EU) 2024/2831 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2024 on improving working conditions in platform work.

18. Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy; see Article 9(2).

19. Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality 2022/C 243/04.

20. Council Recommendation of 30 January 2023 on adequate minimum income ensuring active inclusion 2023/C 41/01.

21. Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the Just Transition Fund.

22. Regulation (EU) 2023/955 establishing a Social Climate Fund and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1060.

23. Directive (EU) 2025/2450 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 November 2025 amending Directive 2009/38/EC as regards the establishment and operation of European Works Councils and the effective enforcement of transnational information and consultation rights.

24. Regulation (EU) 2024/1735 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 on establishing a framework of measures for strengthening Europe's net-zero technology manufacturing ecosystem and amending Regulation (EU) 2018/1724.

gender equality and equal opportunities.[25] Some measures to promote gender equality therefore featured in the plans of some Member States, though their scope and extent varied (Sapała 2022; Akgüç and Arabadjieva 2024). Space constraints preclude a closer examination of these instruments and their (potential) impact on gender equality.

2.2 Limitations and challenges ahead

It is too early to assess the actual impact of these recent measures not least because, for many of them, the deadline for transposition in national law has not yet passed. Nevertheless, we can say with certainty that they are important additions to the EU's existing gender equality toolbox. They build on the traditional anti-discrimination approach by recognising and seeking to address some of the deeper structural aspects of disadvantage, including through greater emphasis on public enforcement, employer responsibility and the role of collective agreements. The positive 'turn' in EU social law and policy more generally during the first von der Leyen Commission has also been beneficial for gender equality since women tend to be overrepresented among more vulnerable groups of workers.

It is important, however, not to become complacent. These initiatives address only a small part of an enormous, complex and deeply rooted social challenge. They do not, for example, directly address the factors that cause persistent gender segregation in employment, the concentration of women in low-paid, poor-quality jobs or among those experiencing the double burden of paid and unpaid work; nor do they challenge many aspects of work organisation that are still shaped by male norms, ranging from the design of protective equipment, to rigid schedules, long hours cultures with unwritten expectations of constant availability and career paths that are linear (Rubery 2026). As mentioned in the Introduction, the pandemic reminded not only of the extent of gender (and other) inequalities in our society, but also that any progress on this topic has been slow, patchy and fragile. Crises and economic shifts with negative socioeconomic effects will tend disproportionately to affect those already subject to structural disadvantages, including women. A much more comprehensive and far-reaching legal and policy framework is thus necessary to achieve profound and lasting changes that will be resilient in the face of shocks and transformations.

Furthermore, all these instruments are subject to limitations and challenges of different kinds. While space considerations prevent a discussion of all of them, it is worth highlighting some key concerns that commentators have raised. Several of these relate to gaps in scope and content. For example, as mentioned, a major gap in the Directive on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence is that it does not specifically address

25. Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Article 18(4)(o).

gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work (ETUC 2024; Kasım 2025). Many incidences of such violence occur in workplaces or indicate spillover effects in this setting – even though domestic violence occurs in the private home, it can affect a victim's access to the workplace and the ability to work. Moreover, it is the foundational role of actors who exist within the workplace (e.g. trade union and occupational safety and health representatives), as well as of the regulatory frameworks that apply there (including collective agreements, workplace regulations and information and consultation procedures), to ensure better levels of prevention, protection and support for women workers. The Directive states that the Commission will consider an additional instrument covering the world of work – but only in 2032 (Article 45). A gap in coverage has also been raised as a concern in relation to the reporting requirements of the Pay Transparency Directive; these only apply to employers with more than 100 workers while a longer transposition period and reporting cycles are established for employers with between 100 and 250 workers.

Another criticism has been that the provisions of some of these instruments afford only the bare minimum level of protection – far from attending to the actual needs of workers. The rights to paternity and parental leave under the Work-Life Balance Directive, for instance, are minimal compared to the real-life needs of parents and carers to take time off to care for children and dependants (Arabadjieva 2022). That the Directive has only very limited provisions on the level of pay for both paternity and parental leave, and no provisions on pay for carer's leave, significantly circumscribes its potential to increase uptake by men. This is because men tend to be the highest earner in the family, which means that taking leave could result in a greater reduction in household income than if women take time off (Chieregato 2020; Arabadjieva 2022). Similarly, the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive provides relatively minimal rights and does not tackle the existence of precarious forms of employment as such, nor does it guarantee that the position of workers with precarious contracts will improve (Piasna 2019).

The effective transposition and comprehensive implementation of these instruments also face challenges. The deadlines for the transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive, the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive and the Adequate Minimum Wages Directive have already passed, and in each case there were delays in some Member States that led the European Commission to send reasoned opinions to several countries (Zwysen et al. 2024). A review of the transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive just after the expiry of its transposition period reported that only one country had transposed its provisions in a, more or less, satisfactory way, with all of the others leaving important gaps in one or several areas (De la Corte-Rodríguez 2022). Another issue is that, even where a directive has been transposed, it has been done in a minimalist way in some Member States – the Adequate Minimum Wages Directive is a case in point (Müller 2025), The Pay Transparency Directive, to be transposed by 2026, has come under attack in the context of the EU's competitiveness agenda and the objective of reducing the 'administrative burden' on businesses.

While this Directive's reporting requirements did not finally make it into the Commission's 'Omnibus' package – which did include proposals to reduce reporting requirements in other recently adopted directives – this had been discussed as an option (ETUC 2025) and it cannot be excluded that this may be up for debate again in the future. It suggests that the Directive is under scrutiny by those demanding deregulation and simplification and, in any case, that transposition at national level is unlikely to be smooth.

The limited availability of financial resources to implement policy initiatives such as the European Care Strategy can also be highlighted as a major barrier to effectiveness. Despite sending a positive signal and outlining a range of important measures, the Care Strategy was not matched by additional EU funding to support Member States in its implementation or strong incentives for them to do so – elements essential to its effectiveness (Karamessini 2023; Rubery et al. 2024). The reformed fiscal rules on EU economic governance passed in 2024, which maintain the reference values of three per cent of GDP (deficit) and 60% of GDP (debt), also mean that many Member States are not able to increase national public spending to implement either the Care Strategy or other policies such as more generous pay for family leave. Indeed, many are required to reduce public spending – a move that runs counter to gender equality objectives (Rubery et al. 2024).

A final point to mention is that gender mainstreaming has often taken place on a superficial level and has not always resulted in tangible improvements (Gonzalez Gago and Castellanos Serrano 2025). The experience with the Just Transition Fund is a case in point. The Preamble to the Regulation setting up the Fund states that gender equality should be promoted and that special attention should be paid to vulnerable groups; while the Fund is subject to the Performance Regulation 2021 which stipulates that gender mainstreaming and a gender perspective should be taken into account in how all the various funds covered by it should be spent. Despite this, analysis of Member State Just Transition Plans reveals that some do not mention gender equality or vulnerable groups at all and, while the majority do mention these issues, they do not actually propose any specific steps to address them (WWF 2023; Akgüç and Arabadjieva 2024).

Reflecting on the developments discussed in Section 2.1, Debusscher (2023) wrote of the existence of a 'new season' for gender equality – indeed, at that time there was much optimism that this would be the beginning of a new era for social policy (Kilpatrick 2023), including equality policy. It was already clear, however, that this would be a long-term project. The new initiatives would have to be followed not only by significant efforts to ensure effective implementation on the ground – including the provision of adequate financial resources – but also by other initiatives that engage with the longstanding challenges as well as the newly emerging ones in an even deeper and more transformative way. In the world of work, this would mean more profound engagement with the structural barriers to the creation of gender-equal workplaces and labour markets. The next section provides a snapshot of some of these challenges.

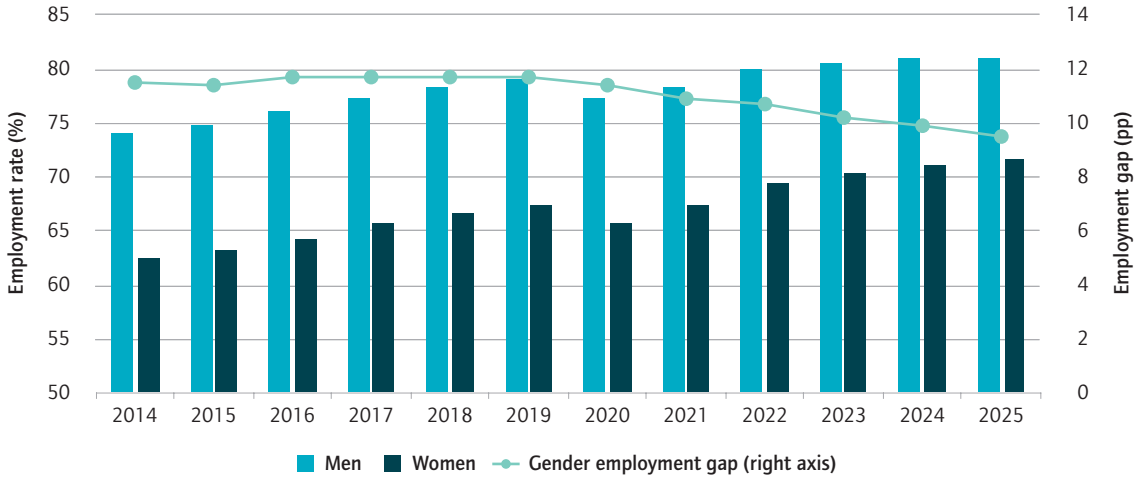
3. Gender inequality in EU labour markets: current trends

Despite some improvements, it is evident that gender inequality challenges persist across the EU. In developing its snapshot of the challenges that lay ahead, this section reviews key trends and developments in EU labour markets, covering the main areas outlined in the 2020-2025 GES. It presents the headline indicators, especially those that provide the basis for the overall assessment by the EU institutions that the current state-of-play is positive, as well as some critical insights into the drivers of these developments; and seeks to uncover the more complex and underlying dynamics. This analysis of key labour market indicators reveals that progress in closing gender gaps has been slow and uneven, while many gaps remain and new risks are emerging, notably related to the digital, green and demographic transformations. Current policy emphases are also outlined, highlighting that (in early 2026) EU institutions have demonstrated a limited level of engagement with the potential implications for gender equality of these ongoing transformations (Rubery et al. 2024). The analysis subsequently informs future policy objectives, emphasising what still needs to be addressed.

3.1 Labour market participation

Employment rates at EU level have been steadily rising for both men and women over the past decade. In 2023, for the first time, men's employment rate in the 20-64 age group across the EU as a whole surpassed 80%, while for women it exceeded 70%. Moreover, following the first signs of recovery from the pandemic dip in employment, the upward trend in employment rates from 2021 have unfolded at a faster pace for women than men. The result has been a steady narrowing of the gender employment gap (see Figure 1). After persisting at nearly 12 percentage points for several years, it fell to 9.5 by the second quarter of 2025. While this is a positive development and has informed the Commission's reporting on gender issues (e.g. European Commission 2025), it is important to understand the drivers in order to assess the sustainability of the process and its socioeconomic outcomes.

Figure 1 **Employment rates for men and women and the gender employment gap, EU27**



Note: comparison of second quarter data. Age group 20-64. The gender employment gap is calculated as the difference between men's and women's employment rate in percentage points.

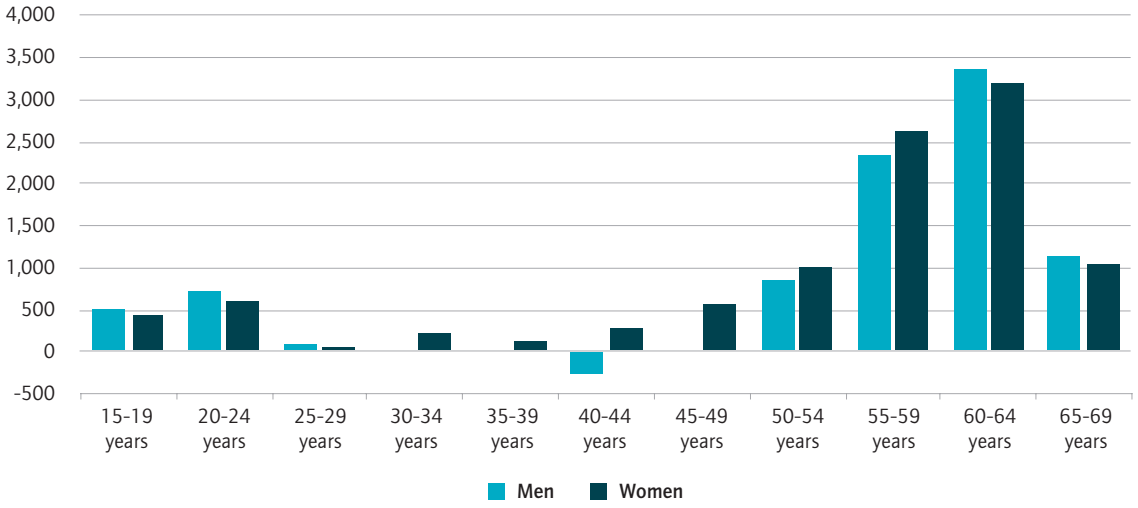
Source : EU-LFS [lfsq_ergaed] ; own calculations.

To begin with, it is important to consider which groups of workers have increased their labour market participation, thereby contributing to the positive trend in employment rates. First, it can be observed that recent employment growth in the EU has been propelled almost entirely by older workers. Figure 2 illustrates job growth (in thousands) for different age groups over the ten years to 2025 and reveals that age has been a key factor in both employment growth and the closing of gender gaps at EU level. The number of workers increased most significantly in the 60-64 age bracket (an increase of 3.4 million men and 3.2 million women). This was followed by the age brackets between 50 and 59, where growth was faster among women than men: up by 2.3 million men and 2.6 million women in the 55-59 age group; and 850,000 men and one million women aged 50-54. The oldest age group shown, 65-69, grew by 2.2 million workers, slightly more of whom were men. Importantly, Figure 2 highlights the apparent failure to increase employment among those of prime working age (25-49): in comparison to the 50-69 age group, which added 15.6 million workers over the past decade, the 25-49 age group increased by only one million.

Given the overall lower employment rate among women, especially in older age brackets, the increase in the number of employed older women represents a seismic shift. It is thus necessary to consider the wider ramifications of this change and the drivers behind the narrowing gender gap. Here, the role of an increased legal retirement age, along with the phasing out of early retirement options, cannot be underestimated (Morgavi 2024), with women compelled to stay longer in paid work to secure a decent pension (see also Figure 10 and related discussion in Section 3.3), or to bridge the gap to a rising state pension age. This raises the question of whether work environments and work organisations have the capacity to adapt to the needs of older people and

can provide them with safe and healthy working conditions. Moreover, older women's increased commitment to paid work has an impact on the provision of care for grandchildren and ageing parents (van den Bosch et al. 2023), putting them under the dual pressure of extending their (paid) working lives while continuing to provide informal, unpaid care especially where formal care is expensive or unavailable.

Figure 2 **Change in employment by age group, 2015-2025, EU27**



Note: change in number employed, shown in thousands. Comparison of second quarter data.
Source : Eurostat, EU-LFS [lfsq_egaps] ; own calculations.

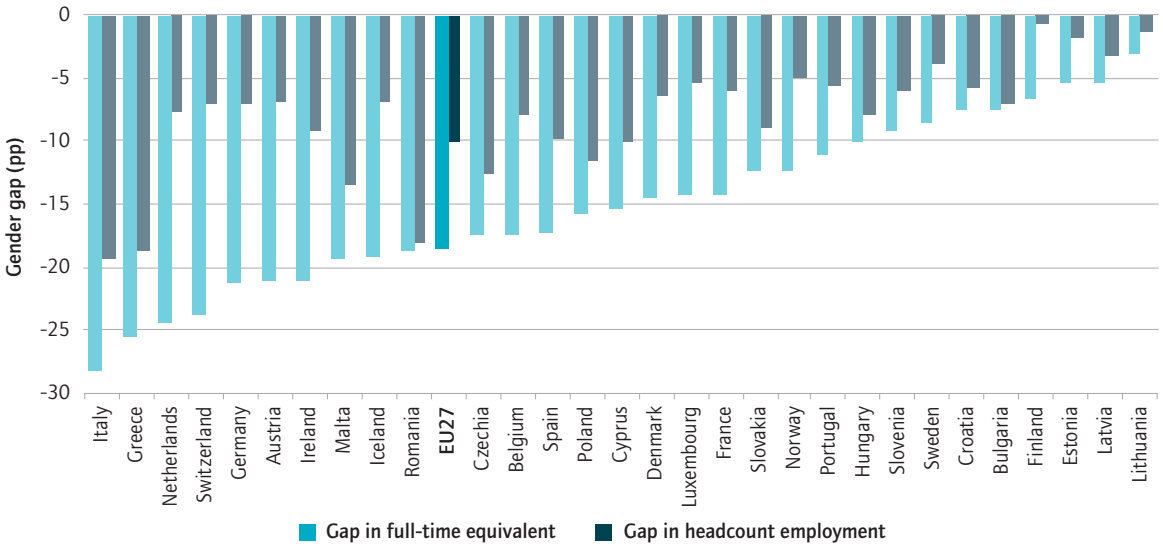
Furthermore, simply counting the number of men and women in paid employment, as illustrated by the employment rate, provides an inaccurate picture of gender inequality in labour market participation. First, women are slightly more likely to be unemployed than men, with unemployment rates of 6.2% for women in the EU in November 2025 compared to 5.8% for men.[26] Second, men and women differ profoundly in their hours worked when employed. In 2024, 28.7% of women but only 8.4% of men worked on a part-time basis in the EU27 (Akgüç et al. 2025). The overall gender employment gap thus masks a much greater disparity in the extent of labour market involvement. When expressed as full-time equivalents, which takes into account not only whether a person has a paid job but also the number of weekly working hours, the gender employment gap at EU level rose to 18.4 percentage points in 2024 (Figure 3). This is 46% higher than the conventionally measured gender employment gap (the simple difference in employment rates amounts to 10 percentage points), meaning the difference in actual labour market involvement is underestimated nearly two-fold.

26. Eurostat [une_rt_m].

Accounting for the number of weekly working hours widens gender employment gaps, particularly in countries with a high incidence of part-time work among women. For example, the Netherlands shows a relatively narrow gender gap in employment rates (below the EU average) but, because of an exceptionally high part-time rate among women, the gender gap expressed as a full-time equivalent is about three times as high (the gender gaps are 8 and 25 percentage points, respectively), placing this country in third from bottom, next to Italy and Greece. Similar shifts, with below average headcount employment gaps and above average full-time equivalent gaps, occur in Germany, Austria and Ireland. On the other hand, Romania and Bulgaria, and to a lesser extent central and eastern European countries in general, exhibit hardly any difference as men and women work similar (usually full-time) hours on average.

When it comes to gendered labour market participation, policies that focus solely on encouraging women into paid employment overlook the important aspect of the scale of this involvement, as well as the quality of the jobs held by women. There is a wealth of empirical evidence pointing to poorer job quality in part-time positions. This goes beyond lower overall monthly earnings, which severely constrain women's economic independence and empowerment. Part-time jobs also tend to have lower hourly pay and worse prospects for career advancement, as well as higher job insecurity (for a review see De Spiegelaere and Piasna 2017). Gender gaps expressed in full-time equivalent terms better capture these disparities, showing that even when women enter paid employment they do so on substantially different terms to men.

Figure 3 **Gender gap in headcount employment rate and in full-time equivalent terms, by country, 2024**



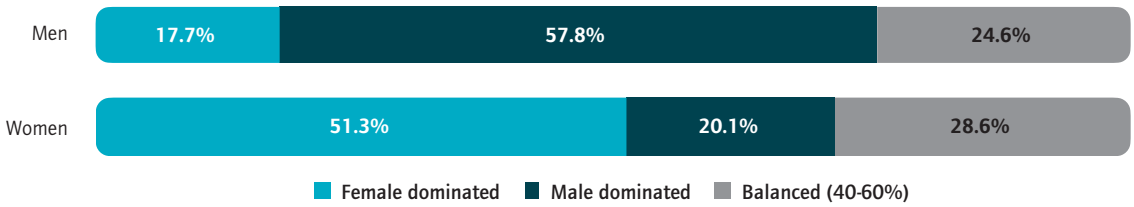
Note: the figure shows the gender gap (in percentage points) in headcount employment and in full-time equivalent terms where employment is adjusted for usual hours worked and expressed in terms of full-time jobs. Age group 20-64. Countries are ordered by the full-time equivalent gap.

Source: Eurostat, EU-LFS [lfsa_pganws; lfsa_ewhun2]; own calculations.

3.2 Gender-based segregation in employment

Workers' characteristics, such as age, are one key issue in understanding gendered employment patterns. Another is the types of jobs that they hold, with sectoral and occupational gender segregation in existing and newly created jobs playing a particularly important role. As shown in Figure 4, more than half of workers in the EU in 2025 were employed in sectors where most other workers were the same sex as themselves. This was the situation for 51% of women and 58% of men. In addition, almost one in five worked in a sector dominated by the opposite sex. Only about a quarter of EU workers were employed in gender-balanced sectors in which 40-60% of workers are of the same sex.

Figure 4 **Sectoral gender segregation: share of workers employed in female-dominated, male-dominated and gender balanced sectors, by gender, 2025, EU27**

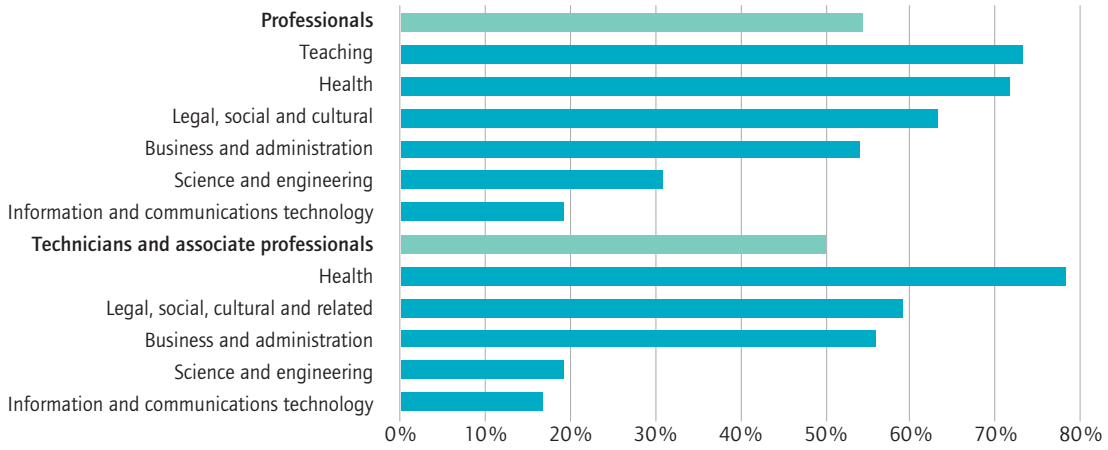


Note: the classification of sectoral gender segregation into female and male-dominated and balanced jobs is based on the share of women across 2-digit NACE. Age group 15-64. Data for the second quarter.

Source: Eurostat, EU-LFS [lfsq_egan22d]; own calculations.

The distribution of men and women follows a clear segregation by type of task. Stereotypically, female-dominated roles often involve care, clerical and service activities while male-dominated roles frequently include physical and technical work such as engineering, ICT and machinery operation. Figure 5 illustrates this divide for two high-skilled occupational groups: professionals and technicians; and associate professionals. At first glance, both groups are gender balanced, with women constituting 54% and 50% of such workers at EU level, respectively. However, closer examination reveals women's overrepresentation in professional jobs in the health and education sectors while men are overrepresented in science, engineering and ICT-related professional jobs. Thus, even within the same broad occupational category, men and women tend to perform different tasks, with the gender division largely reflecting traditional gender roles in which 'women's work' is much more likely to involve elements of care.

Figure 5 **Share of women in professional occupations, 2024, EU27**



Note: detailed occupations based on 2-digit ISCO. Age group 15-64. Annual data.

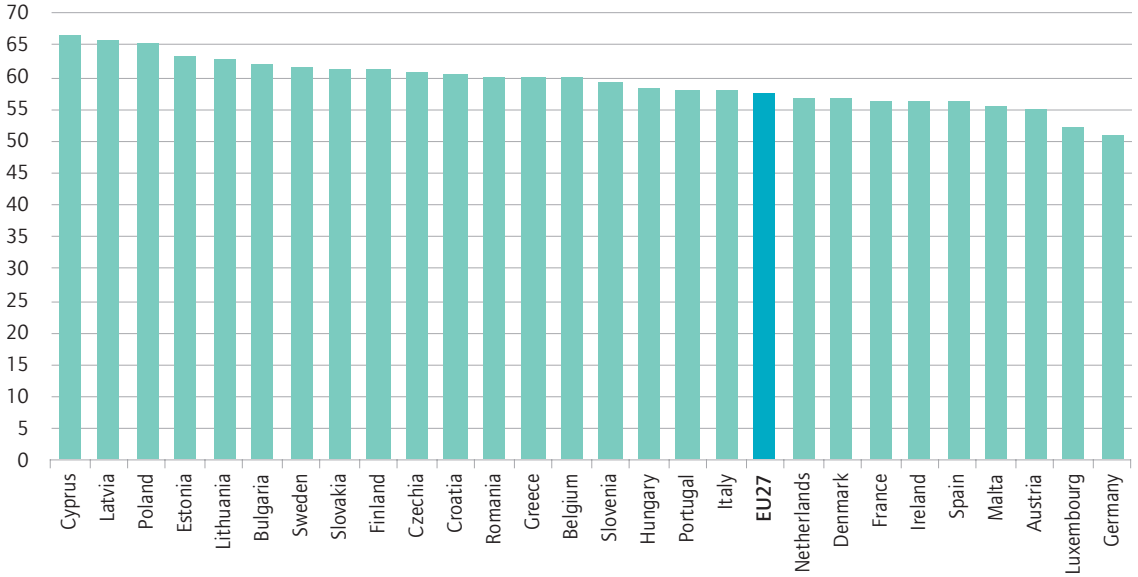
Source: Eurostat, EU-LFS [lfsa_egai2d]; own elaboration.

Notably, this occupational gender segregation has not been remedied by the digital transition; indeed, the reproduction of these same inequalities has been observed in digitally mediated work such as that offered in the platform economy. While platform work is similarly common among men and women, the division of the types of tasks follows a similar pattern to the traditional economy and reinforces traditional gender roles, with women overrepresented in care and housework (Piasna et al. 2022; Rodríguez-Modroño et al. 2024). Dynamic growth in care and domestic digital labour platforms, both heavily female-dominated, poses particular risks in terms of the casualisation and precarisation of working women through reduced labour rights and a lack of benefits such as paid maternity leave (Pulignano et al. 2023; Strüver 2024). Algorithmic management, which has been spreading to traditional workplaces across the EU, has thus far also failed to overcome persistent gender bias in the data used to train and implement decisions (Milanez et al. 2025).

The policy focus in response to occupational gender segmentation often centres on education and skills, emphasising women's underrepresentation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) educational fields as a key reason for their highly gender unequal employment profiles. However, this rationale cannot be sustained when the educational choices of men and women are compared. As shown in Figure 6, women actually outnumber men among ICT graduates in each and every EU Member State. In 11 countries, more than six of every 10 students who graduate in the ICT field are women, with particularly high prevalence in Cyprus, Latvia and Poland. Reasons for occupational gender segmentation cannot thus be attributed only to different gender-specific educational choices being made early in life. Instead, the gender gap appears to emerge later in the career path, highlighting the importance of employers' recruitment and promotion

strategies, job quality and work culture, as well as the discrimination women face in their career trajectories (Piasna and Plagnol 2018).

Figure 6 **Women among graduates in the ICT field (%), 2022, EU27 and Member States**

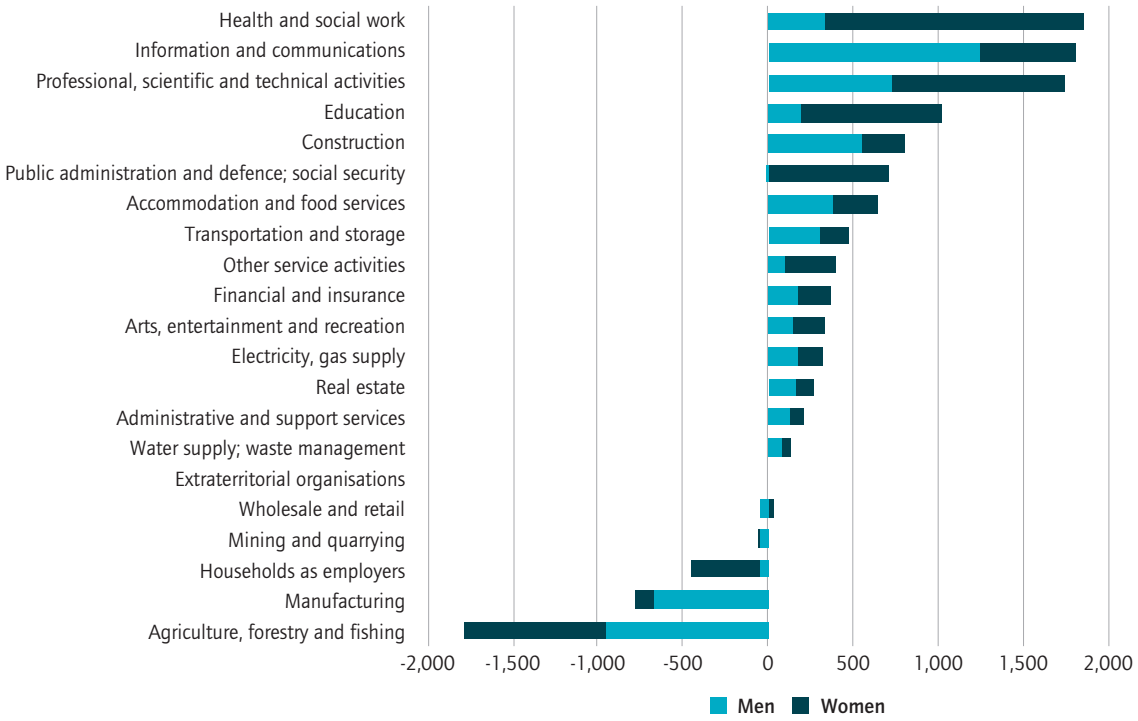


Source: Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal.

Recent employment growth patterns have further reinforced this gender segregation. Figure 7 illustrates this for the period from just before the pandemic to the second quarter of 2025, revealing long-term structural changes in employment that extend beyond the pandemic's initial impact. In the EU27, female employment grew mostly in health, education and public administration, while new jobs being predominantly taken up by men were in ICT and construction. The closure of gender employment gaps, discussed in Section 3.1, may appear to be a progressive and desirable development but, in reality, it has reproduced stereotypical sorting into men's and women's jobs.

As well as the obvious gender differences in working and employment conditions that this implies, it also places men and women in segments of the labour market that are subject to very different policy and spending priorities. Competitiveness principles, together with the high priority being placed on the green and digital transitions, tend to create mainly male-dominated jobs. By contrast, budgetary pressures and spending cuts, especially in the public sector, are more directly and immediately felt by women (Rubery 2015a; Perugini et al. 2019).

Figure 7 **Sectoral employment growth by gender, 2019-2025, EU27**

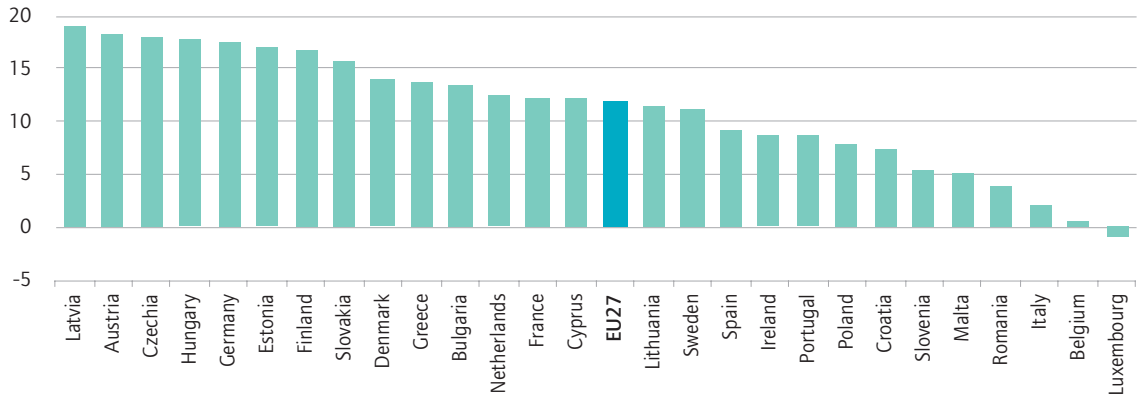


Note: change in number employed, shown in thousands. Comparison of second quarter data. Age group 15-64.
Source: Eurostat, EU-LFS [lfsq_egan2]; own calculations.

3.3 Economic inequality: gender pay and pension gaps

The gender gaps in employment, some of which have been highlighted above, translate into gender gaps in economic terms. On average, women continue to earn less than men. This is not only due to shorter working hours and the high prevalence of part-time jobs among women: a comparison of hourly earnings (see Figure 8) shows that women in the EU27 earn on average 12% less per hour spent in paid work than men. This gap varies considerably by Member State, from 0.7% in Belgium to 19% in Latvia, and is reversed only in Luxembourg.

Figure 8 **The unadjusted gender pay gap, 2023, EU 27 and Member States**



Note: the unadjusted gender pay gap measures the difference between the average gross hourly earnings of male and female employees in paid employment expressed as a percentage of the male figure. For all countries except Czechia, data are for all employees working in firms with 10 or more employees, without restrictions for age and hours worked, from NACE Rev. 2 B to S (-O).

Source: Eurostat [sdg_05_20].

Gender pay gaps reflect two additional layers of inequality. The first of these is labour market segregation. As described in Section 3.2, women tend to be concentrated in lower-paying sectors and occupations. The dynamics behind this are complex and include trade-offs between pay and other job features that are valued by women, particularly those that enable them to reconcile paid work with care responsibilities. Female work is also structurally undervalued: the feminisation of a given occupation or sector is associated with a lowering of the average pay level, thus illustrating enduring gender stereotypes that place economic value on the acquired skills found in male-dominated jobs whereas female-dominated roles are linked to innate skills and dispositions and therefore not linked to a high economic premium (e.g. Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). In addition, women are segregated into lower-paying firms within a specific sector, for reasons that include persistent typecasting (Busch 2018) and the gender-based constraints involved in commuting or moving (Avram 2025; Card et al. 2016). Another factor driving gender pay inequality is the simple difference in pay between men and women performing similar jobs in the same workplace – a manifestation of direct pay discrimination (Penner et al. 2023; Zwysen 2024b).

EU policies are primarily focused on within-firm and within-job pay gaps; thus the second layer of inequality relates to the various pay transparency policies that are aimed at limiting the pay gaps that arise from information asymmetries and associated discrimination already in place in several EU Member States prior to the Pay Transparency Directive. The impact of pay transparency laws hinges on their effective implementation, requiring active disclosure and public dissemination such as via pay audits (Eurofound 2025b). There is thus scope for pay transparency to have a positive impact on wage gaps at very low cost in terms of the administrative burden, but this must be implemented in a way that is easily accessible, public and visible. The

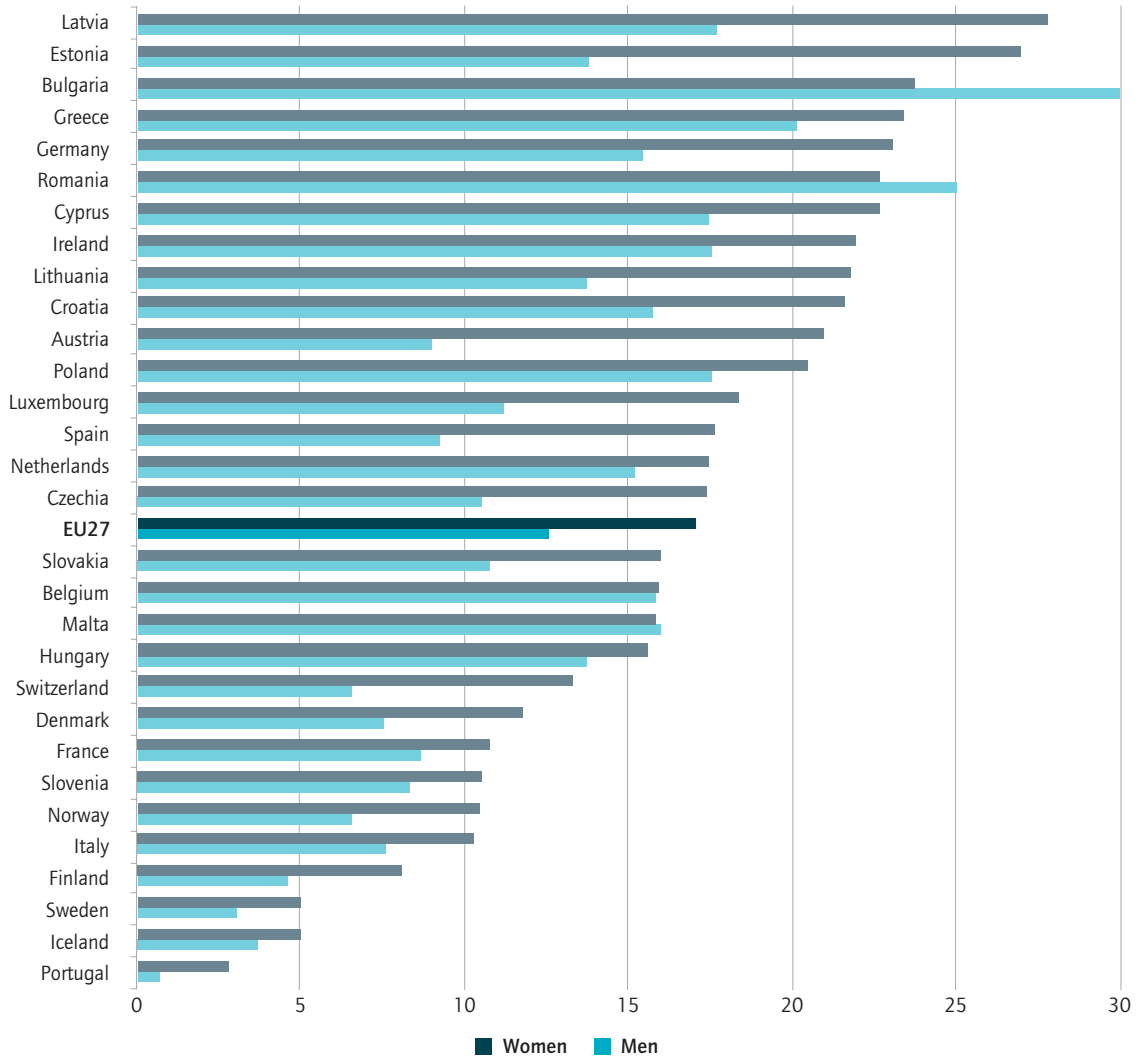
contribution of constrained opportunities for women and the lower pay in female-dominated sectors, which leads to women being overrepresented in lower-paying jobs, is not directly addressed in EU policies. However, policies and institutions that reduce inequalities between firms and sectors, such as cross-sectoral collective bargaining, can contribute to reducing these gaps (Zwysen 2024a). Further, reducing constraints on women's mobility, for instance by providing better or more affordable childcare, can also contribute.

The difference between men's and women's average earnings highlights systemic issues such as occupational and vertical segregation, and gender discrimination. To capture better the vulnerability of women's economic position, and reflect the first of these two factors in the gender pay gap, it is useful to analyse the concentration of women in low-paying jobs (i.e. where hourly earnings are below two-thirds of the median wage). As shown in Figure 9, 17.1% of women and 12.6% of men were low-paid workers in 2022. In only three countries were women not overrepresented at the lower end of the wage distribution: Malta (15.8% versus 16% for men); Romania (23% versus 25% for men); and Bulgaria (23.7% compared to 30% for men). The overrepresentation of women in low-paid jobs can highlight specific aspects of gender inequality particularly in countries where the gender pay gap has closed, as in Luxembourg where women are nonetheless seven percentage points more likely to work in the lowest-paid jobs despite the absence of an average gender pay gap. On the other hand, in Belgium, which also has a very low gender pay gap, men and women are equally as likely to work in low-paid jobs.

The overrepresentation of women in low-paying jobs also means that improving the conditions of the lowest-paid workers tends to have a disproportionate effect on women's labour market outcomes. This is the case, for instance, with minimum wages which improve women's economic situation more on average; or collective bargaining coverage which generally also increases the lowest wages and thereby reduces gender pay gaps (Zwysen 2024a; Parker et al. 2026b).

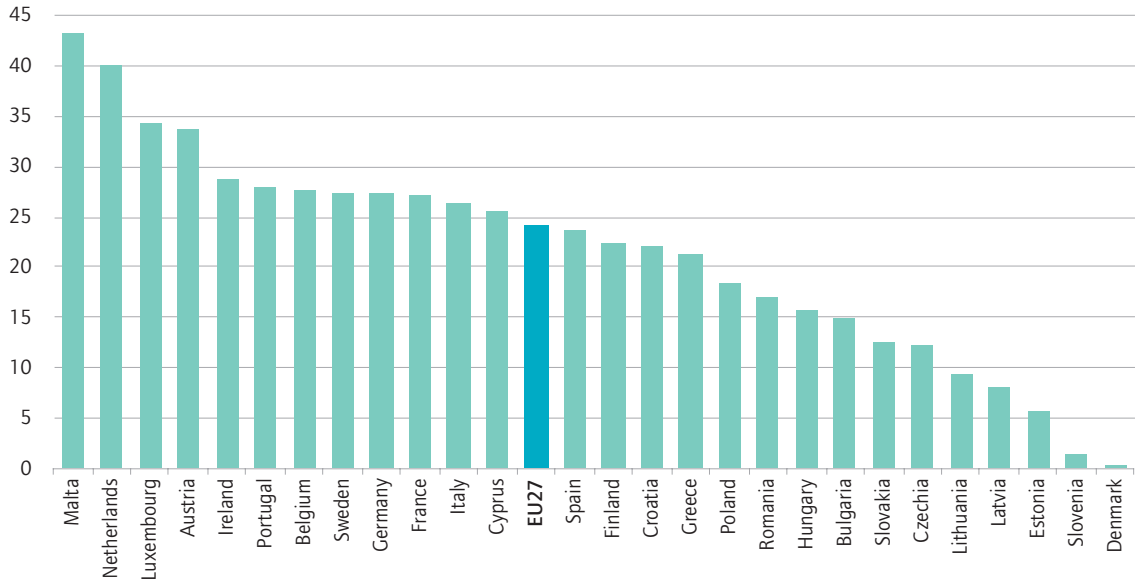
Moreover, gender inequality in economic terms accumulates across the life course, as evidenced by gender pension gaps which far surpass those for earnings. As illustrated in Figure 10, the average pension gap at EU level amounted to 24.1% in 2023 – almost twice as high as the gap in pay. Indeed, the pension gap exceeds 40% in Malta and the Netherlands, is above 30% in Luxembourg and Austria, and above 25% in Ireland, Portugal, Belgium, Sweden, Germany, France, Italy and Cyprus. Notably, pension gaps are very high in countries that demonstrate an otherwise positive performance in terms of gender equality in various other labour market indicators (e.g. employment rate or even pay). They thus provide an important complement to the delineation of the discrepancies between men's and women's labour market positions as they indicate persistent inequalities in employment over the career path, including the unequal uptake of part-time work or career gaps due to maternity and parental leave, with harmful long-term consequences for women's economic situation (Shevchenko et al. 2025).

Figure 9 **Gender differences in the incidence of low-paid work, 2022, EU27 and Member States**



Note: estimated share of low-paid workers in establishments with at least 10 employees.
Source: Eurostat [earn_ses_pub1s].

Figure 10 **Gender pension gap (%), 2023, EU27 and Member States**



Source: Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal.

3.4 Job quality

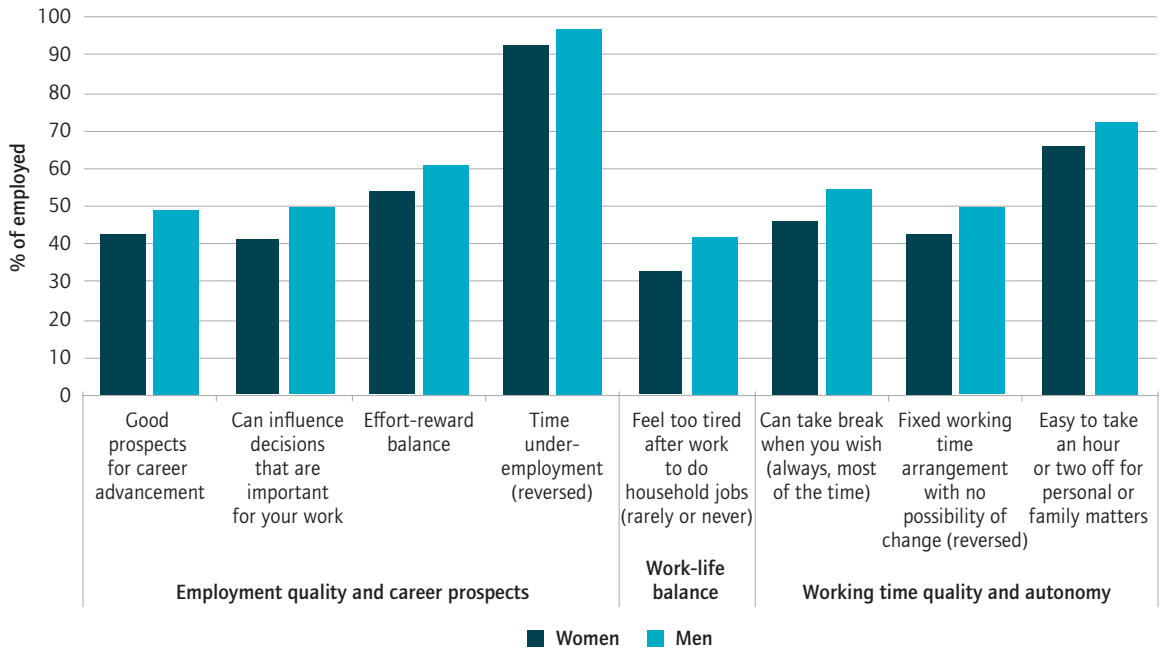
Women's integration in paid employment often comes at the cost of various trade-offs in job quality (Piasna and Plagnol 2018). One illustration of such a trade-off is the higher prevalence of part-time work. As discussed in Section 3.1, the integration in the labour market of women workers is incomplete from the perspective of the dominant full-time worker norm, as evidenced by the fewer hours worked by women. This translates not only into lower monthly earnings, but part-time jobs tend also to have lower hourly pay and are associated with various other penalties and disadvantages. For example, among part-time workers, women are more likely to report difficulties in making ends meet (58% compared to 46% of men) and they are more often underemployed, meaning that they would like to work more hours than they currently do (27% compared to 15% of men) (Eurofound 2024).

Women experience lower job quality in a number of other domains (see Figure 11). In general, women have poorer quality terms and conditions of employment. This includes having lesser prospects for career advancement (43% of women and 49% of men report having good career prospects) and are more often found in non-standard employment, especially on an involuntary basis resulting from the inaccessibility of standard forms of work (see also Piasna 2023). This shows in higher rates of time underemployment among women. These discrepancies are even more pronounced in male-dominated occupations in which women experience the lowest career prospects and the highest job insecurity (Eurofound 2020). What adds to this is a worse balance between the efforts put into their job and the received rewards: almost one-

third of women (32% compared to 24% of men) perceive that their pay does not reflect their efforts.

Moreover, women report less control and worker-oriented flexibility in their working time arrangements. Women are less often able to take time off during working hours to attend personal or family matters (66% of women compared to 72% of men), or take a break when they wish (46% of women compared to 55% men can always, or most of the time, take a break at their own discretion). Women are also more often employed in jobs in which the working time arrangements are fixed by the employer without the possibility of change. This lack of flexibility, compounded by the demands of unpaid domestic work and childcare (see Section 3.6), can further discourage women from pursuing their careers if their working arrangements conflict with their family obligations.

Figure 11 **Gender differences in selected dimensions of job quality (%), 2024, EU27**

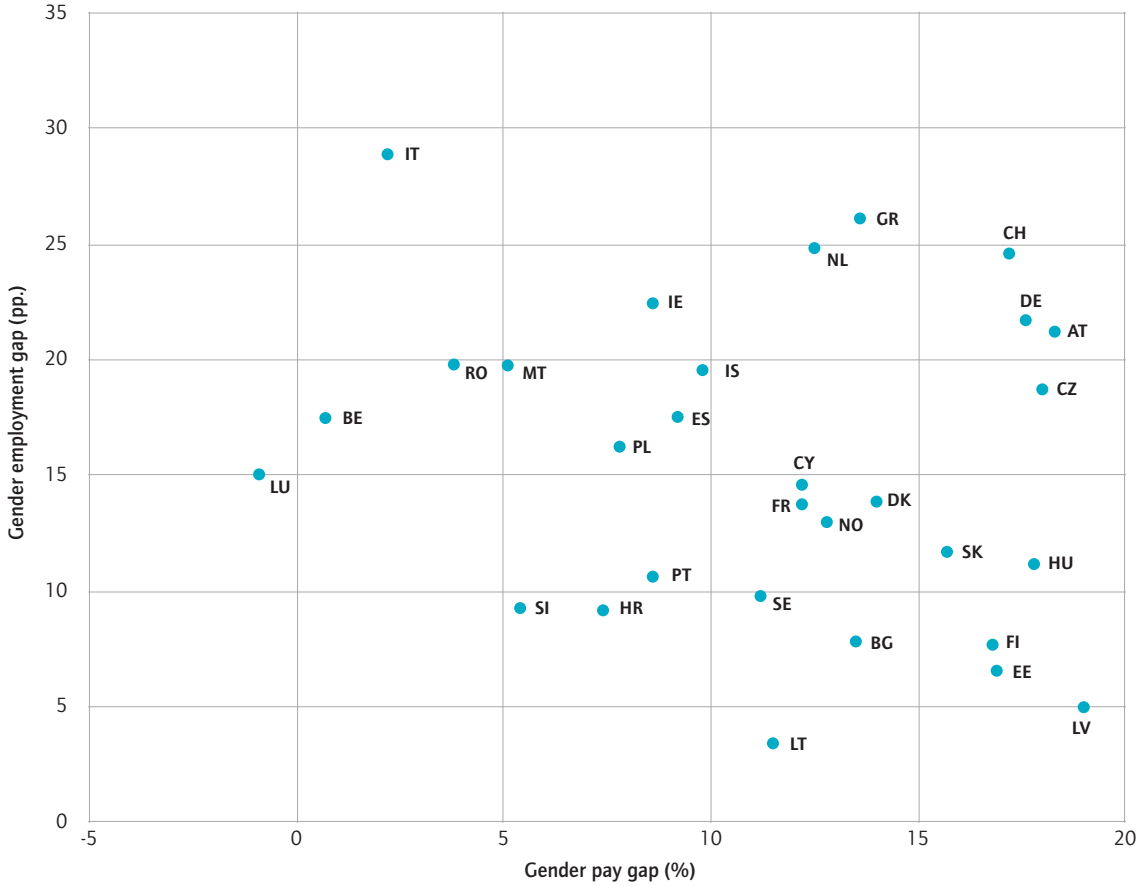


Note: higher values indicate better job quality.
Source: Eurofound 2024; own elaboration..

Another illustration of job quality trade-offs in female employment concerns the negative correlation between gender gaps in employment rates and in hourly earnings. Figure 12 shows that, in most countries, there is either a combination of a relatively low employment gap and a relatively high pay gap (e.g. as in Estonia, Latvia, Hungary and Finland) or a combination of a relatively high employment gap and a relatively low pay gap (e.g. as in Ireland, Italy, Malta and Romania). This means that, more often than not,

closing gender gaps in employment, a major objective of the Gender Equality Strategy, is achieved through employing them in low-paying, poor quality jobs. When evaluating progress in this area, it is thus important to consider the relationship between inclusion and pay levels as this provides a necessary nuance with which to determine whether closing the gender gap is sustainable or rather that it is creating new areas of risk and vulnerability for women.

Figure 12 **Relationship between employment gap in full-time equivalent terms and hourly gender pay gap across EU countries, 2023**



Note: the x axis shows the gender pay gap (%) measured as the difference between the average gross hourly earnings of male and female employees in paid employment as a percentage of the male figure, in firms with ten or more employees. The y axis shows the gender employment gap (pp) as the difference in full-time equivalent employment for men compared to women.

Source: Eurostat [lfsi-emp_a, lfsa_eppga, lfsa_eppgai, sdg_05_20]; own calculations.

3.5 Occupational safety and health

Gender is a sociocultural concept that encompasses behaviours, attitudes, roles and identities which are influenced in part by biological sex which concerns physical, physiological and psychosocial characteristics. In this sense, women are not simply 'smaller men'. Biological differences, including hormonal

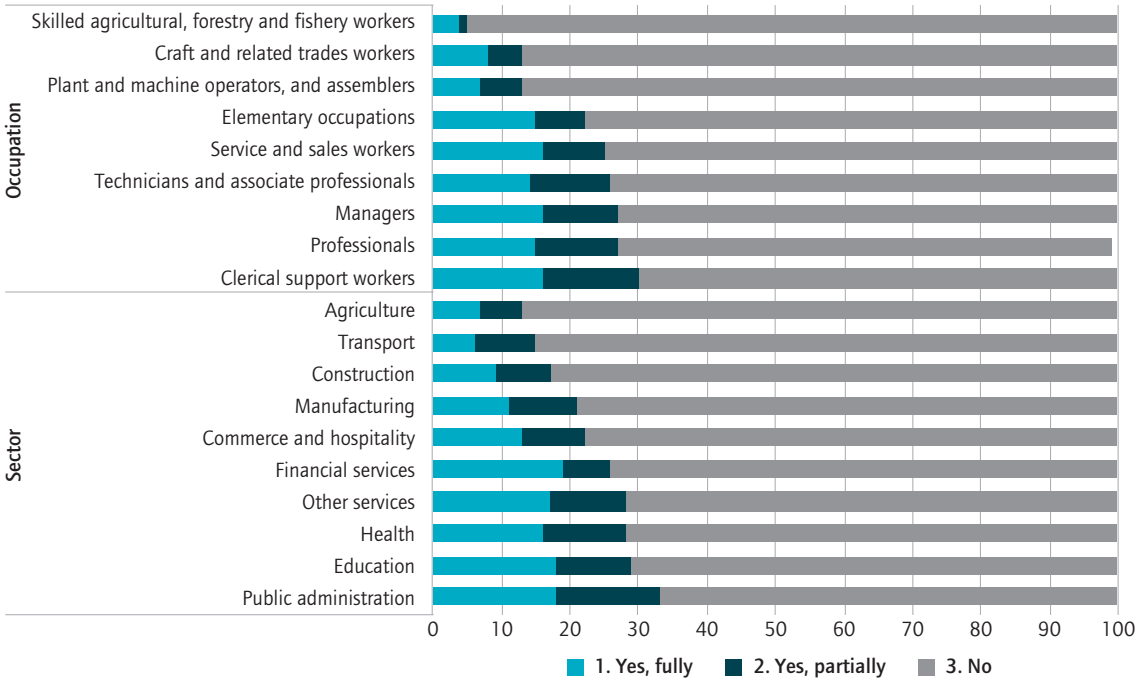
fluctuations throughout a woman's lifetime (e.g. during menstruation, pregnancy and menopause), can influence how women experience and respond to workplace conditions. Moreover, the female body differs to that of the male in its proportions, strength distribution and metabolism. Workers' sex thus affects ergonomics and the suitability of tools, personal protective equipment (PPE) and work environments. Despite this, most occupational safety and health (OSH) standards, equipment and risk assessments are designed based on male anthropometry and physiology (e.g. Messing and Mager Stellman 2006; ILO 2013; Roberts et al. 2016; Ponce Del Castillo 2016). In addition, occupational and sectoral gender segregation has a major impact on differences between genders in exposure to occupational hazards and work-related health outcomes (EU-OSHA 2013).

Poor-fitting workplace tools and PPE manufactured to fit a standard male body, and insufficient recognition of gender-specific health outcomes, contribute to increased exposure and injury risk for women. For example, women are less likely to have access to PPE that is specially designed for female workers. As a consequence, they are forced to use equipment designed for men, risking their health and safety, or potentially give up working altogether (EU-OSHA 2013; SLIC 2018; Ward et al. 2024).

Despite having an impact on half the workforce, menstruation and menopause are often perceived as taboo personal issues, with less than one-third of workplaces in the EU accommodating women workers' painful menstrual periods and disruptive menopausal symptoms, with significant sectoral and occupational differences. As depicted in Figure 13 and Figure 14, this accommodation is particularly limited in male-dominated sectors and occupations. In the longer term, again, these structural shortcomings reinforce occupational and sectoral gender segregation as women may be discouraged from pursuing or otherwise be systematically excluded from certain jobs or sectors that do not accommodate or anticipate their biological needs.

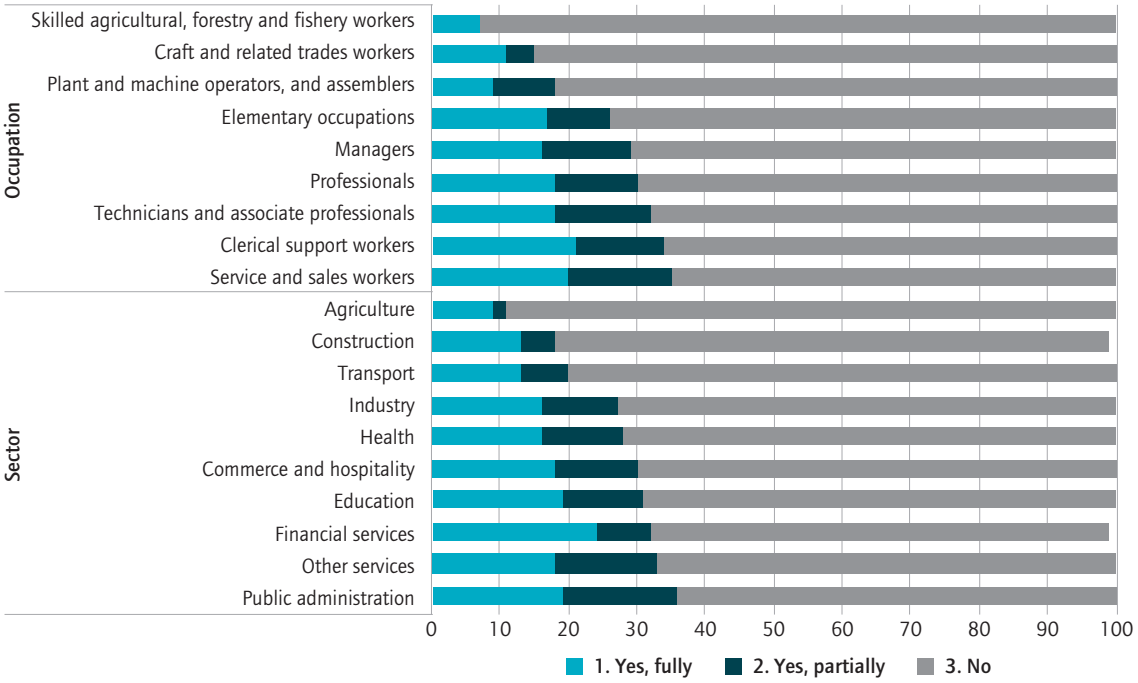
Beyond the biological differences, related gendered social norms shape occupational and sectoral labour market segmentation, as discussed in Section 3.2. Such differences can affect the risks that women and men face at work and the measures needed to ensure effective prevention (see Box 2, p. 34, for a case analysis of women in the male-dominated transport sector). For instance, stereotypes of women as more suited to roles that involve emotional labour and caregiving persist, helping to steer women into 'people-focused' sectors such as healthcare, education and domestic services (e.g. Kesler 2018).

Figure 13 **Employer accommodation of disruptive menopausal symptoms by occupation and sector (%), 2024, EU27**



Source: Eurofound 2024.

Figure 14 **Employer accommodation of disruptive menstrual symptoms by occupation and sector (%), 2024, EU27**



Source: Eurofound 2024.

Box 2 **Uncovering the barriers to women's employment in the transport sector – the role of job quality and OSH**

Acknowledging the problem of gender inequality in the transport sector, the European Transport Federation conducted a study in 2019 to uncover the reasons for the low share of women workers in transport and to find out what was needed to make the transport sector fair and fit for women to work in.

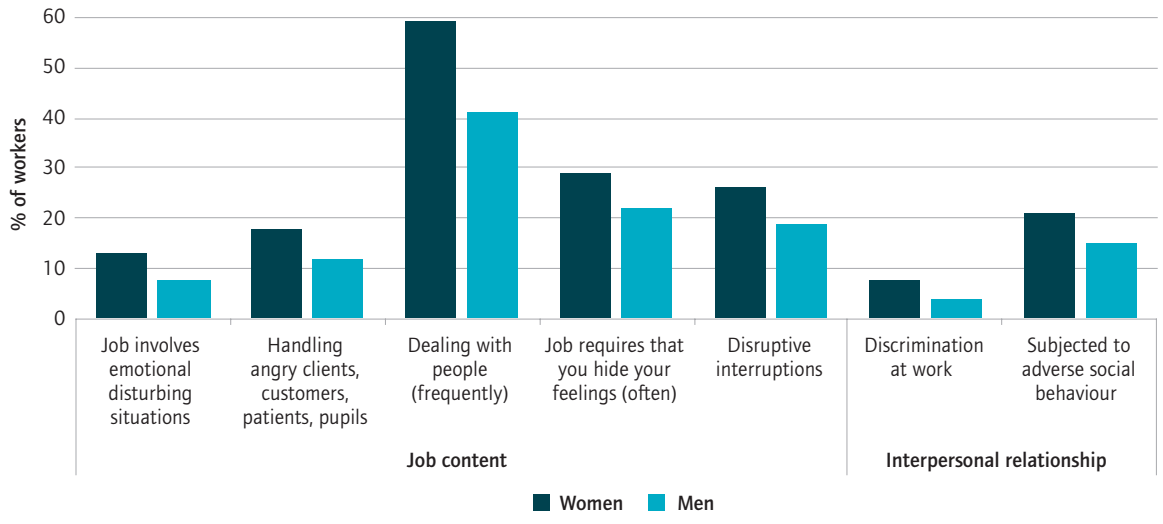
The analysis found that, despite offering interesting long-term employment, working conditions failed to meet the specific needs of women transport workers, while it also uncovered the many prevailing barriers that women encounter (ETF 2020). This not only created a working environment that failed to attract women to pursue their careers in transport, but also failed to support and retain those already working in the sector. The main issues uncovered by the study were: a dominant culture of masculinity and gender stereotypes; discrimination and unequal treatment at work; lack of work-life balance and a 'care trap'; deficiencies in provision for women's health and safety at work; and high levels of violence and harassment against women at the workplace. The 'care trap' means that, because women bear the majority of childcaring responsibilities, they can only commit to part-time work which significantly affects their pay, career opportunities and future pension. In addition, respondents reported that maternity leave or caring responsibilities incur penalties at work such as frozen or reduced salaries or even unpaid leave. Overall, these resulted in over 35% of women in the transport sector being unhappy with their work-life balance. In addition, women in the transport sector still faced workplaces which were poorly adapted to their basic needs in terms of access to tools, equipment and PPE suitable for women, a lack of safe and adequate washing and sanitation facilities at work and ample breaks, particularly when considering women's specific needs when it comes to menstruation, pregnancy or menopause.

Women's experiences of poor working conditions and gender inequality are not confined to the transport sector; they are consistently documented across EU surveys, Member States and forms of employment. The added value of this study, however, lies in its ability to move beyond the descriptive evidence by identifying the hard-edged, sector-specific drivers of gender segregation and by translating these findings into actionable policy and industrial relations measures.

Its conclusions point to an urgent need for policymakers and the social partners systematically to integrate a gender-responsive approach in EU labour and OSH frameworks, including through the application of a gender lens when assessing the adequacy of existing legislation and when developing new policies, such as those addressing psychosocial risks at work or the introduction of new technologies. At the same time, the study underscores the responsibility of the social partners – particularly trade unions – to strengthen women's representation in tripartite and bipartite bodies, as well as in workplace-level structures such as works councils and health and safety committees. Ensuring women's meaningful involvement in the design and implementation of OSH policies is essential for setting priorities through social dialogue and for effectively tackling the gender-discriminatory practices that continue to undermine equality and health and safety at work.

Thus, women are predominantly concentrated in services that are critical to the social infrastructure, yet characterised by low pay, precarious employment and being under threat of budgetary cuts. Due to the nature of the jobs in these female-dominated sectors, alongside lower pay and worse career prospects, women are also more exposed to a harmful combination of psychosocial risks including emotional strain, violence and harassment. Extensive emotional demands include handling angry clients, customers, patients or students, hiding one's feelings and experiencing emotionally disturbing situations. Importantly, these types of risks are less often recognised, and thus regulated, than those that prevail in male-dominated sectors. In 2024, 59% of women reported frequently dealing with people at work, compared to 41% of men (see Figure 15). In addition, 18% reported exposure to angry clients, patients or customers, and almost one-third indicated that their job requires them to hide their emotions. Women are also more likely to be exposed to adverse social behaviours at work, defined as verbal abuse, unwanted sexual attention, threats and humiliating behaviours and also bullying/harassment and physical violence, than men. Healthcare workers (the vast majority of whom are women) report up to three times higher levels of unwanted sexual attention than the EU average (5.7% compared with 1.7%) (Eurofound 2023). Furthermore, women's exposure to various psychosocial risks has been increasing. In 2024, 21% of women and 15% of men reported being exposed to adverse social behaviour at work, a 4 point increase for women and about a one point decrease for men, respectively, compared to 2015 (Eurofound 2023; Eurofound 2024).

Figure 15 **Gender differences in selected aspects of the psychosocial work environment (%), 2024, EU27**



Source: Eurofound 2024; own elaboration.

High emotional demands and adverse social behaviour are strongly and directly associated with various health problems reported by employees including chronic stress, sleep problems, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs),

anxiety, depression and burnout (Leka and Jain 2024). Workers who experience adverse social behaviour in the workplace are around three times more likely to experience physical and emotional burnout (32% compared to 10%) and emotional exhaustion (40% compared to 14%), and are almost twice as likely to suffer from anxiety (53% compared to 27%) or be at risk of depression (38% compared to 20%) (Eurofound 2023).

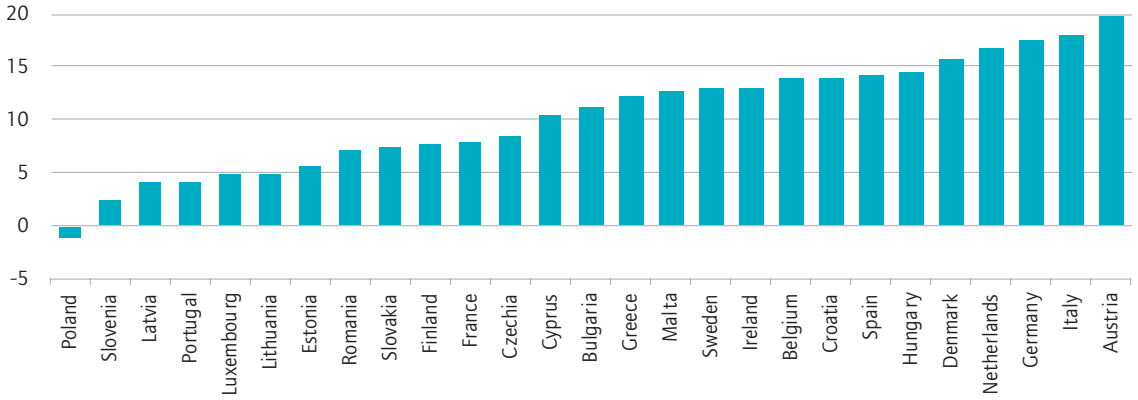
The EU's gender-neutral approach to occupational safety and health in policy and legislation, which has sought to be neither advantageous nor disadvantageous to either sex, has contributed to less attention and resources being directed towards research on occupational hazards in female-dominated sectors and occupations. Exposure to dangerous substances (e.g. chemical substances and infectious materials, bodily fluids, laboratory materials in healthcare, carcinogens in hairdressing and cosmetology, and chemical and biological agents in food manufacturing and textiles) in female-dominated sectors is often overlooked (EU-OSHA 2013). In addition, current legislation is based on the assumption that it will equally apply to all workers. However, by not explicitly recognising gender difference, it cannot thus ensure parity in the protection of men and women at work (EU-OSHA 2013; ILO 2013). Furthermore, the EU OSH Framework Directive excludes the predominantly female-dominated sector of domestic work, one of the fastest growing sectors in the EU.

3.6 Gender gaps in unpaid care and domestic work

Finally, an important contributor to the ongoing gender gaps in employment and, through limiting career progression, in pay is the continuing imbalance in the sharing of unpaid work (such as care and domestic work) within the family. Women on average continue to undertake substantially more unpaid work than men, limiting their opportunities in the paid labour market (Pavlou 2020; ILO 2024). This is driven by gender norms and stereotypes and aggravated by gender-blind policies and institutions including the set-up of leave systems and access to childcare, out-of-school care and care for the elderly (OECD 2025).

Recent data show that women spend an extra 13 hours on unpaid care per week compared to men (Eurofound 2022b). Figure 16 illustrates the magnitude of this gender gap by expressing it in terms of the additional full-time weeks of unpaid work that women perform on a yearly basis compared to men. In some countries, this difference is striking. In Austria, for instance, women report spending an additional 20 full-time weeks annually on unpaid work compared to men. This is in line with the higher gender gap in full-time equivalent employment in that country. On the other hand, relatively lower gaps are reported in Poland, Slovenia and Latvia. An important caveat here is that the reporting of unpaid work in surveys may be subject to various biases (such as men overreporting their involvement, which results in an underestimation of the gender gap), while the type and number of tasks performed in each hour of unpaid work may substantially differ between men and women.

Figure 16 **Gender gap in unpaid work expressed as the number of full-time working weeks on an annual basis, by country, 2021**



Note: the figure shows how much more time women spend on unpaid work (housework, care for children or grandchildren, care for other relatives) compared to men among the employed in 2021. It is expressed in terms of hours per day and is aggregated to the hours difference per year which is then divided by the average hours worked for a full-time job per week in each country.

Source: EWCTS 2021 for unpaid hours, weighted, and EU-LFS [lfsa_ewhan2] for average hours worked in a full-time week per country; own calculations.

Besides the higher load of unpaid work, there is also a high number of women who do not currently work because they provide care. In the EU as a whole, this was the case for 1.1 million women in 2024.[27] In Germany, 338,000 women do not work because of care obligations, followed by 186,000 in Italy, 161,000 in Spain, 125,000 in France and 115,000 in Poland.

Furthermore, women are far more likely than men to head a single household with children. In the EU, 86% of single households are headed by a woman (own analysis of 2023 EU-LFS microdata), with women aged 25-54 being five times more likely than men to be a single parent (Eurostat 2025). This average number hides substantial variation across countries: in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia 13-14% of women are single mothers while the figure in Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Bulgaria and Slovakia is under 3%.

These findings indicate that the unequal division of childcare remains an important limitation on women's inclusion in paid employment. Indeed, gender employment gaps and the prevalence of part-time work among women are particularly high among parents of young children (OECD 2025). Furthermore, gender wage gaps are, to an important extent, motherhood penalties, widening after the birth of a first child and never recovering (see Grimshaw and Rubery 2015). Across Member States, limited or non-compulsory paternity leave policies, combined with shorter or interrupted employment due to maternity and parental leave, hinder women's career continuity and advancement. Consequently, women are more likely than

27. Eurostat [lfsa_igar].

men to work part-time and to work under temporary contracts, while they also have shorter job tenure, with significant implications for the quality of their working lives.

4. Priorities for future EU policy for improving gender equality in work

This Report has provided an overview of the key existing EU-level policy and legislative measures that address gender equality, together with an overview of several key areas in which the situations of women and men in the labour market differ. Against this background, the discussion turns next to evaluating and critically engaging with the direction in which EU policy appears to be heading, outlining potential avenues for action to help with some necessary course corrections. This serves to prepare the ground for a formulation of general recommendations in the concluding section for the implementation of the new Gender Equality Strategy in the years to come.

4.1 From the Roadmap for Women's Rights to the next Gender Equality Strategy

In preparation for the 2026-2030 GES, the European Commission announced in March 2025 a Roadmap for Women's Rights. The Roadmap is not a legal instrument and has no binding provisions. It contains objectives, clustered into eight principles (see Box 3, p. 40), yet with no underpinning concrete measures or policy solutions. Member States and stakeholders can sign up to it on a voluntary basis and thus it serves largely as a political declaration. As such, it provides insights into the Commission's long-term vision in the area of gender policy.

Despite its declaratory nature, the Roadmap serves as guidance for EU-level policy and provides a glimpse into what is to come in the next GES. It is therefore used here as a basis for structuring the discussion on the priorities for future EU gender equality policy, with a focus on those objectives which are most directly related to labour markets and employment, presented in Principles 3-5. The aim of the following discussion is to assess what these (mostly pre)planned EU policies and instruments will be able to deliver in terms of gender equality.

In one of the key areas of gender inequality with regard to employment – namely, equal pay and economic independence – the Commission articulates the ambition of closing the gender pay and pension gaps (under Principle 3). However, it does not foresee any new binding measures to achieve this. The Roadmap refers to pay transparency, in which area the 2023 Directive must be transposed into Member States' legal frameworks by

June 2026, and this is expected to have a significant impact on systems for determining and disclosing pay. While support for an ambitious transposition and enforcement of the Directive is of paramount importance, especially in view of the recent deregulatory pressures to simplify and reduce the scope of numerous EU laws, it remains unclear what else the Roadmap and subsequent GES will contribute in this area. Moreover, the announced measures do not tackle the issue of gender segregation and concentration of women in lower-paid sectors, which is one of the main factors driving the gender pay gap, as discussed in Section 3.3.

Box 3 **The EU Roadmap for Women's Rights, 2025**

Key principles for the realisation of women's rights:
(1) freedom from gender-based violence
(2) the highest standards of health
(3) equal pay and economic empowerment
(4) work-life balance and care
(5) equal employment opportunities and adequate working conditions
(6) quality and inclusive education
(7) political participation and equal representation
(8) institutional mechanisms that deliver on women's rights.

Annex to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, A Roadmap for Women's Rights, Brussels, 07.03.2025, COM(2025) 97 final.

Box 4 **Equal pay and economic empowerment: Principle 3 of the Roadmap**

Every woman has the right to equal pay for equal work or work of equal value and to be economically independent.

Upholding and advancing this Principle includes pursuing the following objectives:
- closing the gender pay gap and gender pension gaps
- tackling the undervaluation of jobs predominantly done by women and ensuring pay transparency
- combating women's poverty, including energy poverty
- promoting financial literacy among women and girls as a foundation to their financial security and resilience
- promoting gender-equal access to finances and economic opportunities, including entrepreneurship
- promoting taxation and social protection reforms that support the economic independence of women
- promoting women's rights and the economic empowerment of women through economic and trade policy, international development and partnerships.

One of the ways in which Principle 3 pursues its aims regarding the economic empowerment of women is through the promotion of financial literacy and entrepreneurship. To a large extent, these measures resemble the direction of employment policy for achieving good quality jobs in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Piasna et al. 2019). The emphasis has been, and currently remains, on supply-side solutions and employability, notably through upskilling, rather than a focus on the demand side such as improving working conditions and eradicating discriminatory employer practices. While having the skills to make sound financial decisions can be helpful for improving financial wellbeing and security, such measures have only a limited capacity for overcoming the discriminatory structural factors (e.g. social norms, biases and practices embedded in the workplace and political systems) which contribute to gender inequality.

In the domain of work-life balance and care, the Roadmap articulates the essential elements for promoting gender equality in terms of the equal sharing of care responsibilities in the family, having working conditions and work organisation that allow for the reconciliation of paid work and private life, and benefiting from access to affordable and good quality care services (Principle 4). While of indisputable importance, these objectives are formulated at a very general level and lack any substance or detail that would hint at specific prospective policy measures. Thus, the Principle does not guide us towards any new instruments, but the previously adopted Directive on Work-Life Balance of 2019 (with respect to the take-up of paternity and family leave) and the European Care Strategy of 2022 (in terms of investment in the care sector) are clearly manifested in it. Again, the Roadmap is reiterating already existing policies in this area without setting ambitious new objectives. Nevertheless, support for previous policies is welcome and much needed, as evidenced by the pressure from the recent 'Omnibus' packages to simplify and reduce the scope of some previous social and employment policies.

Box 5 **Work-life balance and care: Principle 4 of the Roadmap**

Every woman has the right to balance her professional and private life.

Upholding and advancing this Principle includes pursuing the following objectives:
- promoting the equal sharing of care responsibilities between women and men
- promoting working conditions that facilitate the reconciliation of private, family and working lives
- widespread access to flexible work arrangements for all
- encouraging fathers to take up paternity and family leaves
- ensuring affordable, accessible and quality early-childhood education and care for all children
- affordable and accessible high-quality long-term care
- promoting investment and formal employment in the care sector, ensuring quality care jobs.

The Care Strategy still has unrealised potential, given that the goals and proposals it contains have received little financial support which calls into question their effectiveness. Financed primarily through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the RRF, the Care Strategy – with its ambitious commitments to improve longer term care provision through both infrastructure investment and improving the quality of social care jobs – in practice received a much smaller share of the funds than those devoted to the digital or green transitions (Rubery et al. 2024). Less than 2% of RRF funds were allocated to gender-targeted programmes and only around another 6% to gender-relevant projects such as care infrastructure (EIGE 2023). The proclamation of ambitious objectives in the area of gender equality must be followed by hard-edged targets and sufficient funding. Without these, it is impossible to assess the forecasted change or to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of the actions taken and the associated funding.

The Principle also refers to the aim of making flexible working arrangements accessible to all workers. Implicitly, work flexibility is being linked to a work-life balance strategy. However, this needs to be approached with caution as abundant research evidence points to the numerous risks involved in flexible work. These include an extension of the working day, the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal life and the unpredictability of schedules which makes it difficult to plan care obligations where working hours are made variable (Piasna and Plagnol 2018). The outcomes of flexibility depend greatly on the conditions under which it is offered, whether workers or employers have greater control over the time, place and organisation of work and which aspect of work organisation is being made flexible.

Principle 5 of the Roadmap outlines objectives in terms of equal employment opportunities and adequate working conditions. This broad intention also encompasses postulates from the previous two principles but is operationalised through a mix of items not elsewhere classified including the gender employment gap, occupational segregation, job quality, OSH, training and gender-based violence and harassment. As in the previous principles, several of the key objectives refer to legislative initiatives either already adopted (gender-based violence, although explicitly placing it in the context of work which the existing Directive mostly fails to address) or else waiting in the pipeline (psychosocial risks).

The issue of personal protective and safety equipment not being designed with female workers in mind has long been a known point of concern (see the general discussion above in Section 3.5; Sokolowski et al. 2022 for a discussion on the PPE used by firefighters). The risks of musculoskeletal disorders, which are among the most common work-related health problems in Europe, are often higher for women compared to men because the tools, models and technologies designed to protect workers are still based on the male body. Furthermore, women are more likely to be exposed to activities such as lifting and moving people, prolonged sitting and infectious diseases, all of which can lead to musculoskeletal disorders (Eurofound 2025a). This makes the case for gender-sensitive ergonomics stronger than ever. The acknowledgement of

this issue by the Commission in the Roadmap is then very welcome, but there is no proposal in preparation to amend or expand the existing regulation that would allow targeting and a resolution of this problem.

Box 6 **Equal employment opportunities and adequate working conditions: Principle 5 of the Roadmap**

Every woman has the right to equal employment opportunities and adequate working conditions.

Upholding and advancing this Principle includes pursuing the following objectives:
- eradicating the gender employment gap, paying specific attention to occupational segregation and to the employment of underrepresented groups
- quality jobs and decent work, taking into account, in particular, psychosocial risks at the workplace, working time arrangements, access to training and equal career prospects
- eliminating gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the world of work
- ensuring a high level of protection of health and safety against risks in the physical working environment and safety equipment fitting female workers.

The general language used in the Roadmap does not make it possible to grasp the more specific intentions behind the words and it will therefore need to prove its worth in the context of the coming GES. While the objectives are all positive and desirable, the outcomes will ultimately depend on the means taken to achieve them. As discussed in Section 3.1, the recent closing of the gender gap in employment has mainly been achieved by pushing older women into the labour market, with measures such as the equalisation of retirement ages for men and women playing a part (Morgavi 2024). Closing the gender employment gap for adults of prime working age requires a rather different approach. Similar caveats can be made with respect to occupational and labour market segregation. This issue must be addressed not only during education, by encouraging female students to pursue technical degrees at an early age, but also throughout active working life. It is not enough to adapt school curricula; it is also vital to understand the drivers of gender segregation such as working conditions (e.g. long or unpredictable hours), the quality of part-time jobs, long hours cultures, barriers to entry and career progression, and job stability (Piasna and Plagnol 2018). While women often enter STEM fields and sectors, they leave them due to poor working conditions including a lack of opportunities to reconcile work and family life, sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based discrimination and violence (Woodfield 2012; Dasgupta and Stout 2014).

In view of these gaps in policy focus and action, it is clear that a more comprehensive and integrated approach to gender equality is needed for achieving sustainable and substantial progress in gender equality. This is briefly introduced in the following section.

4.2 The need for an integrated and multidimensional gender policy

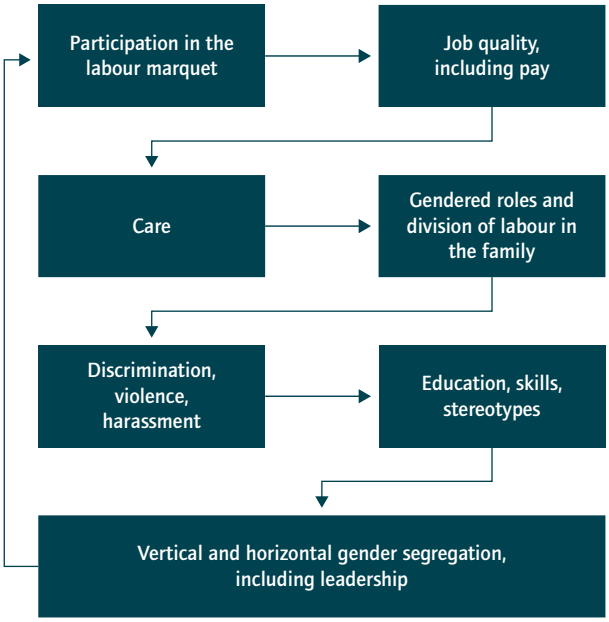
The evaluation of the likely trajectory of prospective EU gender equality policy outlined above indicates a fragmented approach whereby gaps in specific domains of labour market participation are being addressed without an adequate consideration of the prevailing context and underlying dynamics. Devising effective policy measures for closing the multifaceted gender gaps in EU labour markets requires taking account of the intricate dynamics that lead to gendered outcomes. In addition, there is a need for more profound engagement with the structural barriers to the creation of gender-equal workplaces and labour markets.

For example, gender pay gaps are not solely related to differences in employment rates or educational choices, as Sections 3.1 and 3.2 have demonstrated. Therefore, a policy focus that is too narrow and which only considers these two aspects is bound to have very limited effects. Furthermore, closing gender employment gaps by increasing employment rates can be achieved in various ways; in this case, the means are as important as the end. The Roadmap has demonstrated limited capacity in this respect: addressing particular aspects of gender-based inequality in isolation and with very limited engagement with the underlying dynamics will go on to produce unequal and sometimes unexpected outcomes.

There is thus a need to develop a policy framework that integrates the different domains of work and employment in a strategic way. To illustrate such an approach, gender pay gaps are closely linked to the segregation of men and women into different jobs: while men are more likely to work in high-paying, digitally-skilled jobs in the private sector, women more often work in low-paid, public sector jobs in education and healthcare. However, the relationship between such segregation and pay gaps is not static; the increasing feminisation of occupations has, as Section 3.3 also highlighted, been repeatedly shown to lead to such jobs becoming undervalued (Murphy and Oesch 2016; Valentino 2020; Baird and Dinale 2025). It should also be recognised that sorting into traditionally male and female jobs has deep social underpinnings and reflects more than women's and men's educational choices. It is shaped by stereotypes, organisational cultures and working conditions that are more or less amenable to reconciliation with care and housework obligations. Because the latter continue to fall disproportionately on women, this creates a double burden of paid and unpaid work (Ferrant et al. 2014), in turn putting constraints on the types of work that remain available and accessible to women as well as the amount of time they can dedicate to paid work. This double burden also has a negative impact on job quality and career prospects for women, especially when they work from home (Piasna 2026), further straining their earnings potential.

This points to an intersection of various aspects of gender inequality and a need for a broader view of gender equality policies incorporating care provision, gendered roles in the family and any barriers inherent in work and employment conditions. This approach is envisaged in Figure 17.

Figure 17 **Proposed framework for an integrated and strategic approach to gender equality policy**



Source: own elaboration.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Bolstered by favourable political and economic conditions, the much-anticipated 'social turn' in EU social law and policy during the first von der Leyen Commission portended increased commitment to the issue of gender equality. Multiple legislative and non-legislative initiatives were introduced that, both directly and indirectly, aimed to combat obstacles in this area of the labour market and in other domains. As observed in Section 2, however, EU strategies and mechanisms to date have addressed only a fraction of the large, complex and deeply rooted social, cultural and economic challenges to gender equality progress. Drawing on the preceding analysis, this section outlines a non-exhaustive range of recommendations that might inform and flank an ambitious and effective Gender Equality Strategy for 2026-2030.

– Various instruments have been used to promote women's progress while at work and beyond. However, some 'backsliding' on hard-won, slow and fragile equality achievements stresses the need for their greater protection and for more extensive initiatives based on strong, coordinated and transparent measures across multiple domains. In this endeavour, the wider 'opportunity structures' within industrial relations, especially trade unions and collective bargaining arrangements (Pillinger and Wintour 2019), could be used to contextualise and support relevant EU, national and local regulation, bargaining, policy and practice.

– Nonetheless, in developing new initiatives, the baby does not need to be thrown out with the bathwater. Longer-running and recent initiatives to advance gender and intersectional equalities, including those already appearing in the 2020-2025 GES and in the landmark 2024 Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, might be purposefully recast as solid starting points from which to seek greater progress on inequality (e.g. in this case via more extensive reference to the world of work). These should be urgently complemented by new initiatives, in particular seeking to introduce binding requirements for Member States on issues like gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace. Similarly, the European Care Strategy of 2022, a positive development in a relatively untouched area in EU policy, might be recognised as a crucial new platform. Indeed, the gender equality project might be more generally regarded as a perpetual work-in-progress given the contextual dynamics and evolving ideas about what constitutes gender and other forms of inequality in paid work.

– The analysis presented in this Report highlights that, alongside the direct measures, certain legislative initiatives (e.g. the 2022 Minimum Wages Directive, the 2024 Platform Work Directive) indirectly address gender inequality due to many women's disadvantaged position in the labour market and their shouldering of most of the burden of unpaid care work. This underscores the need to mainstream or apply a consistent gender (and intersectional) lens to all stages and levels of policies, programmes and projects to effect transformational change, including in precarious work and other arrangements where women are overrepresented, and to bring about meaningful inclusion in terms of the empowerment of all women via specific aligned measures.

– While recent initiatives have covered an exceptionally wide range of issues of concern for women at and beyond work in the EU, their impacts have been limited and uneven, and the instruments themselves restricted in scope and content. Thus, despite worker and job characteristics being key to understanding gendered employment patterns, various areas with persistent gender and intersectional inequalities (e.g. job quality, gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace or related spillover effects in this setting, gender-specific psychosocial risks in the workplace, labour market participation levels) are yet to be broached. The next GES should therefore promote initiatives that encourage forms of work, work tools and workplace relations that fit with women's biological needs and the needs of a 'working carer' (based on the assumption that all workers should be able to manage paid employment while simultaneously providing unpaid care). The GES should also redress any negative gendered consequences of the 'gender neutral' approach of EU OSH legislation and policy.

– Specifically, the next GES must not be confined to the areas covered by its predecessor but must instead seek to dismantle the work organisation, policies, values, behaviours and attitudes that are still shaped by male norms (e.g. working time) and that quash inclusive structural responses.

– A more effective transposition and implementation of instruments that address gender and intersectional challenges must also be strongly sought and enforced, particularly given the need to confront elements of the competitiveness agenda which are based on reduced administrative loads (e.g. in terms of reporting requirements) and deregulation. The new GES should serve as a safeguard against deregulation and the rollback of existing legislation. Allied to this, adequate financial and other resources (including incentives) with which to implement EU regulatory and policy initiatives must be secured to ensure their effective implementation in Member States, particularly amid austerity measures and cuts to EU social spending.

– This analysis shows that, comparatively speaking, the amount and scope of the strategies and initiatives aimed at progressing gender equality exceed those concerned with other identity dimensions and

intersectionality at work and beyond. The former include, for instance, the post-EPSR policy initiatives of the EU Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030; the latter include the intersectional perspectives that inform the 2023 Pay Transparency Directive and the 2024 Directive on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, illustrating their utility for particularly vulnerable gender- and intersectionality-defined groups.

– Fine(r)-grain data collection and analysis would provide better evidence with which to inform and develop context-sensitive initiatives at EU and other levels. A clear pattern is set by the example of the 2019 Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive, which requires greater responsibility by employers in terms of providing workers with more information on essential aspects of their employment (relationships).

– The analysis presented here evidences the need for strategies and mechanisms that fortify collective approaches such as collective bargaining and social dialogue, flanked by individual initiatives, in work and other domains. Among the intertwined macro challenges that workers and unions face is growing resistance among some employers to meaningful engagement in social dialogue and collective bargaining; the ceding of political ground to right-wing and conservative ideologies; and the promulgation of gender inequalities in some quarters. Efforts such as the Pact for European Social Dialogue (ETUC 2024) thus need to be fully promoted, coordinated and upscaled.

– As noted in Sections 2 and 3, research shows that, generally speaking, wage inequality is lower when terms and conditions are set by collective agreement. Moreover, where wages are based on gender-neutral job evaluation criteria, as required by Article 4 of the Pay Transparency Directive, collective bargaining can help address the structural undervaluation of occupations in which women predominate. Related to this, greater awareness-building is vital among negotiating partners on the importance of such criteria in establishing fair pay structures. Other collective bargaining initiatives could include comprehensive implementation of the Minimum Wage Directive and meaningful action plans to promote collective bargaining in countries where coverage is below 80%; revision of the public procurement directives to ensure that public money goes to companies that respect collective agreements and the right to collective bargaining (Bruun 2025); and the introduction of collective bargaining conditionality that links the provision of support from EU funds (e.g. ESF+, Social Climate Fund) to Member State efforts to promote collective bargaining.

– The minimum floors set by regulatory and other provisions fall short of many workers' real needs (e.g. as with the rights to paternity and parental leave under the 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive). Policymakers and legislators should thus emphasise a GES with bolder goals and actions, with instruments that go 'above and beyond'

minimum gender and intersectional equality standards (e.g. via support for equality bargaining; specific quotas for women in leadership roles; laws that embody ambitious, and not merely anti-discriminatory, equality approaches; faster implementation; a focus on both gender and diversity; and dedicated and adequate funding).

– The analysis also confirms that momentum for gender equality progress can be lost and gains reversed. This underscores the need for the social partners, policymakers and others at all levels to stress upward convergence (e.g. via Member States' aligned interpretation and implementation of relevant EU directives) and to give new force to the existing procedural and institutional measures for monitoring and enforcing responsibilities around gender equality. This infers the need for efforts to eliminate the 'symptoms' of gender inequality (e.g. pay discrimination, sexual violence), its underlying causes (e.g. gender bias within pay structures, discriminatory cultural norms) and the gaps in instrument coverage (e.g. as detected for the Pay Transparency Directive's reporting requirements) to address the structural aspects of disadvantage in a timely manner.

– The principles of the declaratory, non-binding Roadmap for Women's Rights need to be taken into account by all stakeholders if Member States and their institutions are to move towards a more coordinated and impactful GES for women workers.

– In these times of turbulence, there is a need for initiatives sensitive to contextual dynamics including crises and the digital, green and demographic transformations which are disproportionately affecting those subject to structural disadvantage, including women. Lessons gleaned, for instance, from evaluations of the workings and impacts of mechanisms such as the RRF might help to inform future, gender-sensitive responses to (poly)crises at EU and national levels. Moreover, a far-reaching legal, socioeconomic and policy framework incorporating a gender lens is necessary to achieve profound and lasting equality gains. More transformative thinking about the goals of economies (e.g. a decoupling of societal and worker wellbeing from economic growth in post-growth scenarios) may also help set the scene for greater equality and fairness at work and in wider society (Pulignano et al. 2024).

– The significance of social transitioning and upward convergence among Member States, particularly by improved labour market functioning, needs better recognition to ensure fairer working conditions and to promote gender equality and employment (Parker 2023). The role of workplace actors (e.g. trade union and occupational safety and health representatives, regional and international agencies and other players such as civil society and social movements), regulatory frameworks and instruments (including collective agreements, workplace regulation, information and consultation procedures) and meaningful social dialogue at EU and other levels must be promoted.

– Language can be key for garnering widespread political and constituent support for more pervasive change. A shift in terminology from 'gendered' or 'gender neutral' initiatives to those reflecting societally inclusive, 'human-centred' endeavours may deliver an ideological and policy evolution in the conceptualisation of equality, recognising that inequality for women constitutes inequality for others.

The pursuit of gender equality at work and beyond requires its reframing as a perspective that is integral to, rather than merely appended to, the preparation, implementation, and monitoring of industrial and wider policy. As EIGE (2025) recently observed, '(t)he gap between good intentions and real-world impact is still too wide … [and] the EU's new Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030 will be judged not by the promises it makes, but by what it delivers for women and men in all their diversity in Europe.'

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