

WOMEN'S JOURNEY TO GENDER EQUALITY IN THE LABOUR MARKET

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Abstract: Drawing from human capital theory and cultural lag theory, this article examines how the role of women in the labour market has been influenced from the earliest societies to the contemporary status quo. Using a thematic literature review, we present the long journey of women toward equality and dignity, beginning before the Neolithic Revolution and continuing through the Digital Age, incorporating current statistical data from Eurostat regarding the gender gap in employment and wages. Our findings reveal that despite significant advancements, structural inequalities persist, particularly among parents, highlighting the slower evolution of societal norms compared to the techno-economic transformations. Although differences between individuals are natural, including between women and men, the labour market tends to penalize working women, as the data show. Automation and Artificial Intelligence are anticipated to reshape the labour market, and create new opportunities for women, but ingrained gender disparities remain, reinforcing the tendency to revert to previous norms even after temporary shifts, such as those observed during the Covid-19 pandemic, regarding domestic responsibility sharing.

Keywords: gender equality; women's participation in the labour market; inequality of opportunity; gender wage gap; the digital age.

Résumé : S'appuyant sur la théorie du capital humain et la théorie du décalage culturel, cet article examine comment le rôle des femmes sur le marché du travail a été influencé depuis les sociétés les plus anciennes jusqu'au statu quo contemporain. À travers une revue thématique de la littérature, nous présentons le long parcours des femmes vers l'égalité et la dignité, depuis la période précédant la Révolution Néolithique jusqu'à l'Ère de la Digitalisation, en intégrant des données statistiques récentes d'Eurostat concernant les écarts de genre en matière d'emploi et de salaires. Nos résultats révèlent que, malgré des avancées significatives, des inégalités persistent, notamment parmi les parents, soulignant ainsi la lente évolution des normes sociétales par rapport aux transformations technico-économiques. Bien que les différences entre individus soient naturelles, le marché du travail tend à pénaliser les femmes actives, comme le montrent les données. L'automatisation et l'intelligence artificielle pourrait redéfinir le marché du travail et créer des opportunités pour les femmes, mais les disparités de genre profondément enracinées se maintiennent, renforçant la tendance à revenir au statu quo précédent, même après des changements temporaires, tels que ceux durant la pandémie de Covid-19, notamment en ce qui concerne le partage des responsabilités domestiques.

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Mots-clés : égalité de genre; la participation des femmes sur le marché du travail; inégalité des chances; l'écart salarial homme-femme; l'ère de la digitalisation.

Rezumat: Pornind de la teoria capitalului uman și teoria decalajului cultural, acest articol examinează modul în care rolul femeilor pe piața muncii a fost influențat din cele mai vechi societăți până la status quo-ul contemporan. Folosind o revizuire tematică a literaturii, prezentăm lunga călătorie a femeilor spre egalitate și demnitate, începând de dinaintea Revoluției Neolitice și până în Era Digitală, integrând date statistice actuale furnizate de Eurostat privind decalajul de gen în ocupare și salarii. Rezultatele noastre arată că, în ciuda progreselor, inegalitățile structurale persistă, în special în rândul părinților, subliniind faptul că normele sociale evoluează mai lent decât transformările tehnico-economice. Deși diferențele dintre indivizi sunt firești, inclusiv între femei și bărbați, piața muncii tinde să penalizeze femeile care lucrează, așa cum indică datele. Ne așteptăm ca automatizarea și inteligența artificială să transforme piața muncii și să creeze noi oportunități pentru femei, însă observăm că disparitățile de gen adânc înrădăcinate în societate se mențin, accentuând tendința de revenire la norme anterioare, chiar și după schimbări temporare, cum au fost cele din timpul pandemiei de Covid-19, în ceea ce privește împărțirea responsabilităților domestice.

Cuvinte cheie: egalitate de gen; participarea femeilor pe piața muncii; inegalitate de șanse; decalaj salarial de gen; era digitalizării.

1. Introduction

The struggle of women for their long-overdue dignity and for recognition as human beings with rights equal to those of men in society is long-standing, marked by numerous setbacks and accompanied by more significant achievements in the last century. Moreover, for hundreds of thousands of years – during the period when people were hunter-gatherers and later farmers – issues pertaining to identity and human dignity were the same for all individuals because social roles were limited to providing food and raising children, and “such societies have neither pluralism, nor diversity, nor choice” (Fukuyama, 2022, p. 53).

However, without neglecting the claims regarding the right to education, the right to work, the right to vote, and other human rights, we must consider the need for equal treatment, especially from an economic perspective. According to economic theory, people seek to maximize their gains, and it is natural to find this orientation across all social groups, including women. This predilection has been denied to women since the inception of the labour market, and even in contemporary society we still encounter instances of gender-based discrimination.

Contemporary society has made significant progress in terms of *equal opportunity in the labour market*. Women's participation in the labour market has evolved significantly throughout history, influenced by several factors such as major economic transformations, technological progress, and demographic transitions. Nevertheless, overall, *variations persist in the employment rates* between women and men. This gender gap in employment increases with the number of children and continues to persist throughout the entire professional life, even though the level of women's qualification has been steadily rising, often

surpassing that of men. Moreover, regardless of education level, marriage appears to deepen the income gap between men and women, even among employees at the same institution (Barth, Kerr, & Olivetti, 2021). Cultural traditions and gender stereotypes that assign women traditional family roles and greater responsibilities in childcare continue to influence their participation and earnings in the labour market.

If family care is performed disproportionately – being considered a woman's responsibility – this will lead, among other things, to career interruptions and a reduction in the number of hours worked. In the long run, these factors result in wage disparities and institutional discrimination by reducing women's opportunities for promotion overall. Society should recognize motherhood and early childcare as a natural part of the life cycle and ensure that women are not disadvantaged in the long term.

This article aims to analyse, from a historical perspective, the evolution of women's roles in the economy and society, highlighting the factors that have contributed to changes in the labour market. In doing so, the article contributes to the existing theoretical literature by offering a new understanding of the challenges that women face in the labour market. We ask ourselves why, despite these advances, the historical status quo of inequalities continues to persist. Furthermore, the paper intends to spark a debate on why structural changes that could ensure gender equality in the labour market are so difficult to achieve, even in the face of external pressures and major economic transformations.

Beyond the current introductory section, the article is structured in three parts. Section 2 presents the evolution of women's roles in the economy by outlining the transition through the four industrial revolutions; Section 3 presents the current state of gender equality in the labour market, including conceptualization and numerical examples at the European level. Finally, Section 4 includes a conclusion and proposals regarding the future development of this research direction.

2. The Evolution of Women's Role in the Economy

2.1. The Importance of Women from Agricultural Societies to the Digital Era

During the early matriarchy, in the Mesolithic and at the beginning of the Neolithic, the predominant activities were fishing, hunting, and gathering wild fruits. These were carried out predominantly by men, while women played an essential role in maintaining the place where children were raised and where people gathered for domestic activities. In the view of many researchers, there was no gender discrimination, as the roles within the group were naturally established and accepted. Moreover, given the role of women in procreation and child rearing, it is considered that they held a dominant position, one that men accepted as natural.

It took several thousand years for the transition from the nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a sedentary life, as farmers, to spread and gradually encompass the entire known world of that time. This change represented a significant leap in human development and is referred to by specialists as the Neolithic Revolution or the Agricultural Revolution.

The development of more complex social structures and larger groups intensified rivalries and disputes between distinct communities, each striving to protect its interests and ensure its survival. Consequently, the role of women diminished, given their less active participation in defending the group's interests, while dominant positions reverted to the men who ensured the community's survival. This evolution gradually led to men assuming the role of community leaders (Gimbutas, 1982). Once people transitioned to becoming farmers, *women began moving toward a slowly emerging labour market* as their role and participation in activities beyond strictly domestic tasks increased.

The labor market situation of women changed radically many millennia after the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution, when another revolution – the Industrial Revolution – marked a shift from the central role that women had in rural communities to a subordinate position in an industrial environment, often characterized by harsh working conditions and a lack of autonomy. Being endowed with less physical strength than men, women were forced to accept a secondary role both in the community and within the family.

Population growth led to an increased demand for goods, as well as to the diversification of the means for producing these goods. Increasing productivity through the use of machinery meant significant reductions in wage costs. Organized efforts and the involvement of capitalist investors in training and recruiting specialists to improve machines and organize production began. Yet, the development of industrial production and the trade of these goods required ever more labour, which could only come from the rural environment (Chasteen, 2024). This explains why the beginning of industrialization in England coincided with the depopulation of rural areas through the process of *enclosure*, as well as through other measures that discouraged peasants from remaining in the countryside. Gradually, small agricultural holdings were seized by large landowners – the English nobility – leaving peasants without jobs or income. They were forced to move to the suburbs of cities and find employment in the ever-increasing number of new factories. Similar processes would begin somewhat later in Germany, Belgium, France, the United States, and other countries, and in some areas only in the twentieth century.

The Industrial Revolution also meant the *development of the labour market for women*, who were forced to leave agricultural work with no alternative other than employment in a factory to supplement the family income. This meant performing exhausting work for 12–14 hours per day, six days a week, without vacation or free time. As stated by Herrmann (2023, p. 44) “monotonous machine work could also be performed by women and children, who received miserable wages”.

The Second Industrial Revolution is associated with an acceleration in the development of production, transportation, and communication technologies. It is characterized by advances in the mass production of steel and, consequently, in the development of railways, coupled with the growth of the energy sector, the dawn of electricity generation and communications technologies, and the emergence of the automobile, alongside numerous other innovations in agriculture and industry. A significant contribution to increasing production efficiency – and to *expanding the labour market for women* – was made by Frederick Winslow Taylor, who laid the foundations of scientific management, particularly with the division of labour. As a result, operations that did not necessarily require physical strength were established, and these could even be performed better by women, with greater dexterity and speed. At the same time, these tasks were considered 'light work' and were paid less, which positively impacted production costs. This situation persisted for several decades. The integration of the female workforce into a framework modelled after the male workforce led to a clustering of women in sectors such as services, education, and social assistance (Jaba, 1979).

Beginning in the 1900s, in most developed countries, women started to organize and to demand shorter workweeks, as well as treatment and compensation that were fair between the sexes. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s played a significant role by increasingly raising awareness about the barriers that women faced in the labour market – including discrimination, the lack of childcare services, and limited access to education and training (Blau & Kahn, 2007; Fernández, 2013).

After World War II, technical achievements materialized in the refinement of machine tools and the introduction of automation elements in production processes, as well as in the emergence and use of electronic computers – with a remarkable impact on the diversity of product ranges, the novelty and volume, and the quality of manufactured products. These achievements are considered to represent the Third Industrial Revolution, which began in the 1960s-70s of the last century.

A Fourth Industrial Revolution (The Industry 4.0) is taking place through the merging of digital technologies with physical and biological ones, significantly favoured by the emergence of the internet. New concerns and practical applications related to the Internet of Things, data processing, Big Data, industrial robots, etc., are emerging.

Currently, there is also talk of a Fifth Industrial Revolution (The Industry 5.0) marked by close collaboration between humans and robots. However, many specialists consider that Industry 5.0 is not a new industrial revolution, but rather another stage of Industry 4.0, in which the emphasis is on harnessing the creative capacity of humans and facilitating more efficient collaboration between people and machines.

As technological advances and the restructuring of economies – dominated by the expansion of the information and services sectors – gradually increased the demand for intellectual skills at the expense of physical ones, it has become

necessary for a significant proportion of the population to be well educated (Frejka, 2008). This transformation of the labour market and the priorities of governments is making many professional activities, which until now were considered the domain of men, more accessible to women. These changes will lead to *an increase in the number of jobs available for women* and a gradual reduction in the wage differences between men and women. For example, while in 1820 the salary gap between a man and a woman in the USA was around 70%, it had reduced to 40% by 1940 (Goldin, 1990), and is currently about 20%.

2.2. The Revolution of Dignity and Equality in the labour Market

In the Declaration of Independence, drafted in 1776 by 13 American colonies, although it stated that all men are created equal, it referred only to white men and women were also excluded. The same occurred later in the Napoleonic Code, which classified women as persons without legal rights. Thus, for centuries in many traditional societies, women's work was considered inferior to men's work, and women were often paid less – or not at all – for their labour, with their responsibilities being predominantly related to managing the household and caring for children (Kucera & Tejani, 2014; Besamusca, Tijdens, Keune, & Steinmetz, 2015).

In the nineteenth century, most women were employed in domestic care and housekeeping services. Their work involved cooking, cleaning, weaving and sewing fabrics, spinning thread, and taking care of children, animals, and the garden. The majority of women active in the labour market were single, poor, and uneducated, working as domestic employees in the homes of the well-to-do or, after the emergence of workshops and factories, as farmworkers, in cases where employing men was less efficient (Standing, 2006).

Since women proved to be an essential and reliable resource for various industries during wartime, it became possible for them to continue working and to increase their participation in the labour market even after the world wars ended. As more and more women began to work, *social norms regarding gender roles started to change*. Women came to be seen as capable of contributing both to the family and to society, not just in traditional caregiving roles and through unpaid household work.

As production industries declined and the service sector grew, office work – being much less physically demanding – emerged. This development led to an increase in job opportunities in universities, hospitals, banks, and in occupations such as management, consulting, software development, and graphic design, thereby contributing to an *increase in women's participation in the labour market*. Even in the production sector, the composition of jobs changed. As companies automated or outsourced part of their services, they employed more engineers, technicians, and managers to carry out intellectual tasks that required less physical labour (Munnell & Sass, 2008).

In 1957, through the Treaty of Rome the principle of equal pay for equal work was instituted in Europe. This led to laws and policies improving working

conditions and promoting women's participation in the labour market, with childcare policies playing a significant role – although the effects varied among countries (Görge, 2021; Givord & Marbot, 2015).

Today, we expect that digitalization, artificial intelligence, and automation will facilitate the participation of women in the labour market on an equal footing with men. However, the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced many countries to rapidly implement flexible working arrangements to meet safety measures demanded by social distancing, revealed an unexpected yet important impact: during this period, with both parents working from home and limited access to childcare, even though women shared domestic responsibilities more than before, the gender gap in time spent on household and care activities remained constant. After returning to the office, traditional roles persisted, with women still handling a larger share of household duties than men, and in families where mothers continued working from home, they once again assumed the majority of domestic tasks (Dunatchik, Gerson, Glass, Jacobs, & Stritzel, 2021; Chung, Birkett, Forbes, & Seo, 2021). Although *working from home produced some positive effects*, such as increased involvement of fathers in household chores, *it did not lead to a lasting change in the distribution of domestic responsibilities*. This reflects what William Fielding Ogburn (1922) described as *cultural lag* – the idea that while material changes (e.g., teleworking technologies) occur rapidly, social norms and cultural attitudes (such as gender roles in domestic work) adapt much more slowly.

3. Current State of the Gender Equality in the labour Market

3.1. Conceptualization and Definitions

The concept of *equal opportunity* implies that aspects such as an individual's income, well-being, social mobility, or health are influenced both by personal choices and efforts, and by external circumstances, over which people have no control. These factors are classified into two categories: *effort-based factors*, such as the choice of occupation, the amount of hours worked, or investment made in human capital; and *circumstances-based factors*, such as gender, race, or an individual's socio-economic background (Roemer, 1998).

In contrast, the imbalance resulting from circumstances that are beyond one's control including gender, place of origin, family background, and social identity – reflects *inequality of opportunity*. In an economic context, this means that there are differences in income, job opportunities, and labour market participation between women and men due to factors outside their control.

In many societies, women are treated or perceived differently because of social stereotypes and cultural norms related to gender roles, and this influences their choices and decisions. Even women often feel pressured to take on additional responsibilities without being explicitly asked, as a result of the norms and expectations in their cultural context. Moreover, studies show that some companies structure their personnel policies and their compensation and benefits

schemes according to employees' characteristics, which can lead to the maintenance and perpetuation of *gender inequalities* (Kuhn, 1993).

In an economic context, one indicator of *gender inequality* that we will refer to in this paper is the *gender wage gap*, which reflects the differences in remuneration for similar or equivalent work. The gender wage gap can provide information about the degree to which women are valued compared to men, as well as the existence of gender-based inequality of opportunity. The gender wage gap is calculated using the following formula:

$$D_{wg} = \frac{\overline{Hs_m} - \overline{Hs_w}}{\overline{Hs_m}} \times 100 \quad (1)$$

Where:

- = wage differences between genders;
- = the average gross hourly wage or earnings for men;
- = the average gross hourly wage or earnings for women.

These figures refer to the gross hourly earnings paid directly to employees before taxes and social contributions are deducted. For statistical calculations and reporting, only companies with 10 or more employees are considered.

In most societies, women – whether they have children or not – are paid less than men because many companies consider them potentially less productive due to hypothetical absences from work caused by caregiving responsibilities and because they devote more time to domestic duties (Catalyst, 2025). As a result of this generalization, *all women end up being perceived as “risky” employees*, regardless of whether they have children or not, thereby paying “*the price of being female*” (Goldin, Kerr, & Olivetti, 2024).

Specialized literature often highlights the difficulties experienced by working women by referring to a “*motherhood penalty*” (Goldin, Kerr, & Olivetti, 2024). This term describes a loss of human capital caused by interruptions in professional activity following childbirth and child-rearing, which can lead to career interruptions, the depreciation of skills, decreased productivity, and consequently lower incomes (Becker, 1991; 1985). The need for flexibility in balancing family and professional responsibilities prompts many women, after giving birth, to adopt an adaptive approach by opting for less demanding jobs – or jobs that offer working conditions favourable to the status of a mother – but with lower wages, thereby deepening the gender gap in the labour market. In some cases, this adaptation even involves leaving the labour market altogether (Hakim, 2000; Glass, 2004).

Furthermore, the gender gap persists throughout one's professional life. Motherhood has a long-lasting negative effect on women's incomes, even after several years following the birth of their first child (Hsu, 2021). Once children grow older, women typically return to a number of working hours comparable to that of men. Discrimination based on status then manifests itself as employers may view

the role of a mother as incompatible with the ideal employee image (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007), while the incomes of fathers increase when children arrive, since they are perceived as more responsible and dedicated to work (the “*fatherhood premium*”) (Goldin, Kerr, & Olivetti, 2024).

This phenomenon reveals a subtle yet profoundly unfair mechanism: *while women are penalized for motherhood (motherhood penalty), men benefit from fatherhood (fatherhood premium)*. Taken as a whole, society appears to “compensate” for the difficulties faced by women by affording men professional and financial advantages – in effect, maintaining an apparent balance at the family level. However, a closer examination shows that *this logic perpetuates inequalities*. Women, whether or not they become mothers, are perceived as being less professionally available, which negatively affects their wages, career advancement, and access to professional opportunities. Essentially, the labour market continues to operate on a model that disadvantages women and limits their professional progress.

Thus, we argue that the inequalities between women and men are not only the result of individual (effort-based) decisions made in adapting to family needs within the labour market, but also a consequence of the way the labour market rewards motherhood and fatherhood differently.

3.2. Examining the Gender Gap in Employment and Wages: Insights from EU

At the European Union (EU) level, throughout the past few decades, the gender gap in the labour market has recorded significant decreases; however, it persists and remains a challenge for many member states. This gap is reflected in various aspects of labour market participation, including employment rates, wage disparities, and economic inactivity.

Table 1 presents the current situation of EU member states based on the employment rates by gender for the 20–64 age group, offering a comparative perspective on gender gaps in labour market participation, measured in percentage points (pp).

Table 1. Employment rates by gender for the age group 20–64 at the EU level

Country	Employment rate			Difference compared to EU average (pp)	
	Men	Women	Gap (pp)	Men	Women
EU average	80%	70%	-10	-	-
Finland	78%	78%	0	-2	8
Lithuania	79%	78%	-1	-1	8
Estonia	83%	81%	-2	3	11
Latvia	79%	76%	-3	-1	6
France	77%	72%	-5	-3	2
Sweden	85%	80%	-5	5	10
Slovenia	80%	74%	-6	0	4
Denmark	83%	77%	-6	3	7

Country	Employment rate			Difference compared to EU average (pp)	
	Men	Women	Gap (pp)	Men	Women
EU average	80%	70%	-10	-	-
Portugal	81%	75%	-6	1	5
Netherlands	87%	80%	-7	7	10
Slovakia	81%	74%	-7	1	4
Bulgaria	80%	73%	-7	0	3
Luxembourg	78%	71%	-7	-2	1
Austria	81%	73%	-8	1	3
Germany	85%	77%	-8	5	7
Croatia	75%	67%	-8	-5	-3
Belgium	76%	68%	-8	-4	-2
Hungary	85%	76%	-9	5	6
Cyprus	84%	75%	-9	4	5
Ireland	84%	74%	-10	4	4
Spain	76%	65%	-11	-4	-5
Poland	84%	72%	-12	4	2
Czechia	88%	75%	-13	8	5
Malta	88%	74%	-14	8	4
Greece	77%	58%	-19	-3	-12
Italy	76%	57%	-19	-4	-13
Romania	78%	59%	-19	-2	-11

Source: Eurostat (2025a)

In graphic form, the data from the table are represented in Figure 1, which highlights the distribution of employment rates by gender among EU member states.

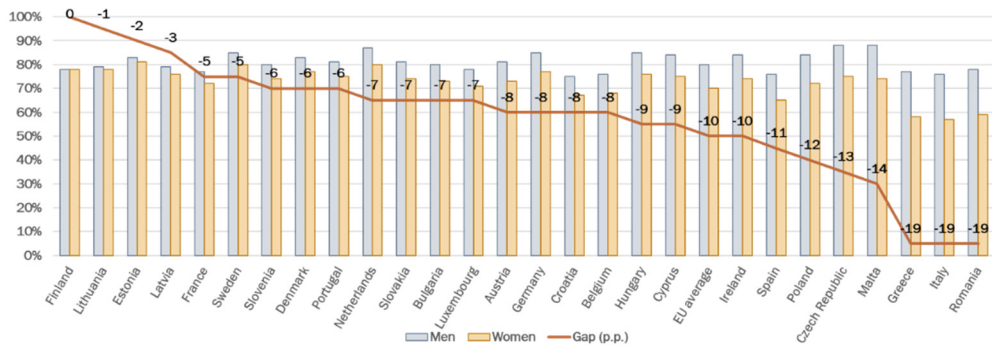


Figure 1. Gender Gaps in Employment Rates at the EU level (Age 20–64)

Data source: Eurostat (2025a)

It can be observed that the employment rate is generally higher among men compared to women, although there are significant variations among member states. Notable differences exist between states, with higher employment rates for both genders in Finland, Lithuania, and Estonia, while Greece, Italy, and Romania

record the lowest employment rates for the 20–64 age category. An analysis of the gender gap in employment indicates that these latter countries exhibit the highest values (–19%), far exceeding the EU average gap of 10 percentage points (Eurostat, 2025a).

A more pronounced gender gap suggests possible structural or cultural barriers to women's participation in the labour market. In Romania – a country similar to Italy and Greece – we see a strong influence of cultural traditions and gender stereotypes that assign women traditional family roles and greater responsibilities in child care (Zamfir, 2010; Rotariu & Voineagu, 2012; Istrate & Banica, 2015). Furthermore, the over-taxation of part-time work and the limited availability of childcare services further hinder women's access to the labour market in these countries (Catalyst, 2025).

This situation is similar in most former communist states, which were characterized by government policies that supported traditional gender roles. As a result of the transition to market economies and democratic societies, these countries have developed different approaches regarding gender policies and the labour market. For example, countries such as Czechia and Slovenia have adopted policies that promote gender equality and encourage women's participation in the labour market, achieving female employment rates of over 74%, while other states that remain anchored in traditional gender models exhibit lower employment rates among women – even when the average level of women's qualifications surpasses that of men.

In other states, gender differences in employment are smaller, indicating more effective policies for promoting gender equality in the labour market. In countries such as Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, or Latvia – where the gender gap can even reach 0% (in the case of Finland) – a strong private sector, an innovative industry, and social and cultural norms that promote gender equality and diversity contribute to greater opportunities for women's participation in the labour market.

Differences in employment rates by gender increase with the number of children. In 2024, at the EU level, the average employment rate for women with one child was 78%, compared with the employment rate for men with one child, which remained high at 92%. Men with two children registered an employment rate of 93%, while women with the same number of children recorded an employment rate of 77%.

The high employment rate among men with three or more children (88%) suggests that the majority of them continue to work – even when family responsibilities increase – compared with women with three or more children (60%), who are more likely to temporarily or permanently leave the workforce in order to take care of their family (Eurostat, 2025b).

Table 2. Average employment rate of persons (aged 25–54) with children in the EU in 2024

Number of children	Men	Women	Gap (pp)
No children	84%	80%	4
One child	92%	78%	14

Number of children	Men	Women	Gap (pp)
Two children	93%	77%	16
Three or more children	88%	60%	28

Source: Eurostat (2025b)

These differences observed among individuals with children can be explained, among other factors, by the fact that childcare responsibilities are often disproportionately assigned to women in most countries. Similarly, the proportion of people inactive in the labour market is higher for women than for men. Among these inactive individuals, 15% are women who state that the primary reason for their inactivity is household chores or caring for children and other family members. In comparison, only 1.6% of inactive men cited the same reasons for their inactivity (Eurostat, 2017).

Another important aspect of the gender gap is the wage gap. At the EU level, according to preliminary data for 2023, women earned on average 12.0% less per hour than men, a slightly smaller gap compared to the 12.7% recorded in 2021 (European Commission, 2024). Although Finland is one of the most advanced countries in terms of gender equality, the *wage gap persists* there as well – exceeding 15%, as can be observed in Table 3.

Table 3. Gender pay gap in the EU

Country	Pay gap (national average)	Difference compared to EU average (p.p.)
Latvia	19.0%	7.0
Austria	18.3%	6.3
Czechia	18.0%	6.0
Hungary	17.8%	5.8
Germany	17.6%	5.6
Estonia	16.9%	4.9
Finland	16.8%	4.8
Slovakia	15.7%	3.7
Denmark	14.0%	2.0
Greece	13.6%	1.6
Bulgaria	13.5%	1.5
Netherlands	12.5%	0.5
France	12.2%	0.2
Cyprus	12.2%	0.2
EU-27 average	12.0%	
Lithuania	11.5%	-0.5
Sweden	11.2%	-0.8
Spain	9.2%	-2.8
Ireland	8.6%	-3.4
Portugal	8.6%	-3.4
Poland	7.8%	-4.2
Croatia	7.4%	-4.6
Slovenia	5.4%	-6.6
Malta	5.1%	-6.9

Country	Pay gap (national average)	Difference compared to EU average (p.p.)
Romania	3.8%	-8.2
Italy	2.2%	-9.8
Belgium	0.7%	-11.3
Luxembourg	-0.9%	-12.9

Source: Eurostat (2025c)

The average wage difference between men and women at the national level is illustrated in Figure 2, which compares the national average with the EU average.

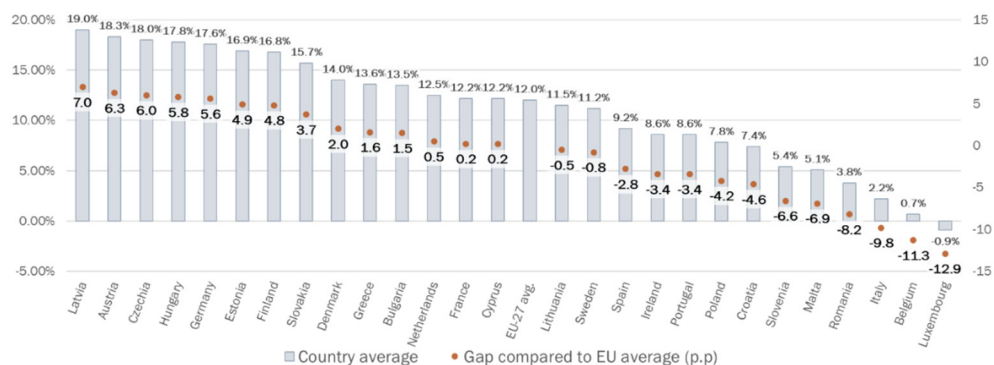


Figure 2. Gender pay gap compared to EU average

Data source: Eurostat (2025c)

The national average is an important indicator for understanding the economic characteristics of a member state and the progress made in reducing the gender wage gap. Latvia has one of the largest gender wage gaps in the EU (19%), followed by Czechia (18%), Austria (18%), Hungary (17%), and Germany (17%). Part of this difference can be explained by labour market segregation, with women occupying lower-paid positions compared to men. This phenomenon may be amplified by the lack of legislation regarding wage transparency and by systematic differences in salary growth between genders within companies.

Romania (3.8%), Italy (2.2%), or Belgium (0.7%) report very small differences in remuneration between women and men. A smaller wage gap does not necessarily indicate gender equality. This can be explained by a combination of economic, political, and social factors that include several evident differences: for example, in Romania, salaries in general are lower compared with other European countries, and as a consequence, the differences between genders are smaller. In addition, the country's economy is characterized by a large public sector, where wages are regulated by law rather than by negotiation, and by a significant number of jobs in sectors – such as education and healthcare – that, even though predominantly occupied by women, offer relatively similar pay between genders (Zamfir, 2015).

The situation is similar outside the EU. Among OECD member countries, the gender wage gap is 12.5%, with significant variations between countries. For example, in 2020, Japan had a gap of 22.5%, while in Mexico the gender wage gap was 9.6%. In the United States, women earn approximately 18% less than men (calculated on an hourly basis) and employment rates are 10 pp lower. In the United Kingdom, the situation is similar, with a gender wage gap of 20% and an employment rate difference of 9 percentage points (Catalyst, 2025).

In most countries, women are still underrepresented and are less likely than men to pursue careers in high-paying fields (e.g., STEM) or to hold leadership positions, even when they start their careers in that field. In addition, they receive lower performance-based pay compared to the total compensation package (Valdés & Solga, 2024; Albanesi & Olivetti, 2009). Regarding the time allocated to household tasks and childcare, women in leadership roles spend more hours at home than men in the same positions (Albanesi & Olivetti, 2009).

4. Conclusion

Some women choose to temporarily withdraw from the labour market in order to devote themselves to motherhood and early childcare. This interruption, while justified from a biological perspective and accepted at a socio-cultural level, should not give rise to a predisposition to penalize women in the labour market.

The aim of the current paper was to analyse, from a historical perspective, the evolution of women's roles in the economy and society, highlighting the factors that have contributed to changes in the labour market. In this endeavour, the study begins with a chronological presentation of the evolution of women's roles in society and, subsequently, in the labour market throughout the transition through the four industrial revolutions. It has been noted that during the era of early matriarchy and the Neolithic, women occupied a central role – indeed, even superior to that of men – in the context of hunter-gatherer societies.

In the context of the First Industrial Revolution, women were forced to join men in the labour market. Being endowed with less physical strength than men, their work was considered less valuable. However, this transition represented a crucial moment in women's economic emancipation, constituting the premise for later claims for gender equality in the professional realm. The Second Industrial Revolution further deepened the wage disparities between the sexes. The increasingly rigid division of production activities assigned 'light work' to women, which was paid less, compared to occupations dominated by men. This professional segregation contributed to the perpetuation of an inequitable socio-economic structure in which women were confined to inferior positions both economically and socially, thus reinforcing the patriarchal gender stereotypes that persist in many societies even today.

With the automation of production and the technological advancements brought by the Third Industrial Revolution, the feminist movements during that period helped partially balance the situation in the labour market. Physical strength, previously an essential criterion in numerous fields of activity, lost much

of its relevance. On one hand, increased access to education and the digitalization that gained momentum during the Fourth Industrial Revolution facilitated the involvement of women in fields previously dominated by men, giving them the opportunity to occupy better-paying positions and actively participate in innovation processes. On the other hand, occupational segregation continued to manifest, with women still overrepresented in sectors that typically offer lower wages, such as education, healthcare, or administrative services. Although technological progress and a more flexible working environment have laid the foundation for greater equal opportunities, the reality of the labour market has shown that gender stereotypes and traditional values continue to persist.

Statistical data on the gender gap in employment and wages at the EU level reveal that women continue to have lower employment rates and, on average, earn less than men. This employment gap widens as the number of children increases, reflecting the disproportionate impact of family responsibilities on women's participation in the labour market.

In most countries, employers tend to perceive women as "risky" employees, as they are considered more likely to experience career interruptions and to prioritize family responsibilities over professional ones, which can affect their earnings, access to leadership positions, and opportunities for advancement (the "motherhood penalty"). In parallel, a man who becomes a father is perceived as having a higher professional commitment, being motivated to secure greater financial stability for the family (the "fatherhood bonus"). This generalization penalizes all women, due to prevailing social expectations regarding gender roles.

Although the industrial revolutions were determining factors in changing the role of women in society and subsequently in the labour market, this paper does not exhaustively cover the influences of other factors, such as policies or the legislative framework. Future empirical studies could provide a clearer understanding of how work schedule flexibilization and the balancing of family responsibilities influence, in the long term, the distribution of tasks between men and women. Furthermore, research could analyse the impact of these measures on wage equity and opportunities for professional advancement, in order to determine the extent to which a paradigm shift in the management of family responsibilities would contribute to a true equalization of women's participation in the labour market.

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