

# Increasing the Labour Participation of Women

by Anna Matysiak and Anna Kurowska

## Summary

Despite having higher education levels, European women participate less in the labour force than men. They often work part-time, earn lower wages and are underrepresented in leadership positions. This disparity, rooted in traditional gender ideologies and institutional barriers, limits the economic and social advancement of European societies, especially amid ageing populations and labour shortages. Women invest more in housework and childcare, face higher caregiving burdens, and endure psychological strain from balancing paid and unpaid work. Policy recommendations include redistributing care responsibilities between women, men, employers and the state and increasing the market value of care work. Furthermore, governments should combat gender-based segregation in the labour market, ensure pay and promotion transparency, and appreciate employee-oriented flexible working arrangements. Finally, it is crucial to address women's health needs throughout their careers. Comprehensive interventions are essential to ensure women's full and sustained employment.

**Keywords** Gender inequalities – Labour market – Care – Employment segregation – Wage gap – Flexible work – Women's health – Policies

## Introduction

Although the education levels of European women are higher than those of men, their participation in the labour force remains lower. Women work part-time more often, earn lower wages and are underrepresented in managerial positions. Additionally, women often outnumber men in lower-paid occupations. This disparity in labour market participation poses multiple challenges. Women's potential, including their human capital and creativity, is not fully utilised, which impedes the economic and social advancement of European societies. This is particularly problematic given the rapid ageing of European populations, which is leading to labour shortages and fiscal pressures. Furthermore, as a consequence of their lower participation in the labour market, women receive lower pensions and are at higher risk of poverty when they become older. It is thus crucial to address gender disparities within the labour market and actively foster women's employment that can be sustained in the long run, that is, enabling the reconciliation of paid work with private life and the integration of diverse professional and life goals. To achieve this, comprehensive policy interventions are needed.

## Gender inequalities and gaps in care

Although the gender gap in domestic work has gradually decreased over the past few decades,<sup>1</sup> women continue to invest significantly more hours in housework and childcare than men do.<sup>2</sup> In the EU, twice as many women as men spend at least five hours every day caring for children.<sup>3</sup> The unequal division of unpaid work, particularly caregiving, limits women's ability to fully participate in paid employment. It also leads to women experiencing greater difficulties in combining paid work with care than men. These difficulties, in turn,

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Altintas and O. Sullivan, 'Fifty Years of Change Updated: Cross-National Gender Convergence in Housework', *Demographic Research* 35 (2016), 455–70.

<sup>2</sup> A. Pailhé, A. Solaz and M. Stanfors, 'The Great Convergence: Gender and Unpaid Work in Europe and the United States', *Population and Development Review* 47/1 (2021), 181–217.

<sup>3</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality, *A Better Work–Life Balance: Bridging the Gender Care Gap* (Vilnius, Lithuania, 2023).

result in adverse mental health outcomes for women who balance extensive paid employment with unpaid household labour.<sup>4</sup>

The gender disparities in the division of domestic work are rooted in traditional gender ideologies but are also perpetuated by institutional arrangements that hinder men’s greater engagement in care in the household. In contrast to non-transferable rights (i.e. available to fathers only), shareable parental leave, even if well paid, does not foster a substantially higher use of leave by fathers.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, in most European countries, men still have access to much shorter non-transferable paid care-related leave than women.<sup>6</sup>

Another institutional barrier to women’s engagement in employment is the remaining childcare gaps (understood as the period between the end of well-paid parental leave and the minimum age for the child’s legal entitlement to full-time institutional childcare). Only six EU member states do not have a childcare gap,<sup>7</sup> and the number is even lower if real opportunities for high-quality childcare are taken into account. Furthermore, many European countries still do not provide full-time and flexible institutional childcare, which is essential for women’s ability to work full-time.

Finally, gender inequalities and institutional barriers to full-time employment are also faced by women in the later stages of life when elderly care is involved. In 2023 over 20% of inactive but wanting-to-work women aged 20–64 in the EU, compared to just 3% of inactive men in the same age group, were not in paid work due to responsibilities linked to caring for children or for adults with disabilities.<sup>8</sup> But many working women combine paid work with providing care to their elderly parents, and this has negative effects on their psychological well-being, particularly in cases of high-intensity care.<sup>9</sup> These negative consequences, in turn, may impact women’s productivity at work. Working women are disproportionately involved in caring for elderly people across Europe, with the highest gender gaps found in southern and eastern member states, where 30% of women provide care to elderly parents, compared to only 17% of men.<sup>10</sup>

## Gender-based segregation and inequalities in pay

Apart from gender inequalities in care, gender-based segregation significantly contributes to women’s lower participation in the labour market and gender disparities in labour market outcomes. Women work in greater numbers in service jobs, particularly in sales, retail trade, health, social work and education, while men more often work in manufacturing and construction sectors.<sup>11</sup> Women are also heavily underrepresented in the well-paid information, communication and technology sector.<sup>12</sup> Vertical segregation is even stronger, with women making up only one-third of the board members in the largest listed companies in the EU and fewer than 10% holding the highest executive positions.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, women remain underrepresented among political leaders and in top governmental roles.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>4</sup> J. Ervin et al., ‘Gender Differences in the Association Between Unpaid Labour and Mental Health in Employed Adults: A Systematic Review’, *The Lancet Public Health* 7/9 (2022), e775–86. See also M. Gilbert-Ouimet, C. Brisson and M. Vézina, ‘Psychosocial Work Stressors, High Family Responsibilities, and Psychological Distress Among Women: A 5-Year Prospective Study’, *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 63/2 (2020), 170–9.

<sup>5</sup> A. Koslowski and G. Kadar-Satat, ‘Fathers at Work: Explaining the Gaps Between Entitlement to Leave Policies and Uptake’, *Community Work & Family* 22/2 (2019), 129–45; L. Haas and T. Rostgaard, ‘Fathers’ Rights to Paid Parental Leave in the Nordic Countries: Consequences for the Gendered Division of Leave’, *Community Work & Family* 14/2 (2011), 177–95.

<sup>6</sup> S. Blum et al., *19th International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023*, International Network on Leave Policies and Research (2023).

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, Eurydice, *Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe – 2023: Early Childhood Education and Care* (Luxembourg, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Eurostat, ‘Inactive Population Not Seeking Employment by Sex, Age and Main Reason’, updated 12 September 2024.

<sup>9</sup> E. Labbas and M. Stanfors, ‘Does Caring for Parents Take Its Toll? Gender Differences in Caregiving Intensity, Coresidence, and Psychological Well-Being Across Europe’, *European Journal of Population* 39 (2023), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> A. Matysiak and E. Cukrowska-Torzewska, ‘Gender and Labour Market Outcomes’, in N. Schneider and M. Kreyenfeld (eds.), *Research Handbook on the Sociology of the Family* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 329–41.

<sup>12</sup> OECD, *Joining Forces for Gender Equality: What is Holding Us Back?* (OECD Publishing, 2023), 151.

<sup>13</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Statistics Database* (2021).

<sup>14</sup> OECD, *Joining Forces for Gender Equality*.

Gender-based segregation in employment is driven by different educational choices and strong social norms associating service work with femininity and technical or managerial work with masculinity.<sup>15</sup> Women are less likely to graduate in science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects and men in health, welfare, business, administration and law.<sup>16</sup> Women often leave male-dominated jobs for other fields, partly due to work cultures that reward long hours and availability beyond standard work hours, which is challenging for women with care obligations.<sup>17</sup> Men avoid female-dominated jobs, likely due, in part, to lower pay. Gender-based segregation may be further exacerbated by feelings of social isolation or experiences of sexual harassment which women are more exposed to in male-dominated fields.<sup>18</sup>

Gender-based segregation is a major reason for the persistence of gender differences in hourly wages.<sup>19</sup> Female-dominated jobs often pay less than male-dominated ones. Other factors contributing to the gender wage gap include women's disproportionate involvement in care (e.g. care-related career breaks, reduction in working hours) and discrimination, which takes place when women and men receive different wages for similar work.<sup>20</sup>

Several reasons explain why female-dominated jobs pay less than male-dominated ones. One is the undervaluation of typical female tasks due to their association with unpaid household chores, such as care.<sup>21</sup> Another is the overvaluation of typical male traits such as power in hierarchically structured organisations.<sup>22</sup> Service work, often done by women, may also be less well paid because it is considered a vocation driven by altruism rather than a desire for profit.<sup>23</sup>

## Cumulative gender inequalities later in life

Childbearing often leads to career breaks for women, and the subsequent childcare responsibilities further reduce their work engagement. These cumulative effects contribute to the disadvantages women face in the labour market later in life. In many European countries, the gender wage gap tends to increase with age until retirement.<sup>24</sup> This growth in pay inequalities may be attributed to both the lower mobility of women between companies and their lower chances of being promoted within firms as compared to men. With rapidly ageing societies, more and more women will face increased care responsibilities later in life, which may contribute to the further aggravation of their disadvantageous position in the labour market.

Furthermore, women, unlike men, undergo serious health-related changes in later life due to their menopausal transition. Studies estimate that between 20% and 40% of menopausal women experience adverse health symptoms that negatively impact the quality of both their personal and work lives.<sup>25</sup> These negative effects are

<sup>15</sup> A. Matysiak, W. Hardy and L. van der Velde, 'Structural Labour Market Change and Gender Inequality in Earnings', *Work, Employment and Society* (2024).

<sup>16</sup> OECD, *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators* (Paris, 2022), 170.

<sup>17</sup> Y. Cha, 'Overwork and the Persistence of Gender Segregation in Occupations', *Gender & Society* 27/2 (2013), 158–84.

<sup>18</sup> S. Das, A. Kotikula and E. Carranza, *Gender-Based Employment Segregation: Understanding Causes and Policy Interventions*, World Bank, Jobs Working Paper no. 26 (Washington, DC, 2019), 26–7.

<sup>19</sup> F. D. Blau and L. M. Kahn, 'The Gender Wage Gap: Extent, Trends, and Explanations', *Journal of Economic Literature* 55/3 (2017), 789–865; D. Leythienne and P. Ronkowski, 'A Decomposition of the Unadjusted Gender Pay Gap Using Structure of Earnings Survey Data', Eurostat Statistical Working Papers (Luxembourg, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Matysiak and Cukrowska-Torzewska, 'Gender and Labour Market Outcomes'.

<sup>21</sup> P. England, M. Budig and N. Folbre, 'Wages of Virtue: The Relative Pay of Care Work', *Social Problems* 49/4 (2002), 455–73.

<sup>22</sup> R. E. Freeland and C. E. Harnois, 'Bridging the Gender Wage Gap: Gendered Cultural Sentiments, Sex Segregation, and Occupation-Level Wages', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 83/2 (2020), 129–51.

<sup>23</sup> P. England, 'Emerging Theories of Care Work', *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005), 381–99.

<sup>24</sup> OECD, *Joining Forces for Gender Equality: What is Holding Us Back?* (2023), 174–5.

<sup>25</sup> C. Hardy et al., 'Work Outcomes in Midlife Women: The Impact of Menopause, Work Stress, and Working Environment', *Women's Midlife Health* 4/3 (2018); B. Ayers and M. S. Hunter, 'Health-Related Quality of Life of Women With Menopausal Hot Flashes and Night Sweats', *Climacteric* 16/2 (2013), 235–9.

not only due to menopausal symptoms but also due to embarrassment and concern about the reactions of others.<sup>26</sup> It has been shown that negative menopausal effects are reported no matter which type of occupation women perform.<sup>27</sup>

## Policy recommendations

Care should no longer fall solely to women but be shared equally between women and men. To achieve this goal, the support of both the state and employers is needed. Society, including employers, must see men as no less responsible or capable than women for caring. To become more engaged in childcare, fathers need to have access to well-paid non-transferable childcare-related leave.<sup>28</sup> Studies show that non-transferable leave quotas for fathers have positive effects on gender equality in labour market outcomes.<sup>29</sup> Fully paid non-transferable leave for fathers, equal in length to maternity leave, would be an ideal solution, providing not only equality of rights to care for both parents but also financial sustainability and a strong symbolic message that care is as valuable as paid work. Policies should not only encourage fathers' involvement in childcare but also promote men's participation in care over the entire life course, including elderly care. Furthermore, following the European Commission's European Care Strategy, European states should also ensure access to full-time, affordable and flexible institutional childcare and elderly care. All European states should close childcare gaps. Institutional flexible and affordable long-term care services should also be developed along with childcare, as growing demand for these services is expected as a result of rapidly ageing societies. Finally, employers should facilitate work–life balance by offering employee-oriented flexible working arrangements with pay and promotion opportunities equal to standard work arrangements.

Increasing the participation of women in the labour force also requires equal career opportunities for women and men. To this end, it is pivotal to reduce gender-based segregation in the labour market by both increasing the presence of women in leadership positions and encouraging women and men to enter sectors and occupations traditionally dominated by the opposite gender. Like the OECD<sup>30</sup> and World Bank,<sup>31</sup> we recommend multidimensional actions implemented from early educational stages. These may include supporting gender-neutral teaching materials and providing training for teachers on how to avoid perpetuating gender stereotypes. Encouraging more men to enter the education field (especially to teach at the pre-primary and primary levels) is also needed to present diverse role models and more effectively meet the different needs of boys and girls.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, policies should support workplace environments that accommodate the diverse needs of women and men and provide them with opportunities to excel. Instead of promoting a culture of excessive devotion to work, such as long hours and constant availability, workplaces should prioritise work–life balance and employees' mental well-being (e.g. through the flexible organisation of work, task sharing and respecting the need for time off work) and foster employees' inclusion (e.g. through penalising sexual and other types of harassment and providing training on gender sensitivity).<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, increasing remuneration in female-dominated professions that require the same or similar skills as male-dominated ones may help attract men

<sup>26</sup> M. J. Smith et al., 'Men and Women's Perceptions of Hot Flashes Within Social Situations: Are Menopausal Women's Negative Beliefs Valid?', *Maturitas* 69/1 (2011), 57–62; M. S. Hunter and K. Liao, 'A Psychological Analysis of Menopausal Hot Flashes', *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 34/4 (1995), 589–99.

<sup>27</sup> S. D'Angelo et al., 'Impact of Menopausal Symptoms on Work: Findings From Women in the Health and Employment After Fifty (HEAF) Study', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20/1 (2022), 295.

<sup>28</sup> J. Ekberg, R. Eriksson and G. Friebel, 'Parental Leave – A Policy Evaluation of the Swedish "Daddy-Month" Reform', *Journal of Public Economics* 97 (2013), 131–43; A.-Z. Duvander and M. Johansson, 'What Are the Effects of Reforms Promoting Fathers' Parental Leave Use?', *Journal of European Social Policy* 22/3 (2012), 319–30.

<sup>29</sup> A. Patnaik, 'Reserving Time for Daddy: The Short and Long-Run Consequences of Fathers' Quotas', *Journal of Labor Economics* 37/4 (2019), 1009–59.

<sup>30</sup> OECD, *Joining Forces for Gender Equality*, 13–14.

<sup>31</sup> Das, Kotikula and Carranza, *Gender-Based Employment Segregation*, iv–vii.

<sup>32</sup> For more details see OECD, *Joining Forces for Gender Equality*, 109–12.

<sup>33</sup> For more details see Das, Kotikula and Carranza, *Gender-Based Employment Segregation*, vi, 26–28.

into these occupations and combat gender differences in pay. Such actions should diminish gender differences in pay gaps in the long run. Last but not least, efforts are needed to ensure equal opportunities for women and men in equivalent positions. The EU Pay Transparency Directive is a good step in this direction. Next steps could incorporate promoting transparency in hiring and promotion practices.

Finally, increasing women’s participation in the labour market requires investment in their human capital, including skills and physical and mental health. Adapting work environments to women’s health needs is crucial to maintaining higher productivity and preventing workforce withdrawal. Such actions should extend beyond pregnancy and maternity, encompassing a comprehensive understanding of women’s health needs at various life stages, including menstruation and menopause. The European Menopause and Andropause Society guidelines emphasise the need for supportive workplace environments, including flexible working hours, improved access to health services, and increased awareness among employers to help mitigate the negative impact of direct and indirect menopausal symptoms on women’s quality of life and work performance. Workplaces should support employees’ access to medical services and offer periodic high-quality health evaluations. Finally, skill enhancement programmes are needed that are tailored to women in their mid-career stages, given women’s susceptibility to skill depreciation due to care-related career breaks and their higher prevalence in positions at risk of automation.

	<b>Programme 1</b>	<b>Programme 2</b>	<b>Programme 3</b>
	<b>Redistributing care responsibilities between parents, the welfare state and employers</b>	<b>Fostering gender equality in professional careers and pay</b>	<b>Improving the ability of women to remain active in the labour market longer</b>
<b>Project 1</b>	Foster men’s involvement in child and elderly care, for example, by ensuring access for men and women to equally paid care leave and promoting men’s engagement in care through social campaigns.	Reduce gender segregation in occupations, particularly by encouraging women’s entry into science and technology and men’s uptake of traditionally female-dominated jobs.	Adapt work conditions to women’s health needs at various life stages, extending the focus beyond periods of pregnancy and early childbearing to encompass menstruation and menopause.
<b>Project 2</b>	Advance full-time, flexible, high-quality and affordable child and elderly care.	Increase the share of women in managerial positions by ensuring both transparent promotion processes and working conditions that encourage a work–life balance in such positions.	Facilitate access to preventative healthcare through workplace environments.
<b>Project 3</b>	Incentivise employers to create conditions that facilitate work–family balance and ensure equal treatment of those working flexibly with those in standard working arrangements.	Ensure equal pay for women and men in equivalent positions by ensuring transparency of pay across all EU member states.	Develop skill enhancement programmes tailored, in particular, to women in the middle stages of their careers, enabling them to adapt to rapid technological changes in the labour market.

## Bibliography

- Altintas, E. and Sullivan, O., 'Fifty Years of Change Updated: Cross-National Gender Convergence in Housework', *Demographic Research* 35 (2016), 455–70.
- Ayers, B. and Hunter, M. S., 'Health-Related Quality of Life of Women With Menopausal Hot Flushes and Night Sweats', *Climacteric* 16/2 (2013), 235–9.
- Blau, F. D. and Kahn, L. M., 'The Gender Wage Gap: Extent, Trends, and Explanations', *Journal of Economic Literature* 55/3 (2017), 789–865.
- Blum, S. et al., *19th International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023*, International Network on Leave Policies and Research (2023), accessed at [http://www.leavenetwork.org/lp\\_and\\_r\\_reports](http://www.leavenetwork.org/lp_and_r_reports) on 5 August 2024.
- Cha, Y., 'Overwork and the Persistence of Gender Segregation in Occupations', *Gender & Society* 27/2 (2013), 158–84.
- D'Angelo, S. et al., 'Impact of Menopausal Symptoms on Work: Findings From Women in the Health and Employment After Fifty (HEAF) Study', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20/1 (2022).
- Das, S., Kotikula, A. and Carranza, E., *Gender-Based Employment Segregation: Understanding Causes and Policy Interventions*, World Bank, Jobs Working Paper no. 26 (Washington, DC, 2019).
- Duvander, A.-Z. and Johansson, M., 'What Are the Effects of Reforms Promoting Fathers' Parental Leave Use?', *Journal of European Social Policy* 22/3 (2012), 319–30.
- European Institute for Gender Equality, *A Better Work–Life Balance: Bridging the Gender Care Gap* (2023), accessed at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/better-work-life-balance-bridging-gender-care-gap> on 5 August 2024.
- European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Statistics Database* (2021), accessed at <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs> on 5 August 2024.
- Ekberg, J., Eriksson, R. and Friebel, G., 'Parental Leave – A Policy Evaluation of the Swedish “Daddy-Month” Reform', *Journal of Public Economics* 97 (2013), 131–43.
- England, P., 'Emerging Theories of Care Work', *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005), 381–99.
- England, P., Budig, M. and Folbre, N., 'Wages of Virtue: The Relative Pay of Care Work', *Social Problems* 49/4 (2002), 455–73.
- Ervin, J. et al., 'Gender Differences in the Association Between Unpaid Labour and Mental Health in Employed Adults: A Systematic Review', *The Lancet Public Health* 7/9 (2022), e775–86.
- European Commission, Eurydice, *Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe – 2023: Early Childhood Education and Care* (Luxembourg, 2023).
- Eurostat, 'Inactive Population Not Seeking Employment by Sex, Age and Main Reason', updated 12 September 2024, doi:10.2908/KFSA\_IGAR.
- Freeland, R. E. and Harnois, C. E., 'Bridging the Gender Wage Gap: Gendered Cultural Sentiments, Sex Segregation, and Occupation-Level Wages', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 83/2 (2020), 129–51.

- Gilbert-Ouimet, M., Brisson, C. and Vézina, M., 'Psychosocial Work Stressors, High Family Responsibilities, and Psychological Distress Among Women: A 5-Year Prospective Study', *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 63/2 (2020), 170–9.
- Haas, L. and Rostgaard, T., 'Fathers' Rights to Paid Parental Leave in the Nordic Countries: Consequences for the Gendered Division of Leave', *Community Work & Family* 14/2 (2011), 177–95.
- Hardy, C. et al., 'Work Outcomes in Midlife Women: The Impact of Menopause, Work Stress, and Working Environment', *Women's Midlife Health* 4/3 (2018).
- Hunter, M. S. and Liao, K., 'A Psychological Analysis of Menopausal Hot Flashes', *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 34/4 (1995), 589–99.
- Koslowski, A. and Kadar-Satat, G., 'Fathers at Work: Explaining the Gaps Between Entitlement to Leave Policies and Uptake', *Community Work & Family* 22/2 (2019), 129–45.
- Labbas, E. and Stanfors, M., 'Does Caring for Parents Take Its Toll? Gender Differences in Caregiving Intensity, Coresidence, and Psychological Well-Being Across Europe', *European Journal of Population* 39 (2023).
- Leythienne, D. and Ronkowski, P., *A Decomposition of the Unadjusted Gender Pay Gap Using Structure of Earnings Survey Data*, Eurostat Statistical Working Papers (Luxembourg, 2018).
- Matysiak, A. and Cukrowska-Torzewska, E., 'Gender and Labour Market Outcomes', in N. Schneider and M. Kreyenfeld (eds.), *Research Handbook on the Sociology of the Family* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 329–41.
- Matysiak, A., Hardy, W. and van der Velde, L., 'Structural Labour Market Change and Gender Inequality in Earnings', *Work, Employment and Society* (2024), doi:10.1177/0950017024125.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators* (Paris, 2022).
- OECD, *Joining Forces for Gender Equality: What is Holding Us Back?* (2023), doi:10.1787/67d48024-en.
- Pailhé, A., Solaz, A. and Stanfors, M., 'The Great Convergence: Gender and Unpaid Work in Europe and the United States', *Population and Development Review* 47/1 (2021), 181–217.
- Patnaik, A., 'Reserving Time for Daddy: The Short and Long-Run Consequences of Fathers' Quotas', *Journal of Labor Economics* 37/4 (2019), 1009–59.
- Smith, M. J. et al., 'Men and Women's Perceptions of Hot Flashes Within Social Situations: Are Menopausal Women's Negative Beliefs Valid?', *Maturitas* 69/1 (2011), 57–62.