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## Gender Inequalities: Progress and Challenges

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# Gender Inequalities: Progress and Challenges

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**Abstract.** – Gender equality and women’s empowerment are universally recognized as essential for sustainable and prosperous development. This chapter offers a comprehensive overview of gender inequalities prevalent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, delving into the historical context of such disparities with a particular focus on education. The chapter highlights the strides made through the implementation of legal frameworks and policies. However, despite significant progress, gender inequalities persist, leaving women susceptible to adverse consequences in their daily lives and rendering them more vulnerable to economic shocks. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of gender inequalities and taking active measures to address them, societies could strive towards a more inclusive and egalitarian society and foster sustainable and prosperous developments for all.

**Keywords:** Gender • Inequality • Policy • Sustainable Development

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## 1. Introduction

Gender inequality refers to the unequal treatment, opportunities, and expectations imposed on individuals based on their gender, often resulting in the disadvantaged position of one gender (usually women) relative to the other (usually men). It encompasses various dimensions, including social, economic, political, and cultural disparities, which can manifest in different ways across societies and contexts. Gender inequality is one of the most pervasive forms of inequality and has been recognized as a significant challenge to human rights, social justice, and economic development. Despite considerable advancements in addressing gender inequalities throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, various facets of contemporary society continue to perpetuate such disparities.

Extensive research has illuminated the pervasive discrimination experienced by women. Despite efforts to account for level of education and experience, studies consistently uncover a persistent wage gap between men and women (Blau and Kahn, 2017). The gender wage gap varies by country and industry but remains pervasive globally, with women earning on average 77 cents for every dollar earned by men (United Nations, 2022). Women are also more likely to be employed in low-wage, low-skilled jobs and are underrepresented in higher-paying fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (Nimmegern, 2016). Women also continue to be underrepresented in political leadership positions globally. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, women held only 26% of parliamentary seats globally in 2022 (World Bank, 2023). Throughout history, women have faced limited access to educational and training opportunities, impeding their ability to compete on equal footing in the job market. Nevertheless, studies indicate that higher levels of education among women contribute to the gradual reduction of the gender gap.

Despite progresses, gender disparities persist. A critical facet of gender inequalities lie in the division of labor within households. Traditional gender norms have burdened women with the majority of domestic work and caregiving responsibilities, constraining their full engagement in the workforce. Research actively explored the impact of policies such as parental leave and childcare subsidies on women's participation in the labor force (Jaumotte, 2003; Winkler, 2022; among others). Additionally, it investigated the evolving social norms surrounding gender roles and household duties. The issue of women's political representation and access to positions of power is a pressing concern in addressing gender inequality. Studies delving into the factors contributing to the underrepresentation of women have shown that gender policies (such as gender quotas) can boost women's representation and influence (e.g. Caul, 2001; Fernández and Valiente, 2021).

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of gender inequalities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, examining the diverse dimensions that have profoundly impacted women's lives. Section 2 delves into the historical context of gender inequalities, with a particular focus on gender disparities in education. It highlights the remarkable progress made in advancing gender equality throughout the twentieth century, including the establishment of crucial legal frameworks and policies. Section 3 acknowledges the persisting challenges and

setbacks that continue to hinder progress, specifically regarding women's position in the labor market and their roles in the domestic economy. Section 4 explores the far-reaching consequences of gender inequalities on women when confronted with economic shocks. It sheds light on the adverse effects and the importance of addressing these disparities to ensure women's well-being and empowerment. Section 5 emphasizes the urgency of tackling gender inequality head-on, emphasizing the need for sustained advocacy, policy reform, and transformative social change. By addressing the persistent challenges faced by women in the twenty-first century, society can foster a more equitable future. Finally, Section 6 concludes the chapter by summarizing the key themes discussed throughout. It underscores the significance of understanding and addressing gender inequalities, ultimately highlighting the critical role of collective efforts in achieving a more just and inclusive society.

## **2. The Long History of Gender Inequalities**

Historically, gender inequality has been deeply ingrained in social, political, and economic structures of societies (Perrin, 2013). Throughout much of human history, women have been relegated to subordinate roles in society, with limited opportunities for education, economic participation, and political representation. In many societies, women's legal rights have been severely limited.

### **2.1. Historical Context of Gender Inequalities**

The feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century challenged gender norms and fought for women's rights, including the right to vote, access to education and employment, and legal protections against discrimination. These efforts led to some progress towards gender equality in the following decades, including the establishment of legal frameworks and policies promoting gender equality.

Nonetheless, progress towards gender equality has been slow and uneven, and gender inequalities continue to persist in many aspects of society. Women still face significant barriers to accessing education, employment, and political representation, as well as pervasive gender-based discrimination. The historical legacy of gender inequality, combined with ongoing societal and cultural norms, continues to contribute to these disparities. Understanding the historical context of gender inequality is crucial for recognizing the persistence and complexity of this issue (e.g. Alesina et al., 2013; Giuliano, 2020; Perrin, 2022a), and for implementing effective policy reforms to promote gender equality and achieve sustainable development (United Nations, 2015).

The increasing exploration into the societal role of women has shattered persistent misconceptions regarding their historical employment, earnings, and overall economic contributions to both developed and developing economies. Recent research has significantly improved our understanding of how women have shaped long-term economic development. While women have always been part of the workforce, their societal status has not followed a

linear trajectory; rather, it has evolved in tandem with the advancement of economies and societies ([Merouani and Perrin, 2022](#))

In the realm of economic history, scholars delving into women's and gender-related issues primarily focused on how women's economic roles transformed during the industrialization era ([Clark, 1920](#); [Pinchbeck, 1930](#)) and the subsequent impact on family economies ([Tilly and Scott, 1989](#)). A pivotal turning point occurred in the late 1980s, when [Scott \(1986\)](#) observed a significant surge in gender-oriented research within economic history. This surge not only enhanced our understanding of women's contributions to the economy but also shed new light on topics such as women's labor, wages, and their overall role in economic life. Economists and economic historians have further explored the influence of gender and women's economic activities on the trajectory of economic development ([Boserup, 1970](#); [Goldin, 1990](#)), unveiling the vital significance of human capital as a key driver in the process ([Diebolt and Perrin, 2013, 2019](#); [Jaoul-Grammare and Perrin, 2017](#)).<sup>1</sup>

The lack of quantitative indicators of gender equality in the past poses a challenge to our understanding of the historical dynamics of gender equality ([Perrin, 2014, 2022b](#)). Quantitative indicators play a crucial role in analyzing the extent of gender equality by providing measurable metrics to assess disparities and progress over time. The scarcity of data makes it difficult to establish comprehensive and accurate quantitative indicators that can effectively capture the complexities of gender equality in the past. In the absence of reliable quantitative data, researchers often rely on qualitative evidence, historical documents, surveys, and anthropological studies to gain insights into the experiences and conditions of women in different historical contexts. While these sources can provide valuable qualitative information, the absence of quantifiable data limits our ability to make precise comparisons, identify trends, and quantify the magnitude of gender inequalities across various periods. Efforts are being made to address this data gap and develop innovative methodologies to estimate and reconstruct historical indicators of gender (in)equality ([Perrin, 2014, 2022b](#); [Dilli et al., 2019](#); [Szoltysek et al., 2017](#); [Perrin, Karlsson, and Kok, 2023](#)).

Research indicates that gender equality has historically evolved alongside economic development. This intriguing relationship between gender equality and economic progress highlights the interconnectedness of social and economic factors in shaping societies. As economies transitioned from agrarian to industrial and subsequently to knowledge-based systems, significant transformations occurred in societal norms, values, and gender roles. During these transitions, women's roles and opportunities gradually expanded, driven by various factors such as advancements in technology, changes in labor demand, and evolving social attitudes ([Merouani and Perrin, 2022](#)). As economies diversified, new employment opportunities emerged beyond traditional gender-specific roles. Women began to enter sectors previously dominated by men, contributing to the overall economic growth and development of societies. Moreover, the expansion of education played a crucial role in promoting gender equality. With improved access to education, women gained knowledge and skills that

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<sup>1</sup> See [Merouani and Perrin \(2022\)](#) for a detailed survey of the literature.

empowered them to participate more actively in the workforce and take on roles traditionally reserved for men (Diebolt and Perrin, 2013, 2019). Education provided women with opportunities for economic self-sufficiency and upward mobility, leading to greater gender equality in various aspects of life.

It is important to note that the pace and extent of progress in achieving gender equality have varied across regions and time periods. Different societies have experienced different trajectories, influenced by cultural, political, and historical factors (Perrin, 2022a). However, the overarching trend suggests that as economies develop and become more inclusive, gender equality tends to improve.

## 2.2. Gender Inequalities in Education – Zoom on the French Case

Gender inequality is intricately linked to disparities in education and the acquisition of human capital. In France, gender equality at school, and the co-education that goes with it, is the result of a long historical, institutional and societal process (see Perrin, 2013).

### *Girls' Education in the Nineteenth Century*

Until the end of the nineteenth century, girls' access to school only concerned the primary level; today, equality between girls and boys in school is enshrined in the Education Code: “*Schools, collèges, lycées and higher education establishments are responsible for transmitting and acquiring knowledge and working methods. They contribute to promoting gender diversity and equality between men and women, particularly in terms of guidance*” (Article L121-1 of the Education Code).<sup>2</sup> In spite of this, training courses and the associated professions remain largely gendered: “*Countries that would steer boys towards the humanities and girls towards engineering training have yet to be invented*” (Baudelot and Establet, 2001). However, since the 1990s, the fight against gender inequality in schools has become a political priority: “*Primary schools, lower and upper secondary schools and higher education must contribute to equality between girls and boys*” (Loi d'orientation de 1989). Since then, beyond the educational sector, gender equality has been at the heart of many reforms at the societal level.

In France, the beginning of the nineteenth century was marked by a notable lack of interest in girls' education, despite the demands of the French Revolution (Condorcet, 1792; Lakanal, 1793). The Civil Code of 1804 perpetuated the legal subordination of women, treating them as minors, criminals, or individuals with mental disorders, echoing the provisions of the *Coutume de Paris*. Napoleon's stance further reinforced this perspective, as he believed in “raising believers, not reasoners.” (Napoleon, 15 May 1807).<sup>3</sup> The disregard for girls' education is

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<sup>2</sup> « *Les écoles, les collèges, les lycées et les établissements d'enseignement supérieur sont chargés de transmettre et de faire acquérir connaissances et méthodes de travail. Ils contribuent à favoriser la mixité et l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes, notamment en matière d'orientation* » (Article L121-1 du Code de l'éducation).

<sup>3</sup> The only exception was the school created and reserved for the daughters of his generals: *La maison de la légion d'honneur d'Ecouen*.

evident in the Enquiry conducted in 1833, which aimed to assess the state of primary schooling in France. Minister Guizot's instructions explicitly excluded girls from the survey, focusing solely on boys' and mixed schools. *"Only boys' schools and mixed schools will be visited. Within the latter, girls will not be counted"* (Guizot, 1833).

However, from the second half of the nineteenth century, subsequent governments gradually recognized the importance of girls' education. The Falloux Law of 1850 and the Duruy Law of 1867 mandated the establishment of girls' schools in municipalities with populations exceeding 800 and 500, respectively. The Bert Law of 1879 required each department to establish girls' teacher training colleges, and the Camille See Law of 1880 introduced co-educational *collèges* and *lycées* for girls, drawing inspiration from the American model. As early as 1870, Jules Ferry highlighted the significance of girls' education and the societal obstacles it faced, emphasizing the need for equal opportunities: *"To demand equal education for all classes is to do only half the work, only half of what is necessary, only half of what is due; I demand this equality, I demand it for both sexes [...] The difficulty, the obstacle here is not in the expense, it is in the morals"* (Jules Ferry, Conférence Populaire, 10 April 1870).

The Republican laws of 1881-1882 represented a significant advancement, as they abolished the distinction between girls and boys in education. Schooling became secular, free, and compulsory for all children aged 6 to 13, regardless of their gender. However, opposition, particularly from the Church, persisted: *"To give the same education to girls and boys is to confuse what nature, common sense, order, society and religion require to be distinguished"* (Monseigneur Donnet, Archbishop of Bordeaux, 1882). The Goblet Law of 1886 went further by entrusting public education exclusively to lay individuals and permitting communes with over 500 inhabitants to replace girls' schools with mixed schools. Higher education also witnessed a tradition of male exclusivity until the end of the Second Empire, denying women access to these institutions. While faculties gradually opened up to women in the provinces, the University of Paris remained resistant to their admission. Despite a decree in 1866 allowing women to attend university, the first woman's admission to the Faculty of Medicine in Paris required intervention from Empress Eugenie. Even in 1872, the Sorbonne continued to reject female students.

During the twentieth century, various economic and societal factors contributed to the expansion of higher education opportunities for girls. These changes were accompanied by significant institutional reforms, such as the Haby Law of 1975, which promoted co-education throughout the education system. These developments marked a substantial shift towards a more inclusive educational landscape in France (Jaoul-Grammare, 2018).

### ***Twentieth Century – Turning Point in Gender Equality***

The 1905 separation of the Church and State in France solidified the role of the State in education, particularly for girls. In 1919, the women's baccalaureate was established, and although the Bérard decree in 1924 granted girls the right to the same secondary education as



boys, it was not until the 1930s that programs and schedules were unified. Mixed secondary education was introduced in the 1960s. The movement to open higher education to girls, initiated in the late nineteenth century, gained momentum with Marie Curie's Nobel Prize and was further amplified by the onset of the First World War. Subsequently, numerous *Grandes écoles* gradually began admitting girls. The mixed *École Normale Supérieure* in Cachan was established in 1912, followed by the admission of women to the *École Centrale* six years later. In 1919, women gained access to the *École Supérieure d'Électricité* and the *École Supérieure de Chimie de Paris*. The *École Polytechnique Féminine* and *Haut Enseignement Commercial pour les Jeunes Filles* (HECJF) were founded in 1925 and played crucial roles in enabling young women to pursue higher education. However, it was not until the 1970s that women gained access to all *Grandes écoles* previously reserved for boys, such as *Polytechnique* in 1972, HEC in 1973, and ENS in 1981 after the merger of girls' and boys' ENS (Marry, 2003).

Alongside these institutional reforms, significant societal changes also contributed to the feminization of education and society. The abolition of legal incapacity in 1938, women's right to vote in 1944, freedom to work in 1965, the Neuwirth law on access to contraception from 1967 to 1972, and the Veil law in 1975 were all key milestones. With co-education established across the education system, the 1980s witnessed an array of texts advocating for gender equality, extending beyond the school to society as a whole. Two parallel movements emerged: a political determination to establish gender parity in all domains and an aspiration to integrate women into scientific research by diversifying study choices for girls and boys. In 1984, inter-ministerial agreements were signed, focusing on "equality between girls and boys, women and men in the education system." These agreements emphasized diversification of school choices, professional diversification, political parity, equal pay, and comprehensive education for equality. Concurrently, various actions were taken to encourage women's participation in scientific research. Advertising campaigns from the Ministry of Education between 1984 and 1992 aimed to eradicate gender stereotypes within professions. Additionally, research associations such as 'Women Engineers' (1982), 'Women and Mathematics' (1987), and 'Women and Science' (2000) were established, alongside awards like the L'Oréal-UNESCO Foundation Prize (1998) and the Irène Joliot-Curie Prize (2001). Partnerships such as the INTEGER Project<sup>4</sup> and the ERA-NET GENDER-NET Project<sup>5</sup> also aligned with the objectives of the Lisbon Strategy to reduce gender imbalances in scientific and technical fields.

Although there has been a reduction in inequalities over time, certain rigidities persisted. In 1833, girls comprised only one third of primary school enrolments, a proportion that increased to 50% in 1881. While there were only two female baccalaureate graduates in 1896, their numbers equalled that of boys in the 1960s and are now in the majority. As of 2017, 84% of girls and 74% of boys possess a baccalaureate qualification. The shift in higher education occurred in the early 1980s. However, girls continue to be underrepresented in science-related

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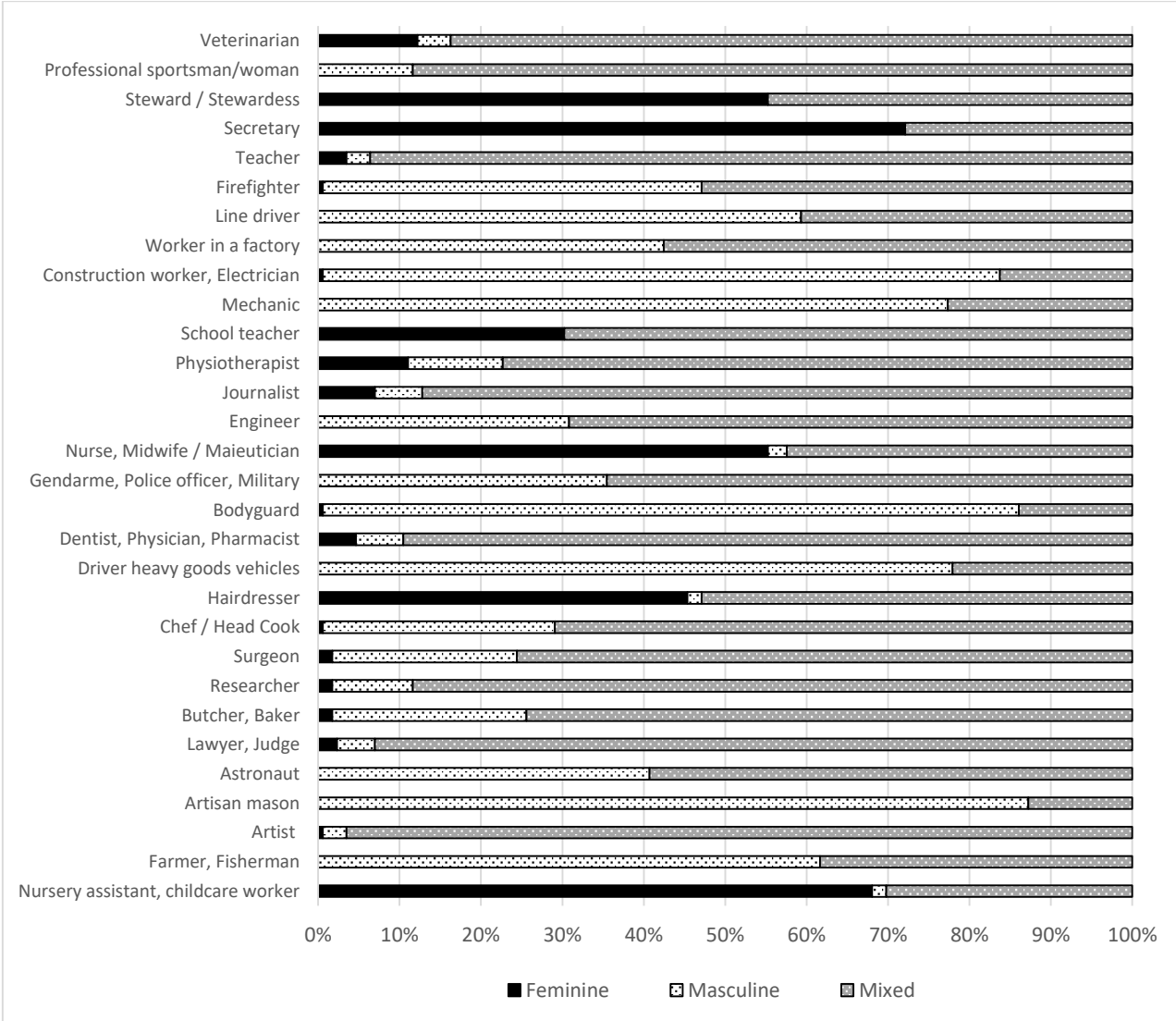
<sup>4</sup> Institutional Transformation for Effecting Gender Equality in Research aims at "*sustainable structural change in research and higher education institutions to improve professional equality between male and female researchers*".

<sup>5</sup> Project dedicated to the promotion of professional equality between women and men within research institutions and to the integration of the gender dimension in research content.

courses: in 2016, only 41% of final-year science students were girls, and in higher education, women accounted for 25% of basic science students, 29% of STAPS students, 28.5% of engineers, and 40% of doctors in scientific fields (RERS, 2017).

The challenges in implementing reforms, despite numerous efforts to promote gender equality, are rooted in societal stereotypes (Leroy et al., 2013, Jaoul-Grammare, 2018). These stereotypes persist in the collective consciousness, associating certain professions and fields of study with specific genders (Figure 1). Consequently, engineering is often perceived as a male-dominated profession, while occupations such as social work and secretarial roles are seen as traditionally female (Guichard, 1992; Guichard et al., 1994a, 1994b; Wach, 1992). In the words of Marry (2003, p. 4), quoting Ferrand (1995): “If the swallows of gender equality signal the arrival of spring, the full summer of equality has not yet arrived.”

**Figure 1. Gender Perception of Occupations**



Source: Jaoul-Grammare (2022)

### **3. Contemporary Challenges in Gender Inequalities**

Despite the catch up of girls in education and the greater integration of women into the labor force, they continue to face disparities in comparison to men, both in terms of their position in the labor market and their roles in the domestic economy.

#### **3.1. Unequal Position in Paid Activities**

The persistent disparity in employment rates between men and women in Europe reveals a substantial gap of nearly 10 percentage points in 2019. While there has been an increase in female employment, accompanied by a decline in the female inactivity rate, women still exhibit a higher probability of being absent from the labor market, thereby augmenting the risk of precariousness.

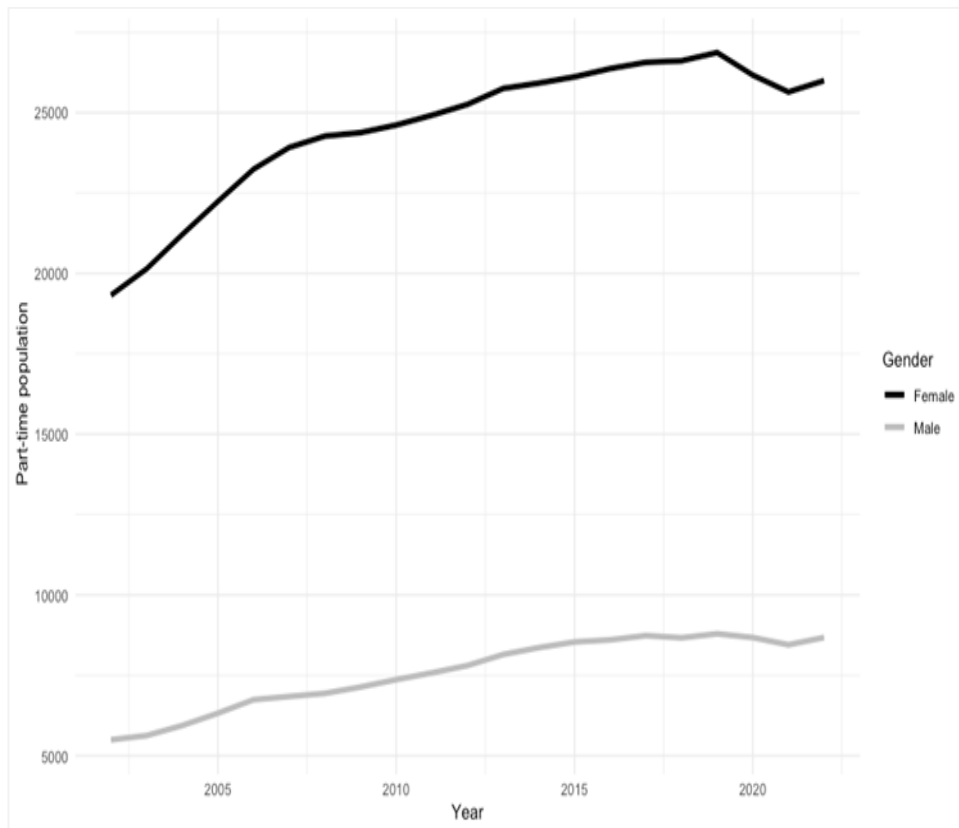
Despite greater participation in the labor market and higher employment rates, women remain susceptible to precarious circumstances. As depicted in Figure 2, women are more inclined towards part-time employment, resulting in lower monthly wages. This trend persists due to a significant proportion of newly created jobs being part-time positions that predominantly favor women (Alper et al., 2019). For many women, part-time work continues to be a viable option for balancing family and professional responsibilities. Achieving a harmonious work-family equilibrium remains a challenge for women, who encounter greater inequalities related to parenthood compared to men, as fatherhood exerts minimal impact on their economic situation. Figure 3 showcases the disparities in employment rates between men and women based on the number of children. While the employment rates for both genders exhibit minimal variation among individuals with one or two children, a considerable decline in female employment rate becomes apparent for individuals with three or more children.

The progress achieved by women in the labor market serves as a positive indicator of their empowerment. Nevertheless, complete gender equality within the labor market has yet to be attained. Women still face lower employment rates, a higher likelihood of inactivity, and continued disparities associated with maternity. These factors undermine their economic situation and financial autonomy. Moreover, even when women are employed, their circumstances are not equivalent to those of men due to their disproportionate representation in precarious economic sectors, an outcome of occupational segregation.

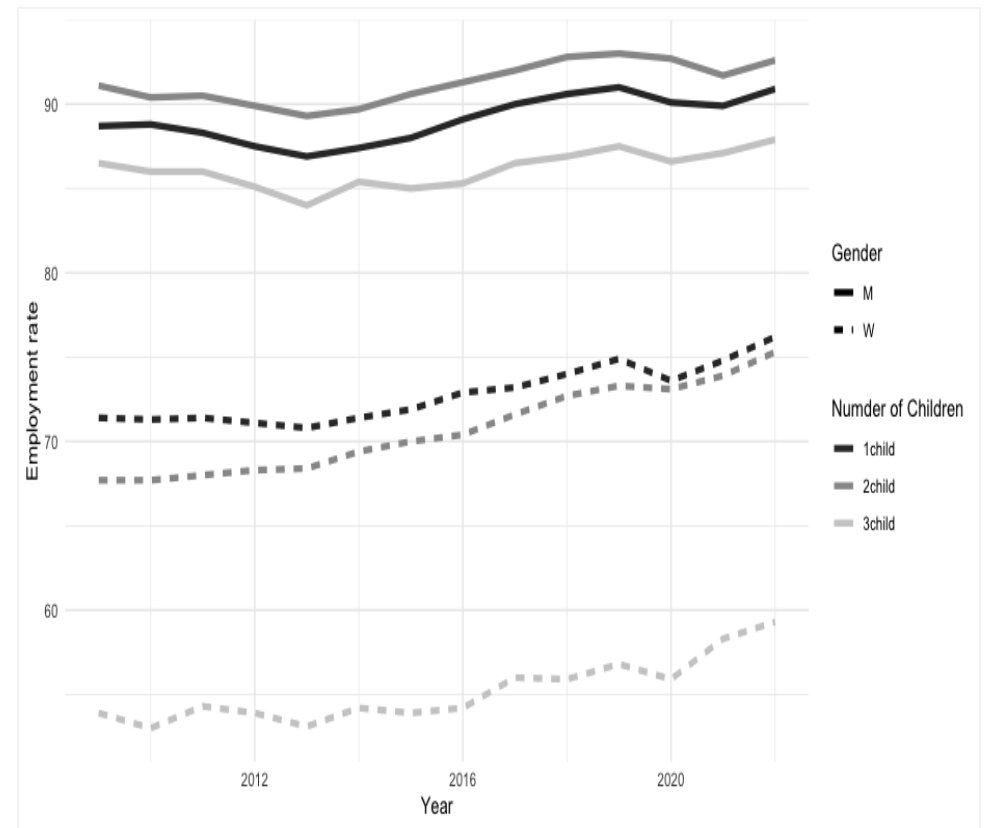
#### **3.2. Occupational Segregation**

Occupational segregation refers to the unequal distribution of individuals across different economic sectors based on gender. The labor market is characterized by sectors that are predominantly occupied by men or women. In Europe, Bettio et al. (2009) find that more than a quarter of the employed population would need to change sectors in order to achieve gender equality in the distribution of men and women across economic sectors. However, there is significant variation among member countries, with a nearly 10-point gap between countries with the highest and lowest rates of segregation.

**Figure 2. Part-time job in EU28, 2002–2022**



**Figure 3. Employment by number of children in EU28, 2009–2022**



Source: European Institute for Gender Equality

Reskin and Bielby (2005) emphasize that while economic factors may partially explain occupational segregation based on employer and worker preferences, sociology views it as a process primarily influenced by gender stereotypes and socialization. According to Seron et al. (2016), addressing the persistence of occupational segregation requires more than just economic incentives. For instance, they provide the example of engineering in the United States, where even when women choose to enter male-dominated sectors, they encounter barriers within the professional environment due to specific socialization processes.

However, Bettio et al. (2009) argue that while stereotypes play a significant role in occupational segregation, their impact may be overestimated. Other factors, such as motherhood, also contribute to the uneven distribution of men and women across sectors. The authors suggest that motherhood leads women to prioritize jobs and sectors with more flexible schedules, contributing to a form of “re-segregation.” Additionally, when excluding full-time workers, the level of segregation increases by 15 to 30 percentage points.

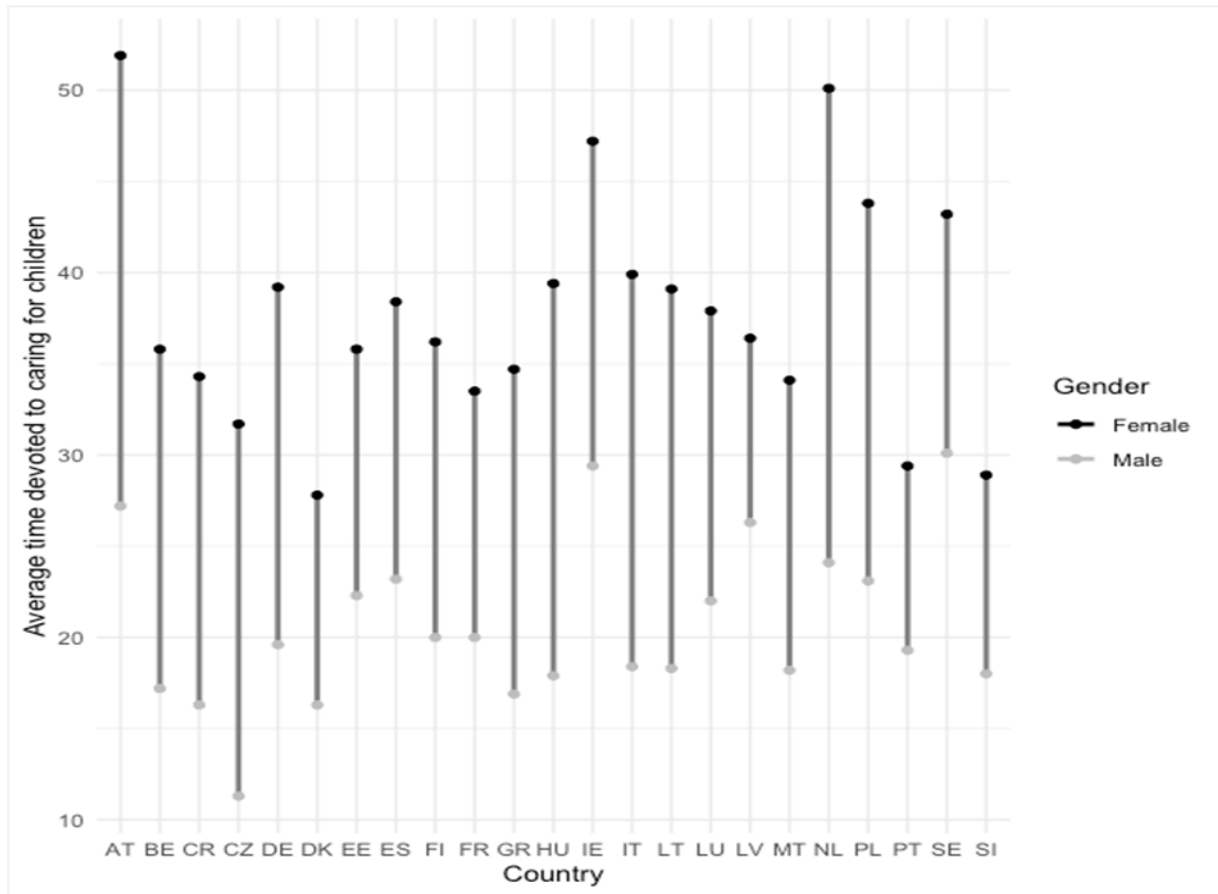
The field of study has also been considered as a factor influencing occupational segregation, but its importance remains mixed. Bettio et al. (2009) demonstrate that although Europe has witnessed a diversification of choices in higher education, potentially leading to a decrease in segregation, studies alone fail to fully explain the level of segregation in a country. They find that only 10% of jobs closely align with the fields of study pursued by workers. Moreover, the authors argue that women’s choice to work in specific sectors can be explained by the influence of motherhood, as they tend to favor jobs and sectors with more flexible schedules. When excluding full-time workers, the level of segregation increases by 15 to 30 percentage points. Motherhood, care work, and women’s employment are closely intertwined. This connection arises from the fact that the household economy, which includes caregiving and domestic work, heavily relies on women’s contributions.

### **3.3. Burden of the Domestic Economy**

The issue of domestic labor remains at the core of the battle against gender inequality, stemming from the division of labor based on sex. Men predominantly engage in paid work, while women shoulder the bulk of unpaid domestic production and caregiving responsibilities.

Despite some progress in the convergence of time allocation between women and men, unpaid work remains primarily carried out by women. The gap in the time devoted to childcare between women and men continues to be substantial (Figure 4). While changes in social norms contribute to this disparity (Fernandez and Sevilla Sanz, 2006; Voicu et al., 2009), institutions also play a crucial role in encouraging paternal engagement in childcare. Fox highlights that social policies aimed at promoting work-family balance predominantly focus on women. An example is the provision of paternity leave, which, in many countries, is either shorter than maternity leave or viewed as more of an individual choice (Fox et al., 2009). Nevertheless, studies suggest that paternity leave can stimulate men’s involvement in care activities (Anxo et al., 2007). Therefore, it represents a vital institutional lever for addressing inequalities in time allocation between women and men.

**Figure 4. Average Weekly Hours spent in Childcare, 2016**



Source: European Institute for Gender Equality

Note: The list of countries includes Germany (DE), Denmark (DK), Spain (ES), Finland (FI), France (FR), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Poland (PL), Sweden (SE), Slovenia (SI), and United Kingdom (UK).

The disproportionate burden of care work negatively impacts personal well-being and the availability of time for paid work, ultimately affecting women’s financial independence (Humphries and Rubery, 1995). Unequal positions in the paid economy, occupational segregation, and the disproportionate responsibility of domestic work placed on women all impede women’s empowerment, perpetuating an economic system where women and men do not experience equitable economic mechanisms. Despite women’s increasing integration into the labor market, their positions do not align with those of men. Inequalities persist in both the labor market and the domestic sphere, maintaining the disparities between men and women.

#### **4. Consequences of Gender Inequalities**

Diverse economic positions result in disparate impacts of economic shocks on men and women. In this regard, both the 2008 financial crisis and the recent Covid-19 pandemic underscore the enduring presence of gender inequalities, exacerbating the economic circumstances of women who are already disproportionately vulnerable to the risk of poverty.

#### 4.1. Gendered Impact of Economic Crises

The gendered impact of economic crises can be attributed to the uneven distribution of women and men across various sectors of activity. [Pérvier \(2014\)](#) describes this impact difference through what she terms the “3 phases” of economic crises. During the initial phase, the economic situation experiences a negative shock that disproportionately affects sectors highly dependent on it, such as public works, construction, and manufacturing, which tend to be male-dominated sectors ([Bettio et al., 2009](#); [Metral and Stokkink, 2016](#)). In the early stages of a crisis, the male unemployment rate dropped rapidly and exceeded that of women, marking a notable occurrence in Europe. On the other hand, women predominantly work in the public sector, which is less susceptible to economic fluctuations. This sets the stage for a second phase, characterized by the recovery of economic activity facilitated by the revival of sectors impacted by the crisis, supported by expansionary policies. Finally, [Pérvier \(2014\)](#) describes the last phase as a period of austerity, primarily focused on controlling spending to rebalance strained national accounts resulting from the previous phase. It is in this final phase that the gendered impact of austerity measures manifests.

Controlling public spending, particularly the rate of its growth, often involves adjustments in public employment, public services, and social benefits. [Theodoropoulou and Watt \(2011\)](#) highlight these channels as common features of countries implementing budget cuts. One of the main measures to control public spending is reducing the overall public salary burden, achieved by factors such as not replacing retiring employees or reducing working hours. This reduction primarily affects sectors such as health, education, and social and cultural services, which are predominantly staffed by women ([Pérvier, 2014](#); [Rubery, 2015](#)). Cuts to public services and social benefits indirectly impact women’s participation in economic activities. Such expenditures typically support the “work-family” balance, a key factor influencing women’s labor force participation. [Himmelweit \(2002\)](#) emphasizes the need to consider gender when assessing the impact of public expenditure, noting that activities and services no longer provided by the state are often absorbed by the domestic economy, predominantly shouldered by women. The increase in domestic workload has been identified by [Rubery \(2015\)](#) as a consequence of austerity policies. Women are consequently affected by a “double penalty”: on one hand, they experience reduced employment opportunities and working hours due to restrictions in public employment; on the other hand, as users and beneficiaries of public services, they encounter difficulties in reconciling work and family responsibilities, leading to a higher prevalence of part-time work ([Edgell and Duke, 1993](#)).

The Covid-19 crisis had a distinct impact. While economic crises, such as the 2008 crisis, primarily affected men’s employment, evidence suggests that women have experienced higher rates of unemployment during the Covid-19 pandemic ([Carli, 2020](#)). Unlike the 2008 crisis, which significantly impacted manufacturing and construction sectors, the service sectors (restaurants, hotels, tourism, culture, etc.), which are predominantly female-dominated, have been most affected. [Reichelt et al. \(2021\)](#) argue that women’s higher exposure to the risk of unemployment can also be attributed to their higher representation in atypical employment.



Furthermore, the lockdown measures disrupted working conditions, with many individuals required to telecommute. [Alon et al. \(2020\)](#) demonstrate that men have greater access to jobs with telecommuting options, exposing women to a higher risk of job loss or reduced working hours.

In terms of the impact on the unpaid economy, several studies have examined the distribution of care activities within heterosexual couples. In England, both men and women increased their time spent with children, but the increase was more substantial for women. Using time-use surveys, [Andrew et al. \(2020\)](#) demonstrate that employed women spent as much time with their children as their non-employed husbands, while non-employed mothers dedicated twice as much time to childcare as employed fathers. In cases where both parents were employed, mothers reduced their working hours and interrupted their paid work more frequently than men. Similar findings were reported for the United States ([Carlson et al., 2021](#)) and Germany ([Reichelt et al., 2021](#)), highlighting the shared patterns of childcare responsibilities and the reduction in women's working hours.

Both the 2008 crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic shed light on the persisting gender inequalities exacerbated by economic shocks. The impact of economic crises differs for men and women due to their unequal distribution across sectors and the gendered nature of policy responses. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate gender disparities and promote equitable economic recovery.

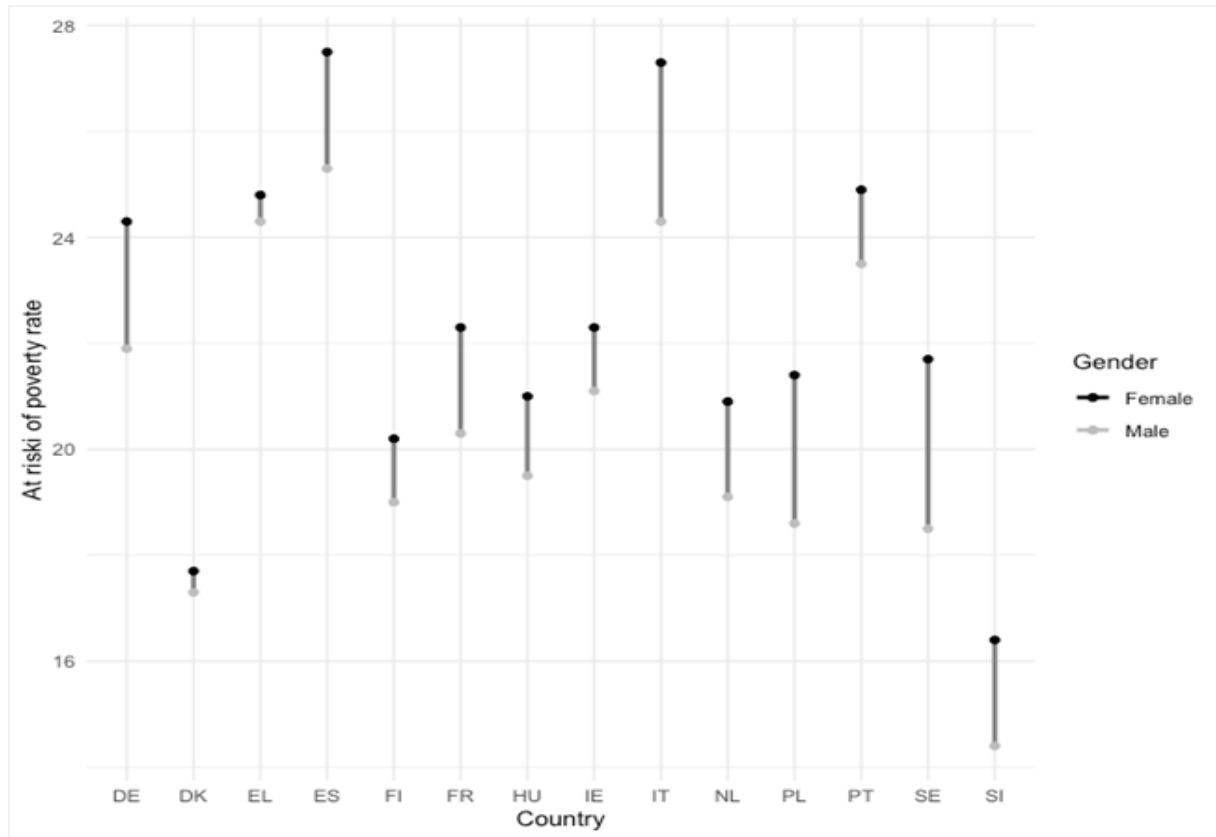
#### **4.2. Women's Exposure to the Risk of Poverty**

Persistent gender inequalities contribute to income disparities, encompassing wage inequality, unequal access to capital, and disparities in wealth accumulation. While the quantification of these inequalities varies across studies, valuable insights can be gleaned from the existing literature.

Horizontal occupational segregation emerges as a major factor driving this pay gap. Women are predominantly concentrated in sectors characterized by higher precariousness, such as sales, personal services, and restaurants ([Mavrikiou and Angelovka, 2020](#)). Despite ongoing desegregation efforts, a disparity in income growth persists between male-dominated and female-dominated sectors. For instance, [Busch \(2020\)](#) reveals that women's incomes in male-dominated or mixed sectors experience substantial growth, while incomes in female-dominated sectors remain stagnant, as observed in the case of Germany. In addition to the horizontal dimension of occupational segregation, a vertical dimension exists. It implies that even within the same sector, including female-dominated sectors, men have a higher likelihood of occupying positions with greater responsibility, leading to higher pay than women ([Blackburn et al., 2001](#)). In parallel to wage inequalities, disparities in wealth between men and women are also evident. [Schneebaum et al. \(2018\)](#) attribute these wealth inequalities to women's limited access to jobs or industries conducive to wealth accumulation. Consequently, men with greater capital hold economic power over women ([Çağatay, 2003](#)).



**Figure 5. Men and Women at Risk Poverty in 14 EU Countries, 2020**



Source: European Institute for Gender Equality

Note: The list of countries includes Germany (DE), Denmark (DK), Greece (EL), Spain (ES), Finland (FI), France (FR), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Sweden (SE), Slovenia (SI), and United Kingdom (UK).

Lower employment rates, higher part-time employment rates, and income inequalities contribute to a higher poverty rate among women (Figure 5). The poverty rate is measured as the proportion of the population, encompassing both men and women, with an income below 60% of the median income. With the exception of Finland, the poverty rate for women exceeds that of men in the remaining countries examined. Several authors have argued that the conventional measurement method underestimates women’s poverty (Corsi et al., 2016; Meulders and O’Dorchai, 2011). In social sciences, poverty is regarded as a phenomenon affecting households. Poverty statistics reflect the percentage of individuals belonging to households with disposable incomes below the poverty line. Meulders and O’Dorchai (2011) focus on “individual poverty” or “financial dependence” and reveal significantly higher rates than the traditionally accepted poverty rate, with differences of up to 30 percentage points. This phenomenon predominantly affects women, as men’s individual poverty rates align more closely with the standard poverty rate. Similar findings are reported by Corsi et al. (2016).

The individual approach highlights that studying women’s poverty solely through the household lens captures only a fraction of the issue. It is imperative to delve deeper into income

disparities between spouses. [Hobson \(1990\)](#) investigates this question by analyzing a dozen Western countries in the late 1970s or mid-1980s. Through her dependency value, she demonstrates that the contribution of spouses to household income varies from a difference of 40.6 percentage points in Sweden to 77 percentage points in Switzerland. [Huber et al. \(2009\)](#) find that, on average, countries with social democratic welfare states exhibit lower income disparities between spouses in the mid-1990s, whereas Christian democratic countries demonstrate the highest income disparities.

Economics delves into the crucial aspect of women's independence by exploring the question of their economic autonomy in relation to their spouses. While this subject remains a matter of ongoing debate, it is important to note that defining women's economic independence solely within the framework of intra-household inequalities is a limited approach. This narrow perspective fails to acknowledge the independence of single women and neglects an assessment of their capacity to sustain themselves through their own income. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of women's economic independence requires a broader examination that encompasses both married and single women, allowing for a more accurate evaluation of their self-sufficiency ([Frecheville-Faucon, 2023](#)). Recent studies focusing on the determinants of women's economic independence have shown that family policies not based on the male breadwinner model positively impact women's economic independence, highlighting the role of gender egalitarian welfare states [Alper \(2019\)](#).

## **5. Public Policies and Gender Inequalities**

Despite the persistent challenges and obstacles, significant progress has been made towards achieving gender equality. This progress has been driven by legal frameworks, policies, and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality.

### **5.1. Welfare State and Women's Economic Emancipation**

While public employment is a driver for women's participation in the labor market, social spending also plays an important role, enabling work-life balance. Indeed, the development of the welfare state has made it possible to support women's participation in the labor market, the decline in social policies observed in Western countries, and more particularly in Europe, raises questions about the role of the State in the women's emancipation. Public policies put in place after the 2008 crisis at the community level leave a mixed picture in terms of the fight against gender inequalities.

The traditional classification of welfare states, as proposed by [Esping-Andersen \(1990\)](#), highlights three categories based on the criterion of decommodification: the liberal model, the social-democratic model, and the conservative-corporatist model. However, social protection cannot be solely determined by market forces or institutional frameworks. This classification overlooks the concept of "demarketing" of labor, which is closely tied to the domestic economy. [Orloff \(1993\)](#) emphasizes that, historically, women have sought "commodification" to achieve

social and economic emancipation from men, but their access to the labor market has been strongly influenced by domestic work.

An alternative classification proposed by Lewis (1992) considers the interaction between the paid economy and the unpaid economy by focusing on the concept of “defamilialization.” This concept refers to the extent to which care tasks are externalized from families and recognizes individuals as workers rather than solely defining them by their roles as spouses or mothers. Three models emerge from this perspective: (i) the “male breadwinner” model, prevalent in liberal welfare states; (ii) the “parental” model, developed in countries like France, which provides social benefits for women as both workers and mothers or wives; and (iii) the “two breadwinner” model, observed in Scandinavian countries, which emphasizes the recognition and professionalization of care activities.

In the majority of European countries, social protection systems were designed to provide coverage for a salaried man and his family against life’s risks. Consequently, they are often ill-suited to accommodate women as active participants in the labor force (Çağatay, 2003; Metral and Stokkink, 2016). The relationship between the welfare state and women’s employment has sparked extensive debate in the social science literature. Does the welfare state promote women’s empowerment, or does it perpetuate social norms that undermine gender equality? While the answer to this question is nuanced, it underscores the significant role of the welfare state in shaping women’s activities.

One argument in favor of the State’s involvement in women’s emancipation is the transfer of care activities from the private sphere to the public sphere. Hernes (1984) demonstrates that as care activities become the responsibility of the State, women gain greater economic opportunities for their emancipation. Dahlerup (1987) supports this idea in the context of the Scandinavian-style welfare state, which provides services and employment opportunities that enhance women’s independence. Similarly, Calvacanti (2003) shows that increased female labor force participation leads to the expansion of government size because women, upon entering the workforce, seek to delegate some family-related services to the State. However, Hernes (1987) questions this relationship between the welfare state and women’s activities, raising the concern of whether women have truly achieved independence or if dependence has merely shifted from men to the State, which now guarantees women’s economic activity. The author tends to support the latter proposition. Dauphin (2010) argues similarly, suggesting that the State has not eradicated the sexual division of labor. The role of “woman-mother” persists, and policies promoting the “work-family” reconciliation primarily target women.

The issue of women’s dependence on the State and its public spending becomes particularly relevant in times of austerity. Périvier (2018) explores the consequences of austerity measures on the degree of decommodification and defamilialization within the welfare state. A retreat from corporatist models may disproportionately impact women due to income and career disparities. For instance, Bonnet et al. (2006) demonstrate that retirement pension inequalities between women and men in France hover around 40 percent, a gap that would widen further if only contribution-based benefits were considered, as women’s retirement pensions primarily

rely on survivor's pensions. Additionally, austerity measures lead to increased labor market flexibility, which can disproportionately affect women, who are overrepresented in sectors vulnerable to market deregulation, such as sales and services (Pérvier, 2018).

## 5.2. Public Policies for Gender Equality: The European Case

Gender mainstreaming is a paradigm that encompasses the design and analysis of public policies, with a strong emphasis on gender equality. It aims to be applied across all public policies and is built upon three key pillars. Firstly, it involves implementing public policies that anticipate their impact on gender inequalities. This proactive approach ensures that policies are designed to address and prevent gender disparities from the outset. Secondly, gender mainstreaming utilizes structural tools to address the underlying causes of inequality. Rather than merely repairing or compensating for inequalities, the focus is on resolving them at their root and ensuring long-term change. Lastly, gender mainstreaming emphasizes the importance of avoiding the perpetuation of gender stereotypes through policy implementation, particularly in communication efforts.

In the late 1990s, the European Union adopted the gender mainstreaming approach following the 1995 Beijing Convention for Women. Consequently, objectives related to female employment emerged alongside the development of family policies aimed at facilitating women's professional careers. One crucial aspect of family policies is childcare expenditure, which has been extensively documented for its impact on women's economic activity. Jaumotte (2004) highlights the significance of childcare services and subsidies in fostering women's labor force participation. She examines the explanatory power of economic policies, particularly family policies and parental leave, and demonstrates that childcare subsidies play a decisive role in women's participation.

Esping-Andersen (2009) reinforces this idea by emphasizing that countries with robust social transfers, such as childcare services and parental leave, tend to have higher fertility rates and greater participation rates among mothers compared to countries where childcare responsibilities primarily rest with mothers themselves. Additionally, Erhel and Guergoat-Larivière (2013) investigate key variables influencing women's choice between full-time and part-time employment, focusing on the role of childcare and family policies. Their analysis, covering 24 European countries in 2005 and 2006, reveals a positive relationship between formal childcare availability and women's full-time employment, as well as a negative relationship with informal childcare.

To address the need for accessible childcare, the European Council established the Barcelona target in 2002, aiming for 90% of children between three years old and school age and 30% of children under three years old to be in childcare by 2010. While this target contributed to reducing childcare gaps, it appears that not all countries achieved the objective by 2018. It is important to note that the Barcelona target does not specify a minimum number of childcare hours, which can significantly influence the prevalence of part-time jobs for women.

Nevertheless, this policy has led to a convergence of family policies within the European Union, with many countries choosing to invest in services and prioritize in-kind family benefits over cash benefits such as family allowances. Despite the efforts, EU policies have yielded mixed results. The policies, which emerged in the late 1990s, focused specifically on growth and employment. Women's employment was identified as an "underutilized labor pool" (Jacquot, 2009) with the potential to boost growth and address broader issues such as population aging and the sustainability of social protection systems.

The Lisbon Strategy in 2000 exemplified this trend, setting a target of achieving a female employment rate of 60% by 2010 in each Member State, with an overall rate of 70% for the 15-24 age group. Gender mainstreaming was included as a condition for financing projects promoting employment within the European Social Fund, the community fund responsible for financing employment-related initiatives. However, these policies have limitations. Often, the measures implemented prioritize quantity of work rather than quality (Bettio et al., 2009; Périvier and Verdugo, 2018). As mentioned earlier, women's employment is primarily characterized by atypical jobs, such as fixed-term contracts and part-time work. The objective of creating a more dynamic labor market appears to have taken precedence over promoting equality (Walby, 2004). The 2008 crisis marked a turning point in EU policies. Austerity measures were implemented without integrating the gender dimension, and the Europe 2020 strategy failed to adequately address the issue. The inclusion of gender in employment objectives was removed, and an overall employment rate of 75% became the sole target (Fagan and Rubery, 2018). Furthermore, Horizon 2020, which followed, seemed to depoliticize gender equality objectives in favor of economic ones (Vida, 2021).

The challenges in achieving gender equality remain substantial. The persistent inequalities have tangible consequences, particularly in terms of poverty and financial autonomy for women. While the state and social policies play crucial roles in women's emancipation, their effectiveness relies on a strong political will to implement and support these policies. Overall, addressing gender inequalities requires ongoing efforts and a comprehensive approach that encompasses all aspects of public policy, aiming not only to enable women's participation in the labor market but also to promote equal opportunities and eliminate gender stereotypes.

## **6. Conclusion**

Efforts to address gender inequalities and promote equality have been ongoing throughout the past century. Despite the presence of legal frameworks and policies aimed at fostering gender equality, women continue to confront economic, political, social, and cultural barriers that hinder their full and equal participation in society. This chapter has explored the historical context of gender inequality, its various dimensions and manifestations, the advancements made towards gender equality, persistent challenges, and the significance of gender equality for sustainable development and social justice.

Gender equality is fundamental to achieving sustainable development. By empowering women and girls and ensuring their equal participation in the workforce and in decision-making processes, societies can unleash their full potential and reap the benefits of their talents and contributions. Ongoing research endeavors and interdisciplinary collaborations are crucial for improving our understanding of gender equality in different contexts. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, scholars strive to unravel the complexities of gender dynamics and shed light on the historical progression of gender equality.

Significant strides have been made in addressing gender inequalities across societies worldwide throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The expansion of women's rights, educational opportunities, and career advancements has played a pivotal role in reducing gender disparities. However, despite these positive developments, formidable obstacles remain that impede the achievement of complete gender equality. This chapter has shown that while gender inequalities have substantially decreased during these periods, there are persistent barriers that continue to hinder further progress. Various aspects of contemporary society contribute to perpetuate gender inequalities, manifesting in unequal pay, limited employment opportunities for women, discriminatory practices, and persistence of gender stereotypes.

Although the women's rights movement has made significant strides in the past, there are still numerous areas where women face disadvantages. Addressing gender inequality in the twenty-first century entails challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, promoting gender-neutral parenting and education, and establishing more equitable workplace policies. By collaborating and working together, society can strive towards a more equitable future for all. Continued efforts to advocate for gender equality, implement policy reforms, and foster broader social change will contribute to a more inclusive and equal society.

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