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SUSTAINABLE ILLUSIONS?

WOMEN'S LABOUR-MARKET
PARTICIPATION IN THE EU:
OBSTACLES AND POLICY LEVERS

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SUMMARY

There is persistent gender inequality on the labour market at EU level, as well as in individual Member States. While some improvement is taking place, this progress is very slow and often nuanced. It is still largely women who take on the burden of care work, which in turn negatively impacts their prospects on the labour market, leading to women accounting for a more substantial share of people living in poverty and resulting in a gender wage and pension gap. While some countries fare better than the EU average, some fall well below the goals and targets set by EU policies. In 2015, the EU committed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), including goals to achieve gender equality (SDG 5) and decent work (SDG 8) by 2030. Has this commitment led to any real change for women in the EU, and is it realistic that in 2030 we will see those goals becoming a reality?

To assess the gap between the declared goals and reality, we compared the policy framework on gender equality at EU level with the trends on the labour market over the past two decades. The main part of the report focuses on four current or former EU Member States: Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany and Croatia. These case studies aim to identify different approaches to social security policies and care arrangements, while bearing in mind the influence of such factors on women's employment opportunities. The main emphasis is on two topics which have proved to be the most relevant predictors of women's employment patterns, namely childcare and parental leave.

Despite some convergence between the four countries examined in terms of increasing female activity and employment rates, there are considerable differences in terms of outcomes on the labour market, as well as employment and family policy. Activity and employment rates have clearly increased in all the countries studied, but this growth came at the expense of a large and growing proportion of women in part-time employment. Although Sweden substantially outperforms other EU Member States, it also relies on women to care for dependants, and this is reflected in a high share of female part-time employment. Moreover, the share of women are not active because of care responsibilities has increased in the majority of EU Member States, and so the conclusion must be that activation measures at national and EU levels, as well as the implementation of the SDGs, did not manage to mitigate the historical burden of care work on women.

The report concludes with recommendations calling for transformative feminist policies that prioritise the quality of work and reproductive work, as well as tackling ongoing trends such as the individualisation of care, the dismantling of the welfare state and the weakening of trade unions.



INTRODUCTION

Women's economic position has long been a subject of feminist political activism, as well as part and parcel of many policies and goals on European and international organisations' agenda. However, we are still witnessing strong gender inequalities on the labour market across the European Union. Economic activity and employment rates continue to be lower for women than for men, and women are overrepresented in part-time employment, while 'feminised' sectors and occupations tend to be undervalued and underpaid. In addition, unpaid care work still predominantly falls to women, which is one of the main reasons behind the different employment patterns of men and women. Specifically, men usually remain closely connected to the labour market throughout their working life whereas women's employment is still substantially affected by parenthood. Low activity and high rates of part-time and precarious work, as well as accumulated time spent out of the labour force due to caring responsibilities, result in women facing a higher risk of poverty. Women receive lower pensions than men (in 2018 the gender gap in pensions in the European Union was 30% to the detriment of women) and the majority of single-parent families in the EU, which are also at higher risk of poverty, are female-headed.

In 2016 the EU co-signed the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which, in the words of a summary by the European Commission (n.d. a), aims to "eradicate poverty, find sustainable and inclusive development solutions, ensure everyone's human rights, and generally make sure that no one is left behind by 2030". According to the Agenda, this will be achieved through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among these, SDG 5 targets gender equality¹, while SDG 8 aspires to quality of employment and economic growth². While those goals address the issue of the gender pay gap and the

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- 1 SDG Goal 5 concerning gender equality is about "eliminating all forms of gender-based discrimination and violence everywhere in the world by 2030, and guaranteeing all women and girls equal opportunities and rights to empower them to be full members of society" (European Commission n.d. b).
 - 2 SDG Goal 8 on good jobs and economic growth aims at "achieving full employment, decent and productive work for all, and equal pay for equal work by 2030[;] ending forced labour and child labour by 2025 and address[ing] informal work, to which women and children are the most exposed[;] supporting investment, entrepreneurship, and innovation to boost job creation" (European Commission n.d. c).

gendered division of unpaid care work and advocate ‘decent work’ for all, there is a lack of political will to really tackle those issues. This is evident just from the fact that the SDGs are not binding for individual states in any way and are not translated into unambiguous policies dedicated to dismantling the real causes of persistent gender inequalities, while even the goals themselves are neither ambitious nor comprehensive, despite also blithely proclaiming a will to “[e]nd all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere” (United Nations 2015). Any meaningful changes would of course require transformative feminist policies that prioritise the quality of work and reproductive work, as well as tackling ongoing trends such as the individualisation of care, the dismantling of the welfare state and the weakening of trade unions.

While focusing on creating opportunities that allow women to participate in the labour market is a worthy ambition, the quality of jobs that are available to women – a key problem which is overlooked by the SDGs – is equally important. Poor quality, low-paid and insecure jobs, in which women are over-represented, not only lead to poverty, but can also have a detrimental impact on quality of life, as they can adversely affect workers’ well-being, mental health and home lives (Hester 2018).

This report aims to assess the current status of women on the EU labour market and trends in this regard, with a special focus on policy areas that enhance/suppress women’s economic activity, namely family policy and social security systems. In the first chapter, we set out the basic tenets of our methodological approach, as well as the key concepts used in our analysis. The second chapter is devoted to EU policies regarding gender equality on the labour market, while the third chapter focuses on a representation of the data showing those trends. To assess the interplay between EU policies and those of Member States, Chapters 4 to 7 examine case studies in four current or former³ EU Member States, namely Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany and Croatia. These case studies aim to identify different approaches to social security policies and care arrangements, while bearing in mind the influence of such factors on women’s employment opportunities. The report concludes with a discussion and recommendations for achieving, in the words of Nancy

3 Among the countries listed here, one (the United Kingdom) has left the EU in recent years.

Fraser (2017), “social arrangements that could enable people of every class, gender, sexuality and colour to combine social-reproductive activities with safe, interesting and well-remunerated work”. Throughout this report we will reference SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (good jobs and economic growth) as benchmarks to assess obstacles and limitations in EU gender policies.

When reading this report, or any other report which refers to ‘women’s position’, it is worth remembering that it is too simplistic to discuss women as if they were a monolithic group. Many of the gender policies advocated by gender mainstreaming, i.e. policies that emphasise a ‘glass ceiling’ or the share of women in management positions, only serve a small proportion of women, namely white, privileged, non-disabled, cis-gender women in high-income countries. The majority of women live in very different situations – especially those with disabilities, in lower social classes or living in non-heteronormative households, coming from a migrant background or having an unregulated citizenship status. While each of those situations, especially when they intersect, results in another layer of inequalities in almost every aspect of life, including on the labour market, the scope of this report means that it cannot always fully address all those layers of oppression/discrimination/inequalities. Moreover, it is crucial to note here that when we use the term ‘women’, we are referring to everyone identifying as a woman, regardless of the gender assigned at birth. On the other hand, the majority of research and official statistics reference almost exclusively cis women, and so unfortunately it would be incorrect to assume that this report will encompass all experiences and lived inequalities of women living in EU Member States.

A chef in a white uniform and black hat is pouring chocolate from a ladle onto a surface in a kitchen. The chef is focused on the task, and the background shows a professional kitchen environment with various equipment and a clean, organized workspace. The lighting is bright, highlighting the chef's actions and the rich color of the chocolate.

1

**THEORETICAL
AND METHODOLOGICAL
FRAMEWORK**

In the tradition of Marxist, socialist and, more broadly speaking, left-wing feminism, the economic position of women is seen as inextricably linked to the issue of unpaid care work, i.e. the societal organisation of care for dependant which enables the whole economic system to work (Bhattacharya 2017; Vogel 2013). Due to a combination of ideological and economic factors, women are still largely the ones to take on the burden of care work (reproductive work), negatively impacting their opportunities on the labour market and resulting in a gender pay and pension gap, a higher share of women among those living in poverty, and so on.

Unlike liberal feminism which mainly focuses on women's performance on the labour market (e.g. the gender pay gap and the glass ceiling) and hopes to achieve gender equality by eradicating discrimination against women, left-wing feminism takes a comprehensive approach by arguing for the socialisation of care work. Socialising unpaid care work means this type of labour being provided and subsidised by institutions other than the family, so chiefly by the state, in order to put women on a level footing with men. Other organisations, such as big business, can also take part in this process, but left-wing feminists advocate that these services be provided by the state so that they can be made available to all women, especially working-class women who otherwise would be unable to afford them. Alongside the socialisation of care, left-wing feminism proposes the transformation of labour relations, because women are also disadvantaged on the labour market, i.e. often working in low-paid, part-time jobs, with no opportunities for advancement, as well as in undervalued occupations and sectors. The aim should be to ensure well-paid, quality jobs for women, and to re-evaluate traditionally 'female' sectors such as (paid) care work as a whole. Therefore, this report will not only analyse indicators of women's status on the labour market but will also weight up social policies that impact women's economic position.

In order to compare the gender (in)equality of different existing social systems, it is useful to introduce the concept of defamilialisation or degenderisation (Esping-Andersen 1990; Saxonberg 2013). Defamilialisation signifies the provision of services outside the family (by either the state or the market), such as childcare, care for older people and parental leave, facilitating women's independence of the market and/or their partners. While the term is not always used

in the same way, it is still helpful for comparative analyses of existing social policies' effect on gender equality. Indeed, the term 'defamilialisation' mirrors welfare regime theory as proposed by Gøsta Esping-Andersen and which has now become entrenched, and the term 'decommodification' which is associated with it. According to this theory, three basic types of welfare regimes can be differentiated: the social-democratic, liberal and conservative-corporatist welfare regimes. The social-democratic regime is characterised by a universalist approach to social rights and a high level of decommodification, i.e. citizen enjoying a high degree of independence vis-à-vis the market as a way to maintain their livelihoods. In other words, decommodification signifies the extent to which individuals' typical life situations are freed from dependence on the labour market (Orloff 2002). The liberal model, at the other extreme, provides only limited social insurance. Its basic principle is that economic well-being is best achieved through the unfettered operation of the market. Its social programmes are aimed mainly at the working class and the poor, and means-tested assistance holds sway. In the conservative-corporatist regime, social principles prevail in most areas, but are based on eligibility that depends on social statuses (mainly related to family, class and religion) and traditions. Therefore, welfare rights are not universal but depend on specific statuses. In the conservative regime, the state, the market and other entities or institutions like one's family and the church share responsibility for citizens' welfare. Some authors (e.g. Deacon / Stubbs 2007) have also tried to incorporate post-communist states into the original typology, but most agree that it should be treated as a separate type of welfare state, i.e. the post-communist regime, marked by the legacy of universalist policies, as well as by radical shifts towards the liberal model after the collapse of the socialist regime.

Although welfare regime theory has been criticised by feminist authors for its blindness to gender inequality (see Saxonberg 2013), some of its tenets are still widely used in comparative studies of social policies' effects on gender equality. It anticipates different rates of female labour-force participation in different regimes – high participation in the social-democratic regime, a medium rate of participation in the liberal regime and the lowest in the conservative regime. The basic rationale behind these hypotheses is the distribution of care between the state, the market and the family. Following its

principle of decommodification, in the social-democratic welfare regime, the state partly assumes responsibility for children, mainly by providing state-subsidised childcare facilities, but also through family-related policies such as paid maternity and paternity leave, child allowances, tax relief for children, and so on. In market-oriented liberal countries (such as the UK, the United States and Canada), women have to weigh up the 'costs and benefits' of economic activity vis-à-vis childcare responsibilities as the majority of women have no affordable alternative. The conservative-corporatist regime supports a traditional gender division of labour. Although this regime is characterised by a higher degree of decommodification than its liberal counterpart, when it comes to childcare, it relies primarily on the family (i.e. women) and only intervenes when the family fails. Family-related policies, including the tax regime, encourage women to withdraw from or limit their market activity, especially when they have young children.

Many feminist authors (Lewis 1992; Pfau-Effinger 2005; Lister 1997; Korpi 2000; Crompton 2006) have developed a similar classification of countries based on the scope of public services for childcare and family support through transfers. Since such public services promote women's employment and their absence constrains it, policies regarding women's employment can be grouped in terms of their level of commitment to a template in which within a household a male is the breadwinner while a female takes care of domestic chores. Walter Korpi (2000), for example, identifies the dual-earner, general family support and market-oriented models. He argues that the dual-earner model is associated with the gender-egalitarian politics of the social-democratic regime, and the general family support model is associated with the conservative-corporatist regime, which relies on traditional family relations in the face of market pressures. Birgit Pfau-Effinger (2005) differentiates between the dual breadwinner/dual-carer model and the dual-breadwinner/state-carer model, while Rosemary Crompton (1999) differentiates between male breadwinner/female caregiver, dual-earner/female part-time caregiver, dual-earner/state-caregiver, dual-earner/marketised-caregiver and dual-earner/dual-caregiver models. Cited welfare regime typologies have different emphases, which leads to slightly different 'regimes', i.e. groupings of countries representing various models of the welfare state regarding the degree of

gender equality achieved. However, countries can be placed on a continuum of defamilialisation/degenderisation, i.e. one of gender (in)equality on the labour market as a result of certain social policies, and the cited typologies despite their differences do end up categorising most countries in a similar way. In typologies that cluster countries with regard to family policies, our selected countries always fall into different groups confirming their variety with regard to the degree of defamilialisation.

Aiming to represent different varieties of social and employment policies and their effects on gender equality, in Chapters 4 to 7 we will focus on employment and social policies of four European countries (Sweden, the United Kingdom, Germany and Croatia) which are considered to be representative of different welfare regimes. According to Esping-Andersen's theory, Sweden is an ideal-typical example of the social-democratic, the United Kingdom of the liberal, Germany of the conservative-corporatist and Croatia of the post-communist welfare regime. Other cited authors may give the regimes different names (e.g. in Korpi's typology, Sweden would represent the dual-earner model, the United Kingdom the market-oriented model and Germany the general family support model, etc.), but the basic rationale behind the selection of countries for the case studies is to show as wide a variety as possible of social policies' effects on gender (in)equality on the labour market.

In the third chapter, which focuses on trends in terms of gender equality on the European labour market, we will be using the rate of employment, the gender employment gap and the share of population that is inactive due to caring responsibilities as indicators of gender equality, as in SDG 5. In addition, we will show the rates of economic activity and the share of women in part-time employment, an important additional indicator of the quality of work which is however missing from SDG 5, as discussed above.⁴

In keeping with the basic tenets of left-wing feminism regarding the importance of the organisation of care work, in Chapters 4 to 7 we will focus on

4 Some popular indicators of gender equality on the labour market, such as the gender pay gap and occupational segregation by gender are not included in our report due to their complexity. For a left-wing perspective on the gender pay gap and occupational and sectoral segregation, see Karamessini and Ioakimoglou (2007).

the four countries and try to link the trends found in their respective labour markets to social policies affecting women's employment. While we will briefly discuss the basic features of each country and touch on issues relating to their social security systems and employment policy, our main emphasis will be on two topics which have proved to be the most relevant predictors of women's employment patterns, namely childcare and parental leave. Paid parental leave plays a vital role in gender equality because it increases women's labour-market attachment, while non-transferable parental leave has been shown to increase leave take-up rates among fathers, which also has a positive impact on women's economic activity. We will give a short description of the current policies on leave in four countries, as well as a brief description of recent policy changes in this area. Similarly, research indicates that the availability and affordability of public childcare services, especially for children aged 0-3 years, has positive effects on the employment rates of mothers and the continuity of their economic activity. Against this backdrop, we will set out and discuss childcare coverage rates for children aged 0-3 years in the four countries studied here.

In our analysis of trends on the EU labour market and case studies of four different social policy regimes, we use descriptive statistics (mostly based on data from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union), presented in the form of graphs, combined with desk research of relevant studies on women's labour-market participation in Europe and social policies of four selected European countries.

While the report covers many relevant topics, it has its limitations. So, for instance, although we present and analyse data for women in general on the EU labour market, in the case studies we chose to focus specifically on social policies primarily affecting women with children. This, of course, is a narrow focus, and a lot more could be said about the organisation of care for older people and taxation policy. However, this emphasis is justified by the fact that childcare and parental leave are the strongest predictors of women's activity and employment rates. References covering less discussed issues can be found in the footnotes.



2

GENDER AND EMPLOYMENT POLICIES AT EU LEVEL

The commitment to achieving gender equality that can be found in the SDGs, especially SDG 5, is nothing new in the EU policy arena. The EU has a long tradition of – in what it says at least – supporting and enhancing women’s labour-market participation and promoting social security policies. As we will show in this chapter, this support is often not backed up by the concrete, targeted investments which are required for a truly transformative approach. Furthermore, its support is usually bedevilled by contradictions between written commitments, the EU’s own political limitations and the interplay of different political actors/powers at national and European levels. After providing a history of EU gender and labour policies, we will focus on analysing its contradictions, with a special focus on childcare and leave policies, which make these contradictions painfully obvious.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The European Union has a long tradition of addressing women’s unequal status on the labour market – including pay, activity and the employment gap. The first mention of gender equality appeared in 1957 when an article about equal pay (Article 119) was included in the Treaty of Rome, or the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community. However, this early commitment to gender equality in labour markets only came about as a result of pressure from France, which already had equal pay legislation and so had concerns about the potential for unfair trade arrangements in the absence of such a provision (Fagan 2018).⁵

Women’s attachment to the labour market was explicitly addressed through the European Employment Strategy (EES) introduced in 1997. One of the four pillars of the EES was equal opportunities and it aimed to “[combat] the gender gap and [support] the increased employment of women, by implementing policies on career breaks, parental leave, part-time work, and good quality care for children” (EU Publications Office 2005). The EES also launched a new form of gender equality policymaking – soft law or non-binding measures in

5 While the Treaty of Rome was signed in 1957, the equal pay article was only activated much later, in the 1970s, through the Directive on Equal Pay and the Directive on Equal Treatment (Fagan 2018).

the form of a sustained cycle of national benchmarking and policy scrutiny achieved through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) (Fagan 2018).

Explicit targets for women's employment started to be set with the Lisbon strategy in 2000, which aimed to make Europe "the most competitive and most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" within 10 years (i.e. by 2010) (European Council 2000). In defining its objectives for active employment policies, the Lisbon strategy included the target of raising the overall employment rate to 70% by 2010 and increasing the share of women in employment to more than 60% by 2010. In order to reinforce employment targets, the Barcelona objectives were agreed on in 2002 and focused on removing disincentives to female labour-market participation and set targets to "provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age" (European Council 2002). The Barcelona objectives were reviewed in 2013 and 2018, and were included in the next European strategy – *Europe 2020* – because the EU had failed to achieve the original targets⁶. *Europe 2020* set the target for the overall employment rate at 75%, including women, older workers and migrants, as a means of meeting this goal.

Another push to close the gender employment gap in the EU, as well as in individual Member States, came with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDG 5, which also calls for unpaid and domestic work to be recognised and valued "through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate" (United Nations n.d.). From 2017 on, gender equality is also addressed by the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission 2018b), specifically in its first chapter, entitled 'Equal opportunities and access to the labour market'. The European Pillar of Social Rights also deals with the work-life balance as part of its second

6 By 2016, the target of 33% of "children under 3 years of age" being in childcare had been reached in Denmark (where the rate was 70%), the Netherlands, Sweden, Luxembourg, Portugal, France, Belgium, Slovenia, Spain, Italy, Germany and Finland. The second target, 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age, was achieved in Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Ireland, Estonia, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia and Germany (see European Commission 2018a).

chapter, 'Fair working conditions', and childcare in its third chapter, 'Social protection and inclusion'.

Although at the level of terminology we can observe a shift from a narrow focus on women's employment rates to a more general emphasis on enabling labour-force participation for women, i.e. on public services, as well as more reference being made to unpaid care work, this shift will not be enough if it is not followed up with strong policy measures and concrete plans to implement them. In this way, EU policies serve as a declarative commitment to gender identity politics, allowing the EU to project the image of a progressive force at international level. At the same time, these policies lack any concrete follow-up that can sustain progressive changes to the status quo of women in general, as well as on the labour market. The three most pronounced contradictions of EU policies regarding gender equality are discussed in the next subsection.

CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN EU POLICIES

As set out above, EU policies on gender mostly seem like wishful thinking or 'good intentions'. This impression is created by three types of contradictions that are, to varying degrees, a feature of most of them.

The first contradiction can be observed at declarative level, in that the EU is often pushing for contradictory values or political goals in the same documents. A blatant example of this can be seen in the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission 2018b). In Chapter 2 of that document, under the subheading 'Secure and adaptable employment', the EU strives both to promote the transition to open-ended contracts and prevent employment contracts that lead to precarious employment, and to support flexible employment that can help employers to adapt to market changes and innovative forms of work. Advocating flexible and innovative forms of employment is usually done on behalf of employers, whose interests are opposed to those of workers. Moreover, it is precisely the increasing deregulation of labour markets, coupled with the diminishing power of trade unions, which has led to the expansion of precarious employment.

The second contradiction is connected to the EU's competence regarding 'social policy'. Most social security policies fall under the auspices of Member States, who have autonomy in defining their scope, content and benefit levels. In fact, some of these policies, like childcare, are devolved to Member States' regional governments. This leaves the EU doing nothing more than issuing non-binding recommendations and opinions, which those they are aimed at have no legal obligation to follow and will face no legal repercussions if they fail to do so. This situation allows the EU to make grand gestures and set goals like a commitment to meet the goal, forming part of SDG 8, to "[b]y 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men" (United Nations n.d.) without having responsibility for enforcing genuine changes.

At the same time, a directive that aimed to introduce four-month parental quotas (which cannot be transferred between parents) and 10 days' paternity leave in all EU Member States, while also regulating the level of benefits paid during such leave to ensure that they are equivalent to at least four months' paid leave at sick-pay level at the very least (European Commission 2017) has faced strong resistance from Member States, mainly because of the additional spending involved. Even though research shows that even taking 10 days' paternity leave can result in a change to parental practices and have a transformational effect on gendered parental responsibilities and employment practices in the long run (O'Brien / Wall 2017; Dobrotić / Varga 2018), and despite the prerequisite for fathers taking paternity leave is that this be non-transferable and well remunerated, the directive was amended two years later with the rights being reduced to 10 days' paternity leave and four months' parental leave with two months that cannot be transferred between parents and without regulating minimal benefits (Directive No 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers). This example clearly suggests that even minimal changes in direction towards a more egalitarian gender balance in unpaid care work, however small or narrow that change is, and although they would help to achieve SDG 5, are met with resistance and defeat in the EU policy arena.

The third contradiction is between the promotion of goals that require generous public-sector funding and strict fiscal responsibility policies

imposed on Member States as a result of the European Semester, which often result in cuts to public spending. This is best illustrated by childcare policies. In the Barcelona objectives, as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights and the SDGs, the need for a broad network of affordable and accessible childcare is recognised as a prerequisite for women's entry and continuous attachment to the labour market. But, as the report on the Barcelona objectives (European Commission 2018b) showed, most countries failed to achieve these objectives, and the goal that was achieved at EU-28 level – 33% of children under 3 years of age in childcare – largely depended on very high levels of child participation in formal childcare already in place in certain Member States (Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden). Only three countries that were below the objective in 2008, had managed to achieve it by 2018. Part of the explanation for the 'poor results' in the above report is ascribed to a lack of legal entitlement to childcare in several Member States, which leads to a 'care gap', i.e. a time lag between the end of paid parental leave and the entitlement to childcare (ibid.). Indeed, even if a legal entitlement to childcare (i.e. every child having the right to a place in a formal childcare facility) were to become a legal requirement at EU level, a group of countries at the lower end of the childcare coverage spectrum would be unable to deliver those rights in practice without significant investments in physical infrastructure, as well as human and educational resources. Needless to say, these mainly low-income countries cannot afford this without some form of large-scale redistribution policy within the EU and/or significantly increasing their public debt.

FROM POLICIES TO ACTUAL CHANGE?

This brief overview and analysis of contradictions in EU policy on gender and the labour market will serve as the backdrop for the analysis of employment trends and the labour-market position of women across EU Member States, as well as the framework in which we can place individual countries, serving as case studies, in this report.

To conclude, for a dramatic change to take place in women's position on the labour market, or to close the gender employment gap in all EU Member States (not only those in the EU core⁷), the EU needs to move away from further liberalisation and flexibilisation of the labour market and deliver strong investment in facilities that reduce the burden of care work facing women. The current redistribution channel through the European Social Fund (ESF) is not nearly enough to tackle stark differences across the EU, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. In addition, project-based redistribution, such as the ESF, is problematic for a number of reasons – ranging from its limited resources, the fact that distribution is dependent on local organisations, and the unsustainability of financing project administration, which is all too often complex and laborious. Moreover, there is a need to be well versed in project language and administration, which is why underdeveloped regions and/or organisations sometimes do not receive funding.

In the next chapter, we discuss in more detail trends in women's labour-market participation over the past two decades.

7 While the above contradictions point to why EU policies are failing to achieve their supposed goals, it is important to understand that in some cases they have succeeded in at least pushing national legislation towards more gender mainstreaming. Although these are not necessarily very progressive policies, they have brought about certain changes and alleviated some discrimination, albeit sometimes only on paper. They have provided a pragmatic framework for feminist and human rights organisations, sometimes in an explicitly conservative and gender-regressive domestic political context, pushing national politicians towards greater gender equality, especially when the relevant country is a candidate for EU membership.

3

TRENDS IN WOMEN'S LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION



This chapter will provide an overview of data on women's position in the labour market in the EU. We will also look at differences among countries/groups of countries using the latest available data from Eurostat, as well as trends over the past 20 years or so. The main indicators that will be discussed are men and women's rates of economic activity and employment, the share of men and women who are inactive on the labour market due to caring responsibilities, the share of children aged 0-3 years old in formal childcare and the shares of men and women in part-time employment. We will set out the trends over the past two decades for the EU-28 average, as well as the latest data for all Member States.

While this section gives a general overview of the trends at EU level, the subsequent chapters (Chapters 4 to 7) will focus on four selected European countries in order to explore the employment and social policies affecting women's employment in more detail.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AND EMPLOYMENT

Over the past 20 years or so, many European countries have experienced an increase in female labour-force participation and employment. On average, the overall participation rate in the EU increased from around 55 % in the early 1990s to more than 78.7 % in 2019. Although the rate of women's activity has been steadily rising over the past two decades (Figure 1), the gender gap in activity is still quite substantial at EU-28 level: while the average activity rate for men was 84.6 % in 2019, only 72.9 % of women in the EU were economically active.⁸ In the same period, women's employment rate has moved in the same direction as the activity rate. On average, the overall employment rate of women in the EU-28 grew from 57.2 % in 2000 to 68.2 % in 2019, compared with a slight rise from 75.9 % to 79.6 % in the same period for men (Figure 2).

The literature has identified various possible reasons for this change in women's position on the labour market: demographic factors (a larger share of

8 Activity rate, or rate of labour-force participation, refers to the %age of active persons in relation to the comparable total population. The economically active population comprises employed and unemployed persons.

the population being at prime working age), a change in women’s fertility decisions (a smaller number of children, and women being older on having their first child), educational factors, reforms of the welfare state and changes to labour-market institutions and policies targeted at groups with lower activity rates, and – last but not least – changes in restrictions that prevented women from being economically active in the past (Cipollone et al. 2012). Furthermore, the growth of atypical jobs during the last two decades could be one of the reasons for the rise in activity rates, especially for women who are over-represented in part-time employment, as will be demonstrated in more detail later (Figures 9 to 11).

MEN AND WOMEN’S ECONOMIC ACTIVITY RATE – EU-28 AVERAGE (2000-2019), PEOPLE AGED 20-64

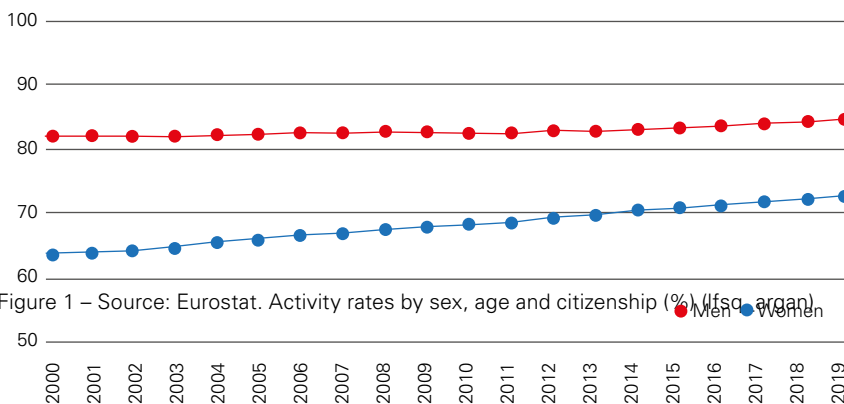


Figure 1 – Source: Eurostat. Activity rates by sex, age and citizenship (%), (fisc. organ).

MEN AND WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT RATE - EU-28 AVERAGE (2000-2019), PEOPLE AGED 2064

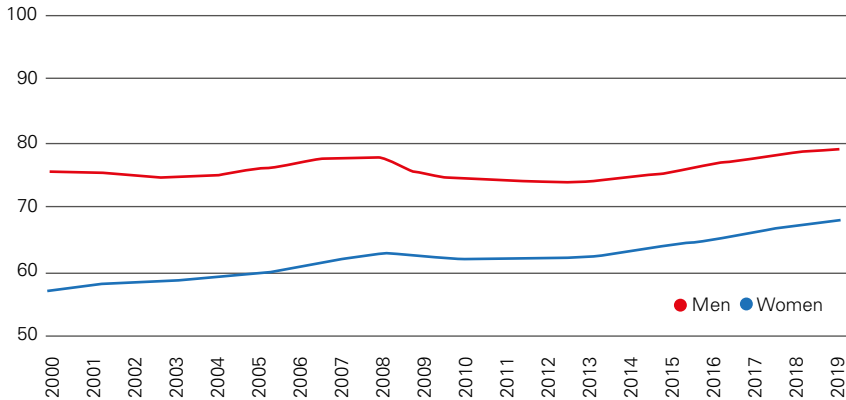


Figure 2 – Source: Eurostat. Employment and activity by sex and age – annual data (lfsi_emp_a)

The observed aggregate increase in women’s activity rates masks significant differences across countries (Figures 3 and 4), suggesting that there are different factors at play affecting women’s labour-market outcomes in individual EU Member States.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY RATES FOR MEN AND WOMEN IN 2019, PEOPLE AGED 20-64

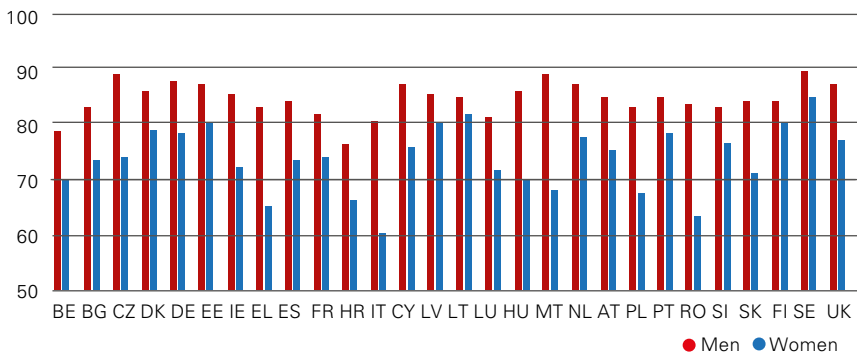


Figure 3 – Source: Eurostat. Activity rates by sex, age and citizenship (%) (lfsq_argan)

EMPLOYMENT RATES FOR MEN AND WOMEN IN 2019, PEOPLE AGED 20-64

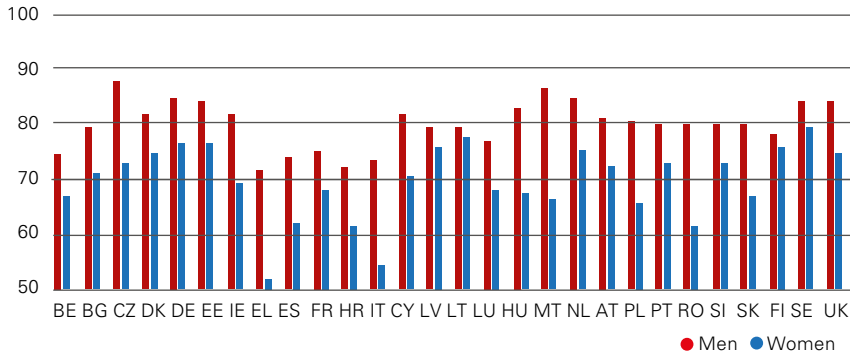


Figure 4 – Source: Eurostat. Employment and activity by sex and age – annual data (lfsi_emp_a)

The difference between men and women’s activity and employment rates varies significantly between individual EU Member States – the biggest differences were recorded in Malta, Italy, Greece and Ireland, and the smallest in Scandinavian and Baltic countries (Sweden, Finland, Latvia and Lithuania). The countries with the lowest female activity and employment rates are Italy, Greece, Romania and Poland, while Scandinavian and Baltic countries have the highest rates of both female activity and employment. Figure 5 shows these differences at regional level.

WOMEN'S RATES OF EMPLOYMENT BY GEOGRAPHICAL REGION, PEOPLE AGED 20-64, 2019

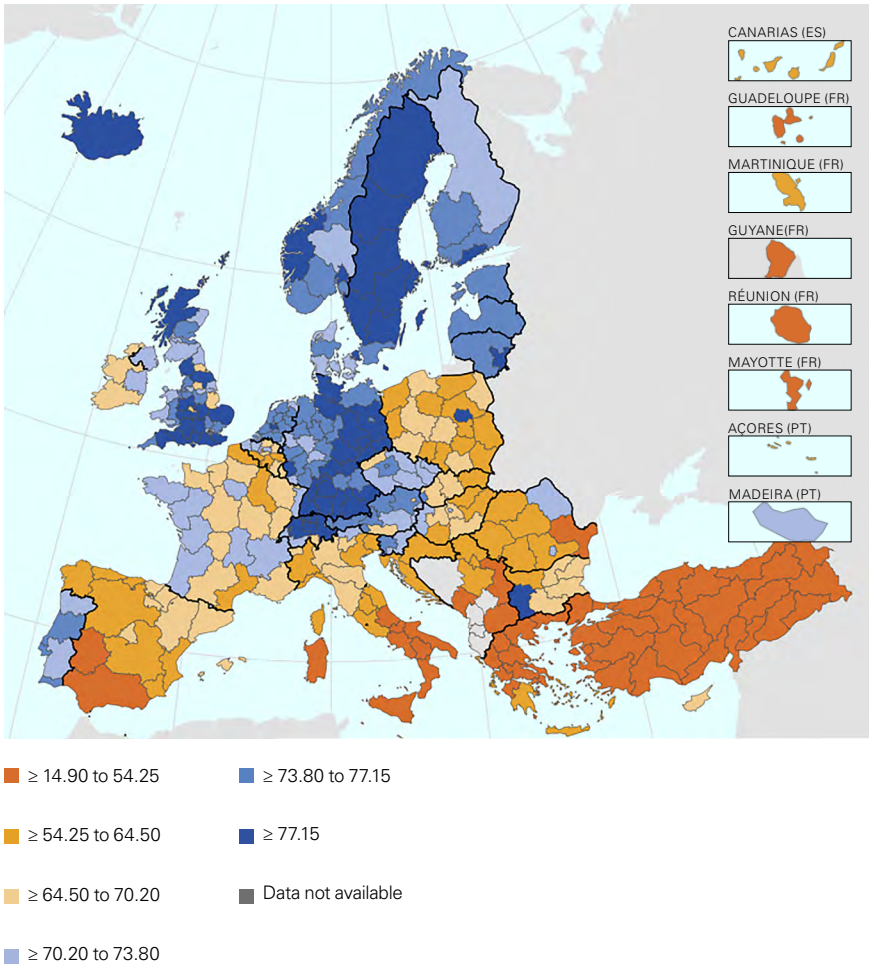


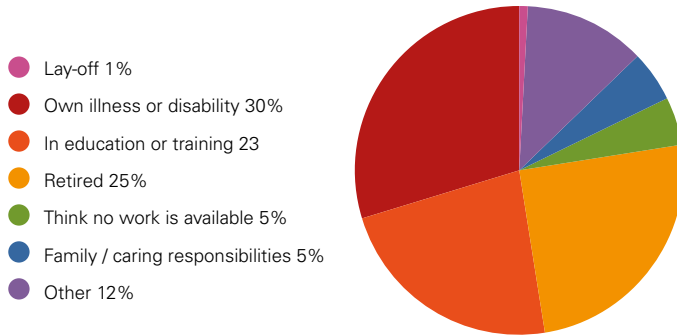
Figure 5 – Source: Eurostat. Employment rates by sex, age and NUTS 2 region (%) (LFST_R_LFE2EMPRT)

As can be seen in Figure 5, some European regions stand out with extremely low female employment rates, falling far below the Lisbon strategy goal of 60% women in employment, such as the Sud-Est (South-East) NUTS 2 region of Romania with 53% of women being employed, the regions of Calabria, Sicilia (Sicily) and Campania in Italy (32%), Extremadura and Andalusia (Andalusia) in Spain (51%) and the majority of regions in Greece (between 40 and 50%). On the other hand, many regions have reached or exceeded that target, such as the Åland region of Finland (83% of employed women), the Vilnius capital region in Lithuania (83%), almost all of the federal states in Eastern and Southern Germany (over 78%) and almost all of Sweden's regions (over 75%). This discrepancy points to structural inequalities across the EU, which obviously cannot be reduced with the EU-level policy approach described in Chapter 2.

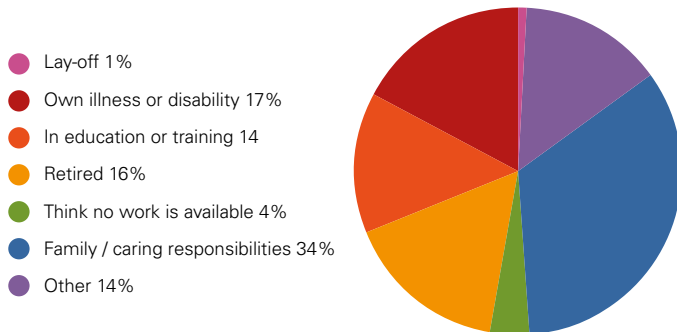
The differences among Member States illustrate the absurdity of setting up targets like the ones set by the SDGs – e.g. to offer quality jobs to everyone or end all forms of discrimination against women everywhere by 2030, considering the fact that some of the European regions cannot even meet the goal of raising women's activity and employment rates above 60%.

Since research consistently points to employment and social policies as the main factors influencing women's activity and employment rates, any substantial changes would have to include backing these goals and targets with specific policies bearing in mind the specific situations of individual Member States, such as the lack of overall employment opportunities in underdeveloped/rural areas, and changing attitudes. More importantly, these policies would have to be centred around alleviating the burden of care work for women – a topic discussed in more detail below.

REASONS FOR INACTIVITY (%), MEN AGED 20-64, 2019, EU-28 AVERAGE



REASONS FOR INACTIVITY (%), WOMEN AGED 20-64, 2019, EU-28 AVERAGE

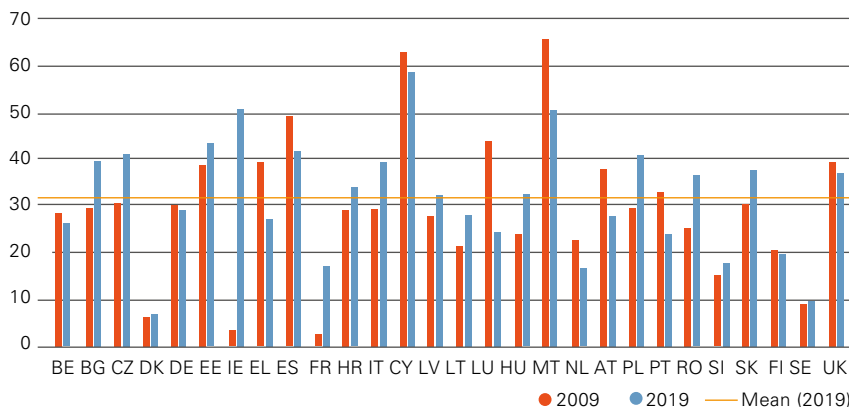


Note: The 'Family/caring responsibilities' category is a combination of 'Looking after children or incapacitated adults' and 'Other family or personal responsibilities'.

Figure 6a + 6b – Source: Eurostat. Inactive population not seeking employment by sex, age and main reason (LFSA_IGAR)

Figures 6a and 6b reveal a stark gender contrast, illustrating the crucial connection between women’s status on the labour market and unpaid care work done inside the family. While family/caring responsibilities are the most important reason behind economic inactivity of women in the EU (more than a third of economically inactive women report family/caring responsibilities as the main reason for not participating in the labour market), this is the case for only a small share of men (5%). How this share varies in specific contexts can be seen below in Figure 7.

INACTIVITY DUE TO CARING RESPONSIBILITIES (%), WOMEN AGED 20-64, IN 2009 AND 2019



Note: The ‘Family/caring responsibilities’ category is a combination of ‘Looking after children or incapacitated adults’ and ‘Other family or personal responsibilities’.

Figure 7 – Source: Eurostat. Inactive population due to caring responsibilities by sex (SDG_05_40)

The EU Member States with the highest shares of women who are inactive on the labour market due to caring/family responsibilities are Malta, Cyprus, Ireland, Poland, Estonia, Spain, Italy and Romania (all above 40 %). On the other hand, it is noticeable that the Scandinavian countries Sweden, Finland and Denmark have the lowest shares of women inactive due to caring responsibilities, as well as France, Slovenia and the Netherlands. The share of economically inactive women in each country is mediated by a range of policies: those concerning childcare, care for older people and parental leave, as well as employment policy, among other factors. While we cannot go into detail for all Member States in this report, we can gain an insight into the impact of some of these policies on women’s economic activity by looking at the share of children aged 0-3 years old in formal childcare (Figure 8).

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN UNDER 3 YEARS OLD IN FORMAL CHILDCARE IN 2008 AND 2018

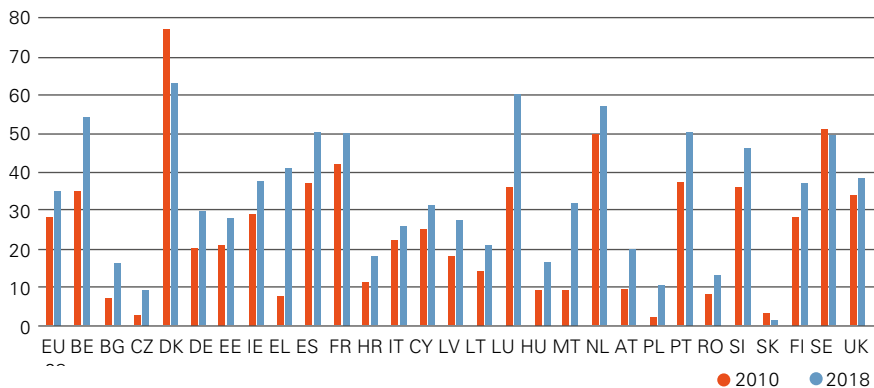


Figure 8 – Source: Eurostat. Formal childcare by duration and age group (TPS00185)

While there are many factors impacting women's economic activity and employment rates overall, the data in Figure 7 point to one of the most important policies affecting women's economic position: the availability of childcare. It also shows how far some of the Member States are from hitting the Barcelona target of 33 % of children under the age of 3 being in childcare: whereas for e.g. Denmark and Luxembourg the %age of children in childcare is more than 60 %, many Member States are well below the Barcelona target (Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Italy, Austria and Poland all come out below 25%). While a comparison between 2008 and 2018 reveals a positive trend, in that the share of children in formal childcare went up in most Member States over that period, in several countries (Sweden, Denmark and Slovakia) the share decreased. Even though these countries have a much higher share of children aged 0-3 years in formal childcare than the 33% set by the Barcelona objectives, this trend is still worrying and could be negatively reflected in women's position on the labour markets of the respective countries.

The rates of economic activity and employment are widely used as indicators of women's economic position without taking into account the reasons for women's economic inactivity and/or the availability of public services which enable women to participate in the labour market. It is unlikely that any substantial progress will be made in this regard without connecting the problem of women's low activity and employment rates to the issue of care work. Another problem with exclusively focusing on the rates of activity and employment is that they paint an incomplete picture without indicators of the quality of employment. Women are mostly represented in lower-paid sectors of the economy, such as services, and in lower positions within their hierarchical structure (Karamessini / Ioakimoglou 2007). The expansion of the services sector, which coincided with the previously discussed growth of female activity and employment, has been characterised by weakened labour standards and wage bargaining power, as well as a move towards piece-rate pay and part-time contract structures. Women are often, depending on the political context, overrepresented in part-time jobs and fixed-term contracts, as will be shown in the next subsection.

PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT

Calls for more flexible labour markets often form part of policy packages that encourage women’s participation in the labour market. That is especially true when it comes to part-time employment, based on the rationale that part-time employment enables a better balance between paid work and care responsibilities for women. However, in some cases, part-time work might as well be considered a form of underemployment, when lower wages are combined with low job security and weak occupational attachment (Cipollone et al. 2012). Furthermore, although part-time employment may be used as a bridge towards permanent employment, it is often used as a cheaper option for employers, which leads to long-term precarious employment in certain occupations. The incidence of part-time jobs is usually higher among women than men, due to their caring obligations (ibid.).

PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT AS A PERCENTAGE OF MEN AND WOMEN’S TOTAL EMPLOYMENT IN 2019, PEOPLE AGED 20-64

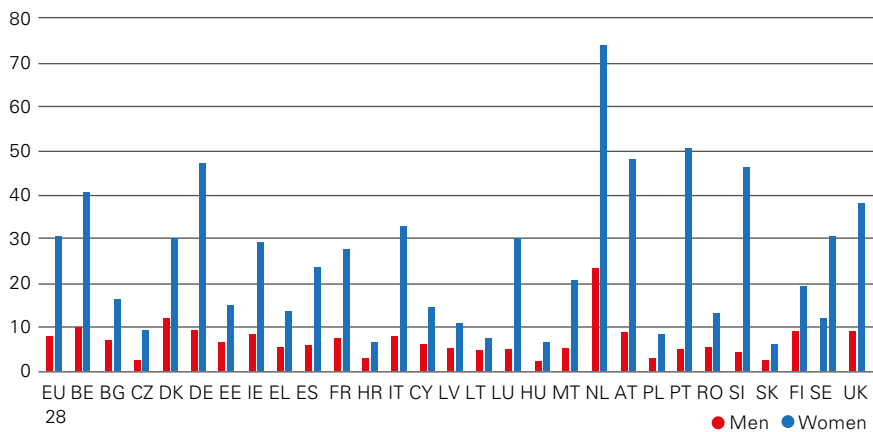
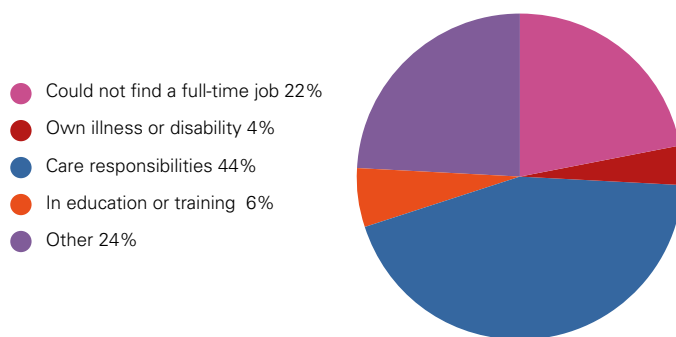


Figure 9 – Source: Eurostat. Part-time employment and temporary contracts – annual data (LFSI_PT_A)

As shown in Figure 9, there are stark differences between Member States in terms of the share of part-time employment in total female employment. On average, more women work part-time in central and northern Europe than in the south, while the share of men in part-time employment is quite even across the EU, with no major geographical patterns. Both men and women experienced an increase in part-time employment over the past three decades due to the progressive deregulation of the labour market, but the trend is much more pronounced for women. Part-time employment typically affects men at the beginning and end of their careers, while women are more frequently involved in part-time jobs throughout their lives (Cipollone et al. 2012). Moreover, there is a notable absence of dramatic changes in the share of female part-time employment over the past two decades, suggesting that this type of employment is a stable feature of female employment (Eurostat 2021c).

REASONS FOR PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT (%), WOMEN AGED 20-64, 2019, EU-28 AVERAGE

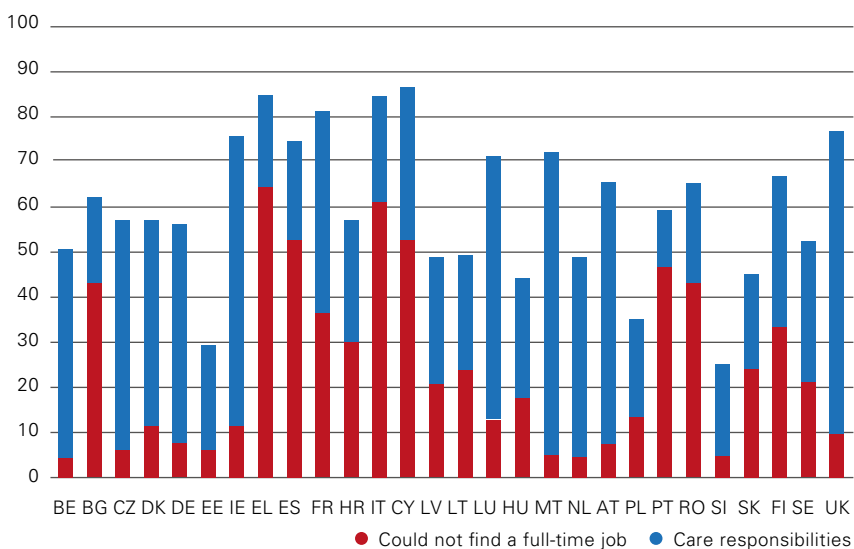


Note: The 'Care responsibilities' category is a combination of 'Looking after children or incapacitated adults' and 'Other family or personal responsibilities'.

Figure 10 – Source: Eurostat. Main reason for part-time employment – Distributions by sex and age (%) [lfsa_eggarr]

As shown in Figure 10, the reasons for part-time employment among women point to care responsibilities being the primary reason for part-time employment in the EU (44 % of all women working part-time), which once again points to the importance of unpaid care work for women’s employment opportunities. However, the average share masks, once again, pronounced differences among individual Member States, shown in Figure 11.

REASONS FOR PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT (%), WOMEN AGED 20-64, 2019



Note: The 'Care responsibilities' category is a combination of 'Looking after children or incapacitated adults' and 'Other family or personal responsibilities'. The rest of the scale (up to 100%) is a combination of 'In education or training', 'Own illness or disability' and 'Other'.

Figure 11 – Source: Eurostat. Main reason for part-time employment – Distributions by sex and age (%) [lfsa_egpar]

As shown in Figure 11, in many EU Member States the share of women working part-time due to care responsibilities is well above average, this being the case in Greece, Malta, the United Kingdom⁹, Luxembourg, Ireland and Austria (all above 55%). Part-time employment often involves much shorter working hours than full-time employment as well as lower wages, and offers very limited or no prospects of career advancement and does not always lead to permanent employment. The increasing availability of 'atypical' jobs and more flexible forms of employment may have helped women to better integrate into the labour market and narrow the activity and employment gaps with men, but this integration process may have occurred at the expense of women being 'trapped' in low-quality jobs.

As we have seen throughout this chapter, the levels of women's economic activity and employment have been rising over the past two decades, but this trend is unevenly distributed across the EU, with many countries still facing an uphill struggle in achieving the Lisbon strategy goal of 60% women in employment. Moreover, reasons behind women's lower activity and employment rates clearly point to the burden of care work done inside the family (caring and other family obligations), while this is rarely the case for men. Another key indicator of gender inequality on the labour market is the quality of jobs, demonstrated in the high rates of women in part-time employment. Therefore, in the next four chapters (Chapters 4 to 7) we will look at the employment and social policies of four selected countries in order to study in more detail the importance of these policies for women's position on the labour market.

9 The UK was an EU Member State at the time the data were compiled.



4

THE CONSERVATIVE-CORPORATIST REGIME – GERMANY

In the welfare literature, Germany is presented as an ideal-typical example of the conservative-corporatist welfare regime. According to Morel (2007), as far as care issues are concerned, this type of regime is characterised by three postulates: (1) a strong reliance on a male-breadwinner model, in which a man alone provides support for a traditional family; (2) the principle of subsidiarity; and (3) the underdevelopment of active employment politics (especially regarding women's labour-market participation). Specifically, policies and social security systems in conservative-corporatist countries discouraged women from participating in the labour market (especially after marriage or having children) through tax disincentives, social security entitlements acquired through their husbands' employment and social services provided through cash transfers (Morel 2017). The principle of subsidiarity in practice meant that the state is the last actor to intervene in a specific case, following family and then local community and voluntary (religious) associations. Finally, these countries are characterised by generous parental leave and a small, semi-public childcare sector (Gangl 2015).

The absence of active employment policies for women was exemplified in the 1960s, when, faced with labour shortages, the then West Germany brought in foreign 'guest workers' (many of them from what was at that time Yugoslavia) instead of developing policies that would allow women to gain a stronger foothold on the labour market (Morel 2017). This policy orientation led to substantial gender inequality there, in the form of mothers facing substantial employment disincentives and low rates of female economic activity, with these only reaching rates similar to other EU countries in the 1990s and 2000s (Gangl 2015).

While the Federal Republic of Germany (the official name for West Germany and then for Germany following the reunification of the West and the East) was committed to the male-breadwinner model, East Germany (officially, the German Democratic Republic, or GDR) with its socialist politics developed a very different model of women's position in society and on the labour market. The East German gender welfare regime was a dual-earner model with high female labour-market participation rates and extensive childcare provision. Thus, prior to reunification in 1990, there were big differences in every indicator of women's position on the labour market. For example, in 1989

women's participation rate in East Germany was 89% while in West Germany this was only 56% (Klammer et al. 2000 cited in Rosenfeld et al. 2004). One of the reasons for this was the difference in mothers' participation rates– in East Germany women's attachment to the labour market was scarcely affected by their marital or parenting status, while in West Germany it was very sensitive to them having children and the ages of their offspring (Gornick 1999 cited in Rosenfeld et al. 2004).

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

If we only focus on the SDG 5 indicator regarding the labour market and gender equality, namely the employment rate and inactivity due to caring responsibilities, Germany performs well. Women's employment rate has been steadily rising– (from 56.9 % in 1993 to 76.6 % in 2019), while the gender gap in employment has been on a continuous downward trend (from 15.7 percentage points in 2000 to 8 percentage points in 2019). In 2019, the gender employment gap was lower than the EU-28 average and lower than most other EU Member States. As regards inactivity due to caring responsibilities, over the past two decades Germany has seen a slight decline, but its level is still just below the EU-28 average, so somewhere in the middle of the pack compared with other Member States. In terms of other SDG 5 indicators such as women in senior management positions, Germany is also at the top end of the EU spectrum, being the fifth best country in this respect (Eurostat 2021e). However, behind these 'positive' results – which must however be seen in light of Germany being considered the ideal typical example of the conservative regime in welfare regime theory – lurk some other less flattering statistics regarding gender and employment opportunities. Germany leads the way, after the Netherlands and Austria, in terms of share of women working part-time. Almost 50% of women working part-time choose to do so because of care responsibilities (and only six countries in the EU have higher rates than Germany). Moreover, women in Germany had the second lowest average number of weekly working hours in 2019 (30.1 hours, only surpassed by the Netherlands) and one of the most pronounced gender gaps as regards the average number of weekly

working hours, which is no surprise given the widespread nature of part-time employment among women. Research has also revealed substantial differences in hourly wages between full-time and part-time employment in Germany, with part-time employment having a negative effect on women's career progression and wages (Zucco 2019 cited in Duell / Vetter 2020). As a result, in 2018 Germany had one of the highest pension-related gender gaps in the EU (namely 37 %) (Eurostat 2021a).

Furthermore, an effect of Germany's trademark low unemployment rate is precarious employment – and this is due in part to the share of part-time employment. In addition, a significant proportion of part-time employment is made up of marginal employment or so-called 'mini-jobs'.¹⁰ Around 60% of 'mini-jobbers' are women, and the age/gender distribution shows that women are more likely to hold such jobs during child-rearing or as they near retirement age (Duell 2018).

The situation on the labour market that is described here has led to growing numbers of 'working poor' in Germany. Specifically, the share of those in work but at risk of poverty rose from 4.8 % in 2005 to 8.1 % in 2019 (peaking in 2014 at 9.9 %). Particularly worrying is the number of women working and still at risk of poverty. In 2019, this was the situation of 9.3 % of women over 18 years of age and in employment. In this regard, Germany is above the EU-28 average, and is one of the few Member States where women in employment are more likely to face in-work poverty than men.

10 'Mini-jobs' were the German government's answer to rising unemployment rates in the early 2000s. They were introduced in 2003, under the Hartz labour-market reforms, with a view to reducing labour costs and increasing flexibility. People with mini-jobs are allowed to earn up to €450 a month but are not eligible for certain health services and can opt out of paying contributions to the pension system. The employer pays flat-rate social security at a lower level than standard contracts. As there is a flat income-tax rate of 2%, there is a lot of incentive for people to get health insurance –based on being young people, homemakers, pensioners, students, and so on, or alternatively by taking a second job. (The information in this note is based on Duell / Vetter 2020.)

SOCIAL SECURITY AND FAMILY POLICY

Most of the social security policies that led to this situation emerged in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. Around that time Germany was suffering from high unemployment rates, population ageing, low fertility rates, a shrinking workforce and a growing number of pensioners. In order to deal with these issues, the federal government adopted, in the words of Bleses and Seeleib-Kaiser (2004: 145), “the ‘dual transformation of the German welfare system’ – this involved “a decreasing emphasis on the guarantee of the achieved living standard of workers through wage earner-centred social policies and on the other hand by an expansion of family-oriented policies” (ibid.). This transformation included shifts in unemployment and employment policies and pension systems, as well as family policies. Unemployment policy was changed through reductions in the wage replacement rate and changes to suitability requirements, while benefit sanctions connected to a requirement to be actively search for re-employment were introduced. Active employment policies shifted towards market-oriented ‘activation measures’ which pushed people into atypical employment and self-employment. Around the same time, ‘workfare’ measures for the unemployed receiving social security benefits were introduced and the pension system was partially privatised. To sum up, the main characteristics of these welfare system reforms were a “greater dependence on market forces and the promotion of self-reliance” (Bleses / Seeleib-Kaiser 2004: 148).

At the same time, family policy and the socialisation of once private responsibilities were expanding (mainly through significant investments in childcare infrastructure). Low fertility and participation rates combined with a rising share of older people raised the question of a ‘care crisis’, specifically regarding the financial problem of the growing cohort of pensioners (Morel 2007). The absence of policies that promote female labour participation and reconciling paid and care work resulted in women having to choose between work and having children, and a growing emphasis on raising employment rates at EU level pushed Germany to develop and reinforce policies with a view to ensuring a work/family balance.

LEAVE AND CHILDCARE POLICY

One of the main domains of social policy that has experienced significant expansion is leave policy. Until the reform in the 2000s, Germany's prevailing policy by and large dated back to 1986, when West Germany introduced a 'family package'. This package consisted of parental leave allowing mothers to take a three-year break from work to take care of children and a flat-rate child-rearing allowance worth approximately €300 a month for two years while the parent on leave could work up to 19 hours a week without any reduction in their benefits (Morel 2007). Morel (ibid.) argued that these schemes aimed to encourage mothers to come off the labour market and revert to caring responsibility as the solution to increasing unemployment in those years. At that time (or more specifically, from the early 1970s to the 1990s) the share of children in publicly financed childcare was always less than 1 % of all children below the age of 3, while around 30 % of children between the ages of 3 and 6 had access to publicly financed childcare (ibid.).

In 2006, a new leave policy was introduced, raising the level of benefits to 67 % of a mother's previous net income, reduced the maximum period for paid leave to 12 months, and added two additional non-transferable months of parental leave for the other parent (Blum / Kuhlmann 2016). This policy change was in line with the leave policy in force in Sweden, and according to research, it has managed to encourage mothers to return to the labour market a year after childbirth. Fathers' take-up of parental leave has also risen significantly (ibid.).

Besides reforming leave policies, in 2008 Germany started a massive investment drive in childcare facilities with a view to creating places for 35 % of children below 3 years of age, as stipulated for example by the Barcelona objectives. Since 2013, all children aged 1 or over have a legal right to a childcare place (the right to childcare for children aged 3 to 6 was already instituted in 1990). As a result, between 2006 and 2014 the average attendance rate for children aged under 3 increased from 8 to 27 % in what was formerly West Germany and from 40 to 52 % in the former East (Strunz 2015 cited in Zoch 2017). By 2019, Germany was close to the EU-28 average, with the

share of children under 3 not in formal childcare steadily declining (Figure 12). Moreover, in Figure 12 we can see a rise in the proportion of children in this age group in full-time childcare (more than 30 hours a week). Research by Zoch (2018) showed that the increased availability of low-cost, state-subsidised childcare for children aged under 3 reduced mothers' time away from employment after childbirth, especially in what used to be West Germany, where availability was low.

DURATION OF CHILDCARE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 3 YEARS OLD IN GERMANY, 2005-2019

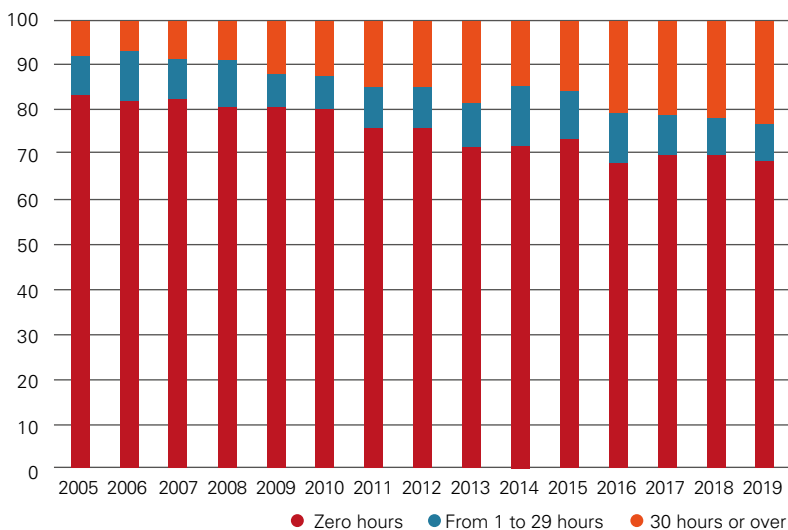


Figure 12 – Source: Eurostat. Formal childcare by duration and age group (TPS00185)

Still, strong regional differences in childcare coverage rates still persist between the East and the West, as well as within these parts of Germany. Since childcare services are dependent on regional financing, the average attendance rates mask great regional variation ranging from 45 to 63 % in the East and from 14 to 47 % in the West (Strunz 2015 cited in Zoch 2018). Additionally, differences between the East and the West persist in terms of childcare duration – in 2015, almost 40 % of children under 3 years of age in the East were in full-time childcare, compared with only 13 % in the West (Zoch 2017).

In conclusion, Germany has somewhat diverged from the typical conservative welfare regime that relied heavily on a male breadwinner/female homemaker model and the family as the sole care provider. Changes in leave-related policy and the expansion of childcare availability has meant that Germany has caught up with other EU Member States and the EU-28 average in terms of the employment-rate goals set by European strategies and policies described in Chapter 2. However, while the achievement of targeted employment rates seems impressive at a superficial level, a more detailed analysis of women's employment opportunities and reforms of the social security system reveals rising levels of employment precarity with a high share of women in part-time employment, which runs counter to the intended goal of gender equality.



5

**THE LIBERAL REGIME –
THE UNITED KINGDOM**

In the welfare regime literature, the United Kingdom is presented as the ideal-typical example of the liberal welfare regime in Europe. When it comes to women's employment, a basic feature of the liberal regime is relying on women's responsibility for caregiving, which implies that policies and tax disincentives discourage women (primarily mothers of young children) from labour-market participation or at least limit their economic activity for a certain period. Historically, social insurance for women in the liberal regime was provided through their spouse, while social services were transfer-heavy (i.e. they were based on cash transfers rather than providing services) and were means-tested, i.e. not universal but based on an assessment of individuals' financial resources, and there was little state intervention aimed at making the work/family balance easier for working mothers. In the liberal regime, the family and the local community are the main safety net, rather the state (Morel 2007; Lewis et al. 2008). These characteristics of the welfare system are reflected in a more pronounced gender division of labour, as well as in greater institutional support for the male-breadwinner model. Women's responsibility for caregiving is the premise behind many social and employment policies in the liberal regime. However, the United Kingdom does support families in some ways that are similar to the more generous welfare systems, which many authors attribute to the political strength of organized labour and of labour-based parties in the UK (Lewis et al. 2008; Daly 2010).

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

As will be set out in section 5.3, the United Kingdom has a relatively high rate of women's economic activity (77.1 % in 2018), but women's activity rates still trail far behind those of men and a relatively large share of inactive women claim family/caring responsibilities as the reason for their inactivity (37 % in 2019) (see Figure 3). Women's employment rate, while lower than for men, was slightly higher than the EU-28 average ahead of Brexit. Levels of both economic activity and employment for women both rose steadily in the UK in the first two decades of the 21st century, thereby increasingly diverging from the traditional male-breadwinner/female-homemaker model typical of the period from just after the Second World War until the 1970s. The UK has

a very high share of women working part-time, indeed having the highest proportion of women working part-time due to caring responsibilities of any EU Member State in 2019 (66.6%) (see Figure 11). In addition, the UK stands out in particular with one of the biggest gender gaps in part-time employment. As the relevant literature points out, the major shift over the past four decades in the UK has been that women have moved to part-time hours, rather than withdrawing from the labour market after childbirth. However, it is the availability and quality of those part-time jobs that differentiates the liberal regime from social democratic and conservative-corporatist regimes in terms of gender (in)equality on the labour market. Within the liberal welfare regime, part-time employment constrains women's ability to gain access to better jobs with higher wages and opportunities for career advancement. This is due to the fact that part-time employment is mainly confined to a limited number of occupations and temporary jobs, resulting in women being denied entry into positions of authority and responsibility (Stier et al. 2001). Such limited market opportunities for women, primarily those with lower wages, along with higher childcare costs, affects their pattern of work, even causing them to pause their employment for several years for child-rearing purposes. This manifests itself most clearly in a low employment rate for mothers (67%) and a very low share of parents who both work full-time in the UK (31%).

Over the past decade, the number of people considered to be 'working poor' has grown in the majority of EU Member States. The same applies to the UK, which saw one of the biggest rises of any EU Member State in the 2010s (in 2019, this was 51 % up on 2010). While the gender difference was not that pronounced among the working poor, the overall poverty rate for women over that period was higher than for men – in 2018, 19.8 % of women were at risk of poverty, compared with 17.8 % of men, according to data from Eurostat (2021b). All the gender inequalities on the labour market referred to above have also resulted in a relatively large gender gap in pensions in the UK (34.2 % in 2019) (ibid.). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, too, has had a negative impact on working women in the UK, especially due to their high level of part-time employment, with part-time jobs decreasing by 70 % in the first three months of the pandemic (Sangster 2020).

SOCIAL SECURITY AND FAMILY POLICY

The current policy on care in the UK was formed only relatively recently. For many years, the United Kingdom's liberal heritage saw the country basing social spending on anti-poverty and pro-employment goals, and the prevailing ideology was that state intervention was justified only when the family, as the basic care provider, could not take the appropriate action. The Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s pursued the retrenchment of many social benefits and services. The social security system came to be dominated by means-tested payments with only a minor role for earnings-related social insurance. As income inequality rose in that period, the costs of cash benefits soared despite the tightening of eligibility rules due to introducing greater means testing. As a result, the unemployment benefit system was further reoriented towards activation. A somewhat different policy framework was initiated in the late 1990s, following the election of the New Labour government in 1997. Among other things, the new family policy was focused on the provision of childcare and promoting employment for mothers (parents). However, the New Labour government continued the 'mixed economy of welfare', i.e. shifting responsibilities between the state, the private sector, the non-profit voluntary and community sector and unpaid caregivers. The assumption was that this would promote greater efficiency and responsiveness to the needs of those using the services, and therefore formerly public services were contracted out to private and voluntary-sector organisations. Consequently, the subsequent New Labour administrations further developed the activation approach started by their predecessors, while childcare services, although available, often remained out of the financial reach of working families. During Prime Minister Tony Blair's time in office (1997-2007), the central feature of the social investment-led 'Third Way' strategy was a heavy reliance on employment to address poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. The 'welfare-to-work' scheme, one of the government's key policies, saw stricter conditions being attached to benefits, requiring the unemployed to actively seek work and participate in training (Mitton 2016).

Overall, in the field of family policy in recent years, the focus has shifted towards promoting child development for the underprivileged and those at risk, rather than on bringing more women into employment and enhancing policies to reconcile work and family life.

LEAVE AND CHILDCARE POLICY

Childcare in the UK is provided by the public sector, small for-profit businesses, large chains, the voluntary sector and (on a very limited basis) by employers (Mitton 2016). Informal care accounts for a significant proportion of childcare, with grandparents the most common informal carers. The National Childcare Strategy launched in 1998 combined the establishment of nursery places with subsidies for pre- and post-school childcare to promote measures that enable parents to balance paid work with the needs of their children. By 2004, free part-time childcare services were being offered to all children over 3 years of age, while provision for children below that age stayed mainly in the hands of their family. Under the Conservative / Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-2015), there was continuity in terms of funding policy – from 2013, local authorities had a legal obligation to secure provision for the 20% least advantaged two-year-olds, and from 2014, for the 40% least advantaged (West / Noden 2016). According to the latest data, all three- and four-year-old children in the UK are eligible for 570 hours of free childcare per year.

The UK has a relatively high share of children outside the formal childcare system (Figure 13), resulting from the fact that there are no guaranteed places while financial support for childcare for children under 3 is limited. In addition, in 2018 the UK had the highest population share in the EU that was not using childcare because of the cost (according to Eurostat (2021d), 16.1% of parents in the UK claimed that the cost was their reason for not using childcare in 2018, compared with the EU-28 average of 7.2%). The majority of childcare institutions in the UK offer less than 30 hours of childcare weekly (Figure 13), thereby buoying up the full-time/part-time earner model. Although the level of availability of childcare is relatively high and increasing, there are major

obstacles in terms of affordability, quality, staffing, flexibility and complexity of provision (Mitton 2016).

DURATION OF CHILDCARE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 3 YEARS OLD IN THE UK, 2008-2018

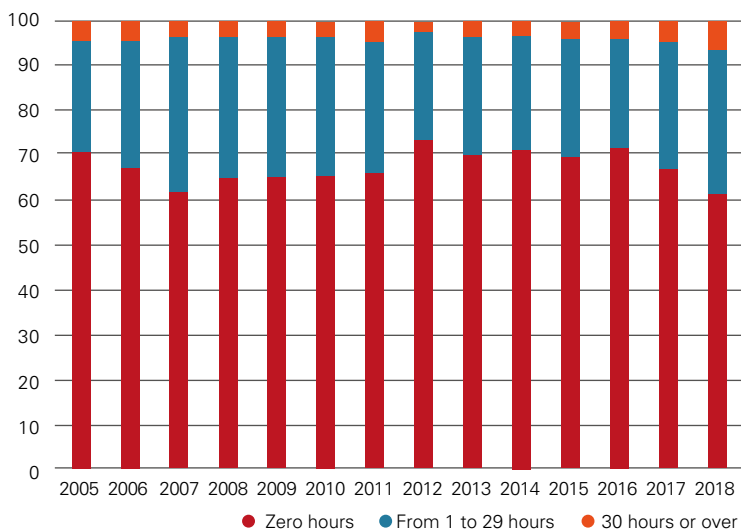


Figure 13 – Source: Eurostat. Formal childcare by duration and age group (TPS00185)

The data point to the conclusion that the UK has a split system with a shortage of public childcare services for children aged under 3 and fairly extensive provision for children older than this, but in both cases the majority of childcare institutions offer support which is incompatible with both parents working full-time.

Leave policy was developed incrementally under the New Labour government from 1999 onwards and was aimed mainly at mothers, while very little was done about fathers' involvement in childcare and their use of the right to parental leave. Parental leave was introduced to comply with the minimum requirements of the relevant EU Directive in 1999 – meanwhile, however, the UK focused on providing longer maternity leave, extending it from 14 weeks to nine months, and after that to twelve months in 2010 (Daly 2010). The

2006 Work and Family Act enables mothers to transfer the last six months of maternity leave to their partners if they return to work, but the low levels of compensation for fathers resulted in low take-up. Although the UK offers pregnant employees the right to 52 weeks (12 months) of maternity leave, it comes second last out of OECD countries when it comes to paid maternity leave. At the same time, fathers receive just two weeks of paid leave, far below the OECD average of eight weeks (ibid.).

In conclusion, in recent decades the UK has implemented some policy changes, introduced by Labour when it was in power, making its family policy more generous than before. However, the family still bears the main caregiving responsibility and motherhood involves a significant reduction in women's economic activity. Welfare reforms still encourage women to depend at least partially on their partner (or in the absence of a partner, other family members), while young children significantly increase the share of female part-time work. The effects of these policies can be seen in a low employment rate for mothers (67%) (OECD 2016) and only a small share of parents both working full-time (31%) (ibid.). While some progress has been made in terms of childcare coverage and the length of maternity leave, all the key policies aiming to achieve a work-family balance are underpinned by what is in essence a full-time / part-time earner model. The majority of childcare facilities offer only part-time care and due to the 'mixed economy of welfare' childcare is often unaffordable. The emphasis on extending maternity leave, while doing very little to give fathers an incentive to take up their right to parental leave, also perpetuates outrageous gender inequality on the labour market, with incremental and limited changes to family policy obviously unable to improve women's economic situation.

6

THE SOCIAL-DEMOCRATIC REGIME – SWEDEN



Often presented as the ideal prototype of the social-democratic welfare regime, Sweden's welfare policy has historically emphasised the principles of universalism and egalitarianism. Sweden's commitment to family-friendly policies has made it a role model for gender equality to be emulated by other countries. The Swedish state has long had a strong political commitment to the full employment and wide-ranging family policy initiatives, public childcare systems, as well as parental leave and care for older people. When it comes to gender equality, the social-democratic regime is explicitly committed to promoting women's labour-force participation and gender equality in general. Sweden has a long history of policies that encourage high rates of employment for mothers, high levels of use of parental leave among fathers and a high incidence of both parents taking parental leave. The foundations for this approach were laid during the 1960s and 1970s under the government led by the Social Democratic Party (SAP), which appointed a 'Gender Equality Delegation'. Thanks to women's organisations and feminist activism rooted in socialism and demands for class and gender equality, gender equality issues were institutionalised and politicised (Lane / Jordansson 2020). However, in recent decades public services are becoming increasingly marketised and the process of welfare retrenchment is taking place, with repercussions for gender equality as well.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

As will be shown in section 6.3, Sweden has the highest rate of women's economic activity in the European Union (80.2 % in 2018) and the EU's lowest gender gap in terms of activity rates (and this gap is narrowing still further). The share of women inactive due to caring responsibilities is one of the lowest in the EU (9.1 % in 2019) and only a small gender gap for inactivity as a result of such responsibilities. The rate of women's employment, although lower than the rate of men's employment, is the highest in the EU (79.7 % in 2019). Levels of both economic activity and employment among women rose steadily between 2000 and 2019 in Sweden. However, Sweden has a high %age of women working part-time (30.7 % in 2019) and a relatively large gender gap in terms of part-time employment. In addition, Sweden has a relatively high

proportion of children aged under 3 who are not in formal childcare (49.3 % in 2019). Although that share is relatively low compared with the majority of EU Member States, many children aged 0-3 years are taken care of by their families. Along with the prevalence of female part-time employment, this suggests that Sweden, often cited as a shining example of the dual-earner model, partly relies on women's unpaid care work.

It is worth noting that part-time employment in Sweden is designed as a temporary stopgap or stepping stone on the way to full-time employment, with similar working conditions to full-time employment, unlike in the liberal regime, where women are often 'trapped' in part-time employment. Part-time employment is on offer on a widespread basis as it provides a way to ensure that mothers continuously remain involved in the labour force. It is assumed that part-time employment during early motherhood is a transitional stage, and women will return to full-time employment, so it serves more as a stepping stone to full-time employment than as a means of trapping women in marginal employment as is the case in the liberal regime. Employment conditions for part-time workers are therefore, unlike in the liberal regime, similar to those in full-time employment (Stier et al. 2001). However, these inequalities still result in women's economic position being less rosy than men's. According to recent research, changes latterly on the labour market are widening class and gender differences in terms of employment and working conditions (Lane / Jordansson 2020). The gender gap in terms of pensions in Sweden is slightly above the EU average and a higher percentage of women face the risk of poverty (17.8 % in 2019) than men (16.3 %).

SOCIAL SECURITY AND FAMILY POLICY

Since the 1970s, Sweden's 'dual-earner' family policy model has been boosted by the expansion of childcare, parental leave and individualised taxation of spouses' income. However, since the 1990s, Sweden has adopted several privatisation-oriented policy reforms and in the late 1990s and early 2000s Sweden sharply reduced its public spending. Its expenditure on social protection is still above average, but the gap between Sweden and the EU average is getting smaller (Duvander / Ferrarini 2013; Lane / Jordansson 2020). Gradually from the 1980s onwards the Swedish welfare model has shifted towards a more liberal approach by introducing the notion of active citizenship into mainstream policy discourse, particularly when it comes to the labour market. Reforms have been implemented and are gradually turning welfare into a commodity (Lane / Jordansson 2020). Reforms of family policy gained greater prominence after, in the wake of the 2005 election, a centre-right coalition came into government which put forward and implemented a number of new reforms in the area of family policy legislation with the clear purpose of enhancing individual choice. These reforms, however, point in different directions, introducing new and partly contradictory principles for the organisation of care. Most importantly, a gender-equality tax bonus for the more equal sharing of care work was introduced, entitling parents who share parental leave more equally to a monthly tax break of SEK 3,000 (around a fifth of the average net wage). At the same time, though, a flat-rate home-care allowance was brought in, backing up a more traditional division of labour between men and women. In addition, a 'childcare voucher' opened up the possibility of alternative care solutions being provided in the homes of care workers with little professional training.

While gender equality issues were previously raised in a way that transcended class, implying that gender equality and class equality went hand in hand, the collectivist approach (both in general and in terms of gender equality-related issues) was gradually replaced by a more individualistic one. Research has emphasised cutbacks made in the provision of care for older people and childcare, and the need to fill the gaps between care and work schedules, leading to an increased demand for private domestic services. With the marketisation of care and the transfer of more care responsibilities back to the home, paid domestic work re-emerged in Swedish households (ibid.).

CHILDCARE AND LEAVE POLICY

For several decades, Sweden's family policy has been one of the clearest examples of a dual-earner model, with parents having been encouraged to participate in the labour market and to share unpaid care work (Duvander / Ferrarini 2013). Alongside its progressive tax system and individual taxation policy, the main policies aimed to achieve these goals have enabled widespread public daycare for children and generous parental leave provision. From 2000 onwards, the right to public childcare was introduced – initially only for working parents but with this gradually being expanded to include all children under the age of 5 (Lane / Jordansson 2020). The vast majority of childcare in Sweden is financed through public spending, with parents co-financing childcare activities by paying fees that are income-tested to ensure their affordability. Over the past four decades, several reforms have been implemented to increase the scope and affordability of public daycare. While only 30% of pre-school children were enrolled in public childcare in the early 1970s, by 2015 this proportion was up to 83 % (ibid.).

DURATION OF CHILDCARE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 3 YEARS OLD IN SWEDEN, 2005-2019

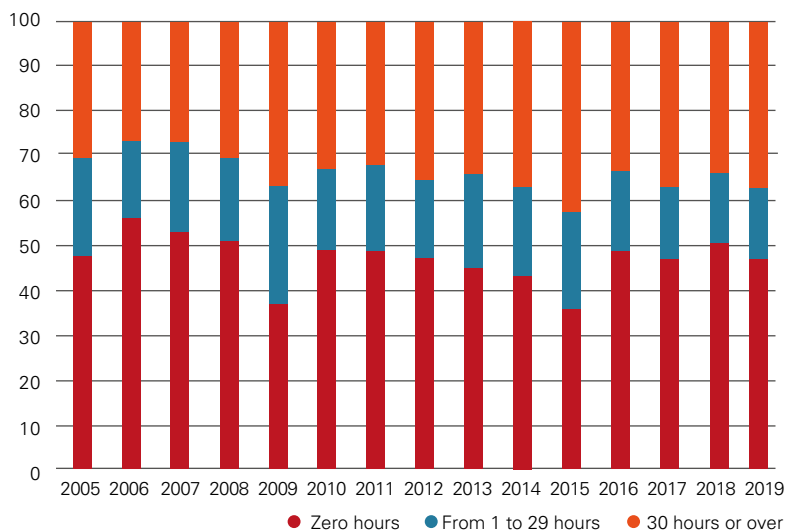


Figure 14 – Source: Eurostat. Formal childcare by duration and age group (TPS00185)

The social-democratic regime offers public childcare to all children over the age of 1, resulting in a relatively low proportion of pre-school children having no formal childcare, while the majority of children are enrolled in childcare facilities full-time (Figure 14). Among other beneficial effects, the continuous growth of publicly financed childcare facilities has been shown to increase mothers' employment (Duvander / Ferrarini 2013).

When introduced in 1974, the length of parental leave was initially six months but was subsequently extended to 16 months (480 days) in the 1990s. Initially, parents were free to share the leave as they wished, resulting in a very small fraction of total leave being used by fathers. Since then, leave rights have been extended and fathers' use of leave has gradually increased due to a non-transferable leave benefit for each parent. To nudge fathers towards taking more responsibility for their children, the so-called 'daddy month' was introduced in 1995 and extended to two months in 2001. Since 2002, the total leave period has been 16 months, including 13 with an earnings-related benefit payment amounting to 80 % of

previous earnings. Parental leave is used by almost all mothers and by around nine out of 10 fathers. However, the gender division of parental leave remains unevenly distributed: in 2015, 74 % of the total number of net compensated days were taken by mothers (Duvander / Ferrarini 2013).

Although there has been a shift towards gender equality in using parental leave, progress in terms of men's participation in child rearing and other domestic activities has been very slow (Lane / Jordansson 2020). However, the state has gradually turned away from advocating more equality in unpaid care work inside the home, and has been implementing measures such as the tax break on household services, the so-called RUT, introduced in 2007, with the basic premise of enabling private households to purchase at a subsidised rate domestic services (cleaning, washing or dry cleaning of clothing and home textiles, cooking and a number of other services where qualifying households were eligible for a tax break).

By introducing such policies, Sweden has been gradually moving towards increased marketisation of care work and away from offering public services that are proven to enhance gender equality, such as extending parental leave for fathers. In recent years, this new trend in Swedish family policy has seen an emphasis on increased choice rather than gender equality among all groups of parents (Lane / Jordansson 2020). However, most of the country's parliamentary opposition at the time of these reforms (the Greens, the Left Party and the Social Democrats) favoured a return to previous family policy approaches and a renewed consolidation of earner-carer policy (Duvander / Ferrarini 2013).

The above policies on childcare and parental leave have resulted in a high level of continuous female employment during their working lives and eliminated or substantially reduced the negative impact of childbirth on women's employment rates, meaning that Sweden has one of the highest employment rates for mothers in Europe (83 %). Moreover, among couples with children, a high proportion of parents both work full-time (68 %, more than double the rate in the UK, as noted earlier). However, recent reforms in family policy are contradictory – while some reforms can be expected to strengthen gender equality, others leave greater scope for market solutions and more traditional family orientations.



7

**THE POST-COMMUNIST
REGIME - CROATIA**

Given its communist past, Croatia can be regarded as an example of the post-communist welfare regime. As discussed in the introductory chapter, post-communist EU Member States are very different from other countries in the European Union because of their specific individual historical paths, while also differing significantly from each other. For the welfare regime, this often means a ghastly mixture of a dual-earner strategy inherited from socialism and conservative/liberal tendencies developed through the period of transition to Western capitalism.

Women's position in Yugoslavia was defined by their dual role as workers and mothers – while female employment was considered a way to secure emancipation, women's role as mothers and carers was recognised by the state and 'socialised' through welfare arrangements such as childcare, extended maternity leave of up to one year, and so on (Bonfiglioli 2015). Although socialist Yugoslavia recognised the importance of providing childcare, investments in the sector were insufficient to provide extensive childcare services.¹¹ The lack of widespread childcare meant that women had to maintain traditional family ties and so had to combine paid work and care responsibilities. Thus, despite significant advances in women's access to education and the labour market, female activity rates in Croatia (as well as in other parts of the then Yugoslavia) during the 1970s and 1980s were low and closer to those in Western Europe (in 1961 only 33.8 % and in 1981 35.6 %), while the proportion of women in total employment grew from 38.5 % in 1978 to 41.0 % in 1988 (Bejaković 1990; Woodward 1985).

The transition period and the wars that hit Yugoslavia in the 1990s had a fundamental impact on Croatian society, including its welfare system and family policies, as well as the dominant ideology about women's role in society and their position on the labour market. The privatisation of state-owned companies, among other things, led to rising levels of unemployment and poverty.

11 Childcare in Croatia (and Yugoslavia as a whole) was less developed than in other socialist countries. Even though the number of children in formal childcare grew from 3,947 in 1946 to 34,369 in 1976, only 1.7 % of children under the age of 3 and 15.1% of those aged from 3 to 7 were in formal childcare in 1974/1975 (ibid.). By 1990, the childcare coverage rate for children aged 3-6 in Yugoslavia had increased to 23%, but at that time in the Czech Republic and Slovakia more than 75% of children of the same age were in childcare, while in Hungary this was even 85% (Dobrotić 2019a).

A focus on declining fertility rates by a right-wing nationalist government and the increasing influence of the Catholic Church on state policy resulted in efforts to steer family policy away from the dual-earner model to policies more in keeping with conservative regimes¹², but, due to budgetary constraints, most of the policy changes that were meant to provide strong backing for the ideologically motivated ‘re-domestication’ of women that had been announced failed. Other than conservative influences, Croatia was influenced by a process of delayed Europeanisation, particularly as a result of negotiations to become an EU candidate country and then a Member State, which informed aspects of its work-life balance, family and anti-discrimination policies.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Croatia’s statistics compare unfavourably with other EU Member States – after Greece and Italy, it has the lowest employment rate (66.7 %, while the EU-28 average in 2019 was 73.9 %). In the period from 2012 to 2017, Croatia had the third highest unemployment rate in the European Union (after Greece and Spain). While in 2019 the country’s unemployment rate dropped below the EU-28 average, this was in large part due to the expansion of temporary employment, given that Croatia has the highest rate of precarious employment¹³ and third highest share of temporary employment. Another reason for the declining unemployment rate was substantial work-related migration to other EU countries.

12 This was illustrated by the National Programme for Demographic Development, signed in 1996, which was supposed to provide the basis for a new family policy in Croatia. For example, policies aiming to bring about demographic renewal included an ambitious programme of child benefits with the level of these increasing with the number of children, tax relief also based on the number of children, free childcare for families with three or more children, three years’ maternity leave for mothers with three or more children, and ‘parent-carer’ status being granted to mothers with three or more children. However, due to the socio-economic situation, most of these measures were not introduced, with the exception of the three years’ maternity leave for mothers of three or more children. Child benefits remained insufficient to act as a proper incentive for women to leave the labour market (Puljiz / Zrinščak 2002).

13 In Eurostat data, precarious employment is employment on temporary contracts lasting three months or less.

As regards gender inequalities on the labour market, not surprisingly women's employment rates in Croatia are some of the lowest in the EU, although there has been an upward trend in this respect (from 52.8 % in 2005 to 61.5 % in 2019). The employment gap in 2019 accounted for 10.5 %age points, i.e. just below the EU-28 average. In Croatia's case this is not an indicator of greater gender equality on the labour market, but a product of general low activity and employment rates, not only for women but also for men. Early retirement in the 1990s was typical among war veterans (Dobrotić et al. 2013), as well as a solution for the growing number of unemployed in the aftermath of the privatisation and devastation of large numbers of factories and workplaces. Moreover, the employment gap significantly narrowed in the years following the 2008 crisis, not as a result of policy successes, but because of greater job losses in male-dominated sectors in the wake of the crisis, while female-dominated sectors had more job security. The only indicator of gender equality on the labour market where Croatia fares better than other countries studied in this report, or indeed EU Member States in general, is the proportion of part-time employment. Although a small gender gap exists in terms of the use of part-time employment, in Croatia, as well as in other post-communist countries, women's part-time employment as a proportion of employment overall are rather low (6.6 % in 2019). The communist gender regime and its focus on full-time employment avoided part-time employment as a means of integrating women into the labour market, and this is still key to explaining this difference between EU Member States.

While women are not overrepresented in temporary and precarious employment, these types of employment are issues of growing concern in Croatia because of their high levels. All of the country's governments, from right-wing to social democrats, have sought to make the labour market more flexible as a way to boost the competitiveness of the Croatian economy, cut the unemployment rate and attract foreign investments. However, a gradual liberalisation of the labour market from the 1990s on has recently led to the expansion of insecure and temporary work.

SOCIAL SECURITY AND FAMILY POLICY

After the breakup of Yugoslavia, there was a gradual transformation of the public sector and public services in Croatia. The overhaul of the social security system started in the late 1990s and included the partial privatisation of pension systems, the gradual liberalisation of childcare, healthcare, and so on. It is difficult to unambiguously characterise Croatia's welfare trajectory because of its mixture of a continental European (Bismarckian or conservative-corporatist) model of social insurance, a legacy of a universalistic approach to social policy from the communist era and recent trends to privatise services and individualise responsibilities (Dobrotić 2016). Universal rights to (free) education, healthcare and childcare were gradually hollowed out to rationalise expenses, include private providers of services and reduce the state's responsibilities (ibid.). One of the repercussions of this has been that exercising certain rights has become more costly. While healthcare still predominantly falls within the public sector, over the past 30 years health insurance and swathes of primary, gynaecological and dental care have been privatized. Labour market policies, as was mentioned above, have been oriented towards further flexibilisation, while active employment policies have shifted towards measures like support for self-employment, employment of inactive older women from rural and underdeveloped regions to work as 'geronto-homemakers', financed by the ESF, and a failed vocational training initiative without entering into an employment relationship for young workers without previous work experience, etc. At the same time, alongside the above statistics on unemployment in Croatia, unemployment policies are some of the most restrictive in the EU, with around 80 % of registered unemployed persons in Croatia not being entitled to unemployment benefits (Ćačić / Levačić 2018). As Dobrotić (2016) points out, social systems in Croatia, which have mostly been inherited from the past and have not received sufficient investment, are "facing problems with sustainability and efficiency, while the welfare state was not adequately redesigned to cope successfully with changing social risks (e.g. indebtedness, atypical working courses, long-term unemployment, work-family balance, long-term care)".

In this context, family policy has mostly found itself on the sidelines of the state's social policy discourse and policy agenda. Although often framed as an argument about fertility and demographic issues, the interventions made have been minimal, as we will discuss at more length below.

LEAVE AND CHILDCARE POLICY

While leave policy has undergone a number of legislative adjustments over the years, it has not dramatically changed from the policy inherited from the former Yugoslavia (Dobrotić 2019a), with changes including the gradual extension of maternity leave to 25.8 weeks paid at the level of previous earnings.¹⁴ Although Croatia introduced fathers' quotas for parental leave (two non-transferable months) through a process of negotiation and harmonisation with the EU Parental Leave Directive, these measures failed to challenge the unequal distribution of care and employment between genders because mothers have remained the primary beneficiaries of such leave. Paternity leave is still a glaring omission in leave policy in Croatia and, according to research, parental leave benefits are not generous enough to provide strong incentives for fathers to take them. Even though they were increased and are currently paid at the level of previous earnings, paid benefits cannot exceed 170 % of Croatia's budgetary basis (approximately €760 in 2020)¹⁵ (Dobrotić 2019a).

The situation regarding childcare is similar to that for leave policy. Croatia has not made significant progress in terms of public childcare over the past 20 years. An insufficiently developed network of kindergartens is still the main characteristic of the childcare sector – in 2000 only 35 % of children aged 3 to 7 were in formal childcare (Bouillet et al. 2002 cited in Puljiz / Zrinščak 2002). As shown in Figure 15, Croatia is well below the EU average for the Barcelona objective regarding children under 3 being in formal childcare. The situation is similar for the other relevant Barcelona objective. In 2016, Croatia

14 The upper limit for maternity benefits was revoked in 2007 because its real value fell from 2.8% of average pay in 1994 to 0.9% of average pay in 2006 (Dobrotić 2019b).

15 Given that the maximum levels of parental benefits were €540 before 2020 and €157 before 2017 (Dobrotić 2019a), this can be seen as a move in the right direction, but still below other EU Member States.

had the lowest childcare coverage for children aged 3 to 6 (51.3 percentage) of the EU-28. In this light, it is no surprise that 60 % of women who are inactive or work part-time due to care responsibilities report a lack of suitable care services (European Commission 2018a). Croatia is one of the EU Member States that has been doing the least well in this regard, with only Latvia and Romania having a higher proportion of women reporting such a situation (ibid.).

DURATION OF CHILDCARE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 3 YEARS OLD IN CROATIA, 2010-2019

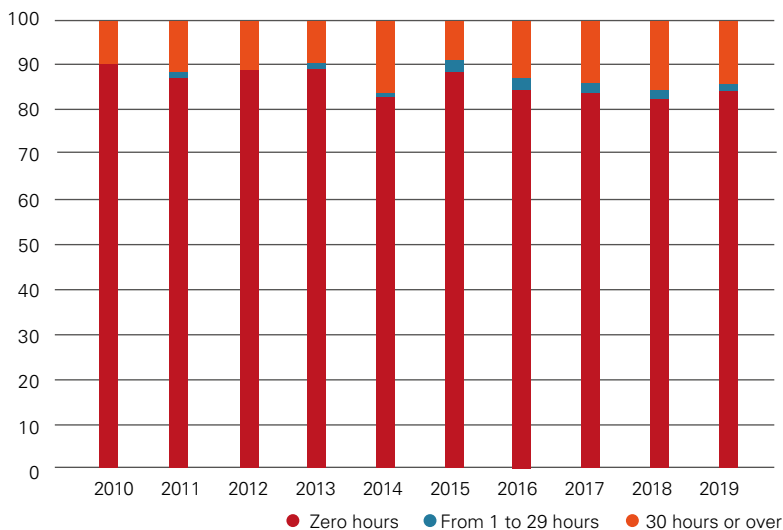


Figure 15 – Source: Eurostat. Formal childcare by duration and age group (TPS00185)

The situation is even worse for regional coverage rates – coverage for children aged 0-3 ranges from 5.6 % (or 24.4% for kindergartens) in Brod-Posavina County to 40.4% (82.8% for kindergartens) in the city of Zagreb (Dobrotić et al. 2018). Such huge differences are in part the legacy of the decentralisation of the childcare system, because the responsibility of financing the whole childcare system lies in the hands of local communities, i.e. cities and municipalities, whose financial capability to invest in the sector differs vastly from one place to another. Another consequence of decentralisation is the

differences in the cost of childcare, which is set at local level without there being any national leverage in this regard. Moreover, the cost tends to be highest in less developed communities (ibid.). It is also worth pointing out that eligibility criteria for a childcare place are also determined at local level, which, along with a lack of available places, often means that children of unemployed parents and of jobseekers do not get a place in childcare. The lack of adequate childcare arrangements severely compromises these parents' chances of finding employment.

Most of the growth in childcare coverage in Croatia came about through the private sector (ibid.), supported by public subsidies, while public-sector kindergartens face constant underinvestment and infrastructure that is often past its sell-by date. While some investment in physical infrastructure is being provided by European Structural Investment Funds (ESIF) aimed at rural development, these are not nearly enough to make up for the lag behind other Member States, especially in the context of the Barcelona objectives.

In conclusion, our brief overview of women's position on the labour market in Croatia with regard to its social security system shows the state's very ambiguous stance towards advancing women employment opportunities and mitigating gender inequalities on the labour market and in terms of care work responsibilities. To meet EU criteria, Croatia ratified the required EU directives, but most of them were only adopted on paper. An ongoing failure to invest in the infrastructure inherited from socialism (from hospitals to kindergartens) along with the retrenchment of the responsibilities for swathes of the country's social security systems does not provide a good basis for the emancipatory gender policies that could improve mothers' disastrous situation on the labour market. Although there have been some positive developments in terms of leave policy, these cannot make up for the lack of other services intended to mitigate the burden of care work. Especially worrying are the regional disparities in childcare coverage rates across Croatia which could severely hit women's employment opportunities in less developed parts of the country.

8

DISCUSSION



There is persistent gender inequality on the labour market at EU level, as well as in individual Member States. While some improvement is taking place, in particular in terms of women's economic activity and employment rates, this progress is very slow and often nuanced, in that these positive developments are often accompanied by high proportions of women in part-time employment, leading to women accounting for a more substantial share of people living in poverty and resulting in a gender wage and pension gap. It is still largely women who take on the burden of care work, which in turn negatively impacts their prospects on the labour market. While some countries fare better than the EU average, some fall well below even the modest goals and targets set by policies at EU level, such as the Lisbon strategy.

Despite some convergence between the four countries examined here in terms of increasing female activity and employment rates, there are considerable differences in terms of outcomes on the labour market, as well as employment and family policy. Activity and employment rates have clearly increased in all the countries studied here, so Germany, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Croatia. However, in all these countries except Croatia, that growth came at the expense of a large and growing share of women in part-time employment. Germany, which over the past two decades has experienced the steepest rise in employment and activity rates, also has the highest proportion of part-time employment. A similar trend has been witnessed in the UK, with less pronounced growth in women's employment and activity rates, and the highest proportion of part-time employment among women after Germany. Although women's activity and employment rates in Sweden are the highest of the four countries and also outstrip other EU Member States (and rising), even that country relies on women to care for dependants, and this is reflected in a high share of female part-time employment.

In all four countries, the increase in employment rates is greater than the rise in activity rates, especially in Croatia which has the lowest activity rates of the four nations examined here. In the period between 2000 and 2019, activity rates increased by only 4 percentage points, meaning that most women who were not active on the labour market remained so despite the positive trend.

Moreover, the proportion of women who were inactive because of care responsibilities increased in the majority of EU Member States between 2009 and 2019, and so the conclusion must be that activation measures at national and EU levels did not manage to mitigate the historical burden of care work on women.

All four countries except Croatia have a high proportion of part-time employment within total female employment. As might be expected, the gender gap was negative in all countries, indicating that part-time employment is still predominantly carried out by women. The reasons for such employment being undertaken point to care responsibilities being the primary reason for part-time work in all four countries. The UK stands out in this regard with more than 60 % of women stating that care responsibilities were their main reason for working part-time. This trend is consistent with trends in social security and family policy, leading to childcare arrangements that cannot tolerate the dual-earner model, which is so characteristic of the situation in Germany and the UK.

While Germany and the UK have made the most progress regarding employment rates, and have adapted their family policy more to policies that are conducive to the dual-earner model that has, among other things, promoted this positive trend. However, the results are devastating if we contrast them with the quality of the work women most often engage in, as well as the impact on their livelihood, i.e. increasing rates of working poor and working people facing the risk of poverty. As some authors (Ferragina 2019; Morel 2007) have concluded, in countries that historically followed the male-breadwinner model, the expansion of family policies happened at around the same time as the divergence from other forms of active social security systems – through the privatisation of healthcare and pension systems, the deregulation of labour markets and the reduction of other social benefits that could serve as a safety net in times of need – unlike the Scandinavian countries, which started expanding family policies in the period when the welfare state became increasingly generous in the 1960s and 1970s. This has led women, who were finally able to enter the labour market in larger numbers, to find themselves on qualitatively different labour markets that have been increasingly characterised by uncertainty and precariousness.

This is one of the reasons why the introduction of similar policies that were characteristic of the glorified Scandinavian welfare regimes has yielded rather different results in the context of retrenchment and labour-market deregulation (Ferragina 2019).

An analysis of the trends in Sweden's social security and family policy also points to a similar conclusion: the trend of welfare retrenchment is resulting in greater gender inequality and the welfare services becoming more marketised, while some of the recent welfare reforms are leading to more traditional gender roles. Women perform a far larger share of childcare than men, even in countries where public services are well developed. Across the EU, there is substantial variation in the quality of women's jobs, as well as in the exact mix of paid and unpaid work. However, it is safe to say that the basic pattern is the same: men 'specialise' in paid full-time work, while doing little unpaid care work, and women still do the bulk of unpaid work, increasingly in combination with paid work.



9

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the rise and growing strength of right-wing forces across the EU, it is of the utmost importance that left-wing forces organise around demands for gender equality and create policy proposals that are much more ambitious, precise and effective than the current ones being proposed in goals and strategies at EU level. As shown by numerous researchers throughout the EU and pointed out by the UN Women Progress Report on SDGs (UN Women / United Nations 2020), the ongoing crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated gender inequalities and has had a devastating impact on sectors in which women are overrepresented. In this context, it is extremely important for policies to address these inequalities. In order to overcome the discussed obstacles to gender equality in the EU, policies should aim to redistribute care work from women and households to public institutions, making services affordable for all women, especially those from the working class. Policies should aim for quality jobs for men and women, and support collective bargaining and the unionisation of workers in traditionally 'female' sectors and occupations in order to overcome the undervaluation of women's work. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of 'key workers', the vast majority of whom are women, yet so far very little has been done to improve their wages and working conditions.

Recommendations for policies that could lead to real changes should come from feminist political organisations with local roots working together internationally. One of the biggest shortcomings in the current policies that aim to improve women's economic position is their top-down approach, which does not and cannot comprehensively take into account the material circumstances of individual women's lives. The following recommendations, which are grouped based on policy objectives, stem from the insights gained in this report and should provide a potential basis for left-wing feminist actors to build on.

1. GENDER EQUALITY MONITORING

- > Mandatory gender-sensitive annual monitoring of the amount, intensity and distribution of unpaid care work should be included in official statistical reports at EU level.

2. SOCIAL POLICY

- > To encourage more equal sharing of the burden of care work inside the home, the EU should standardise its leave policy in line with existing research and best practices in certain Member States. Specifically, it should set minimum leave benefits at 80 to 100 % of previous pay. To get fathers/ other parents to take parental leave, the leave should be non-transferable and well paid. In advocating a more equal division of parental leave take-up, it should be borne in mind that in countries with significant gender pay gaps, leave that involves benefits below the suggested level (at least 80 % of previous pay) can lead to a significant reduction of the household budget, making it unlikely that parents with higher wages will take the leave even if they would otherwise wish to do so.
- > The EU should address the question of the duration and affordability of childcare in their targets and policies, as well as its availability. For Member States to increase childcare capacities and secure legal entitlements to early childhood education and care (ECEC) for every child, there must be sufficient investment in the sector, possibly financed at EU level. In order for the SDGs to initiate real changes, quality public services, including childcare, care for older people and social protection, should be financed by progressive gender-responsive taxation.

3. FUNDING OF FEMINIST ORGANISATIONS

> The EU, as well as individual member states, should increase the funding for feminist organisations that can build their demands from the bottom up in their communities. To this end, funding should be directed into long-term organisation building, instead of encouraging the proliferation of redundant project outputs and overburdening the organisations with project administration. Funding of feminist organisations should leave more room for actual community building which can have an impact in respective countries, as well as at EU level.

4. QUALITY OF EMPLOYMENT

> When calling for policies that reconcile work and family life, part-time employment as an option for women should be approached with caution due to its known adverse labour-market consequences. These policies should stress the importance of union protection and making working conditions similar to those of full-time jobs, with part-time employment only being used as a temporary solution which should lead (back) to full-time employment.

> While the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) is demanding the addition of a clause which would prevent minimum wages being set below the poverty line, to the European Commission's proposal for a new Directive on minimum wages (ETUC n.d.), unions should advocate a much more ambitious concept of the living wage for all workers. All categories of workers currently excluded from the statutory minimum wage, like domestic workers (predominantly women) and young workers, should be included in the demands for a living wage.

> To guarantee that Member States help unions to increase the number of employers signing up to collective agreements, a ban on public funds for companies which refuse their workers their right to collective bargaining should be included in the current proposal of the new Directive on minimum wages. Just as importantly, unions at national and EU levels should argue not only for pay transparency, as is currently the case, but for raising the level of wages in low-paid sectors and in 'key' occupations.

5. SUPPORTING MARGINALISED GROUPS

- > National trade unions, as well as trade union confederations at EU level, should make more effort to organise in sectors other than the traditional bastions of the trade union movement that are the male-dominated manufacturing industries. The sectors involved include the service sectors, among them domestic and care work (predominantly populated by women). Trade unions should also move towards including young, migrant, precarious and gig-economy workers in their membership, as well as broadening the scope of what is seen as part of their legitimate field of action. Moreover, trade unions must open up to the unemployed and underemployed to maintain the continuity of their membership in times of work precarity. To this end, membership fees should be tailored to suit all budgets and to ensure that such fees do not form an obstacle to anyone joining a trade union.
- > There needs to be a clearer commitment to taking on board in EU policies, targets and politics the perspectives of disadvantaged groups of women, especially LGBTIQ people, the disabled, migrants and those with an unregulated citizenship status. To avoid 'pinkwashing' and tokenism, conditions must be created for those women to have a platform to speak for themselves and be the ultimate authority on the respective policies and changes.

This list of recommendations, which is by no means exhaustive, cannot be expected to come to fruition without wider political changes. In particular, advocating equality for all women and girls everywhere, as the EU does with the SDGs, requires far more generous financing of public services than the current political climate in the EU allows. Given the imposed limits on public spending, there is not much scope for the implementation of gender equality policies without much stronger political pressure from the left. In such a context, more gender-sensitive policies are finding it difficult to go beyond politically correct platitudes. Feminist politics must be deeply rooted in leftist demands for fulfilling jobs, dignified working conditions and a much higher standard of living for everyone, instead of concentrating only on middle- and upper-class, privileged women. This in turn means that any left-wing politics that has the ambition of changing the political direction towards a more progressive and emancipatory approach, must prioritise feminism and provide room for women to take the lead.



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ROSA-LUXEMBURG-STIFTUNG

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung is an internationally operating, left-wing non-profit organisation providing civic education. It is affiliated with Germany's 'Die Linke' (Left Party). Active since 1990, the foundation has been committed to the analysis of social and political processes and developments worldwide. The Stiftung works in the context of the growing multiple crises facing our current political and economic system. In cooperation with other progressive organisations around the globe, the Stiftung focuses on democratic and social participation, the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, and alternative economic and social development. The Stiftung's international activities aim to provide civic education by means of academic analyses, public programmes, and projects conducted together with partner institutions. The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung works towards a more just world and a system based on international solidarity.

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The EU has a long tradition of – in what it says at least – supporting women’s labour-market participation and promoting social security policies. The EU’s commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are among its most recent attempts to achieve this, with the SDGs’ promise to end “all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere”. Have such policies yielded any substantive results when it comes to improving women’s economic position?

Focusing on four European countries, this report shows that it is still largely women who take on the burden of care work, which in turn negatively impacts their prospects on the labour market. Gender inequality, in other words, still persists despite some positive trends. For real change to happen, a radically different approach from the one suggested by the SDGs is needed. This approach must be based on transformative feminist policies that prioritise the quality of work and reproductive work, as well as tackling ongoing trends such as the individualisation of care, the dismantling of the welfare state and the weakening of trade unions.