

Gender gaps in paid and unpaid work persist

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Key messages

- Compared to men, women have lower employment rates, are more likely to work part-time, spend fewer hours to paid work, and spend more hours in unpaid work. This negatively affects their earnings, career prospects and social protection entitlements, including pension income.
- Differences in women's and men's outcomes reflect gender norms and stereotypes around paid and unpaid work, which interact with social, policy and economic environments to disadvantage women in the labour market. These include unequal distributions of family leave; inadequate access to affordable, good-quality childcare and out-of-school care; poor access to long-term care for relatives; low pay in traditionally women-dominated sectors; and gendered tax-benefit systems that disadvantage second earners (more commonly women). These are further aggravated by gender-based violence.
- To close these gender gaps, governments need to commit to (or advance upon) commitments to work-life balance policies (e.g. early childhood education and childcare, long-term care, paid family leave and flexible working arrangements for all workers) and equal pay and pay transparency policies, among other gender-equality measures.

Every person should be able to participate fully in the labour market. Yet gender norms and stereotypes, social and policy environments, structural barriers, bias and harassment, and discrimination combine to create gender gaps between women and men in labour market outcomes, including in the type, quality, quantity and remuneration of paid and unpaid work.

This policy brief summarises the key findings of Chapter 5, on paid and unpaid work, from the OECD report *Gender Equality in a Changing World: Taking Stock and Moving Forward*, written with the support of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST). The chapter provides an overview of key gender gaps in paid and unpaid work and identifies social, economic and institutional factors preventing gender equality. The chapter then proposes policy options to reduce gender gaps in paid and unpaid work.

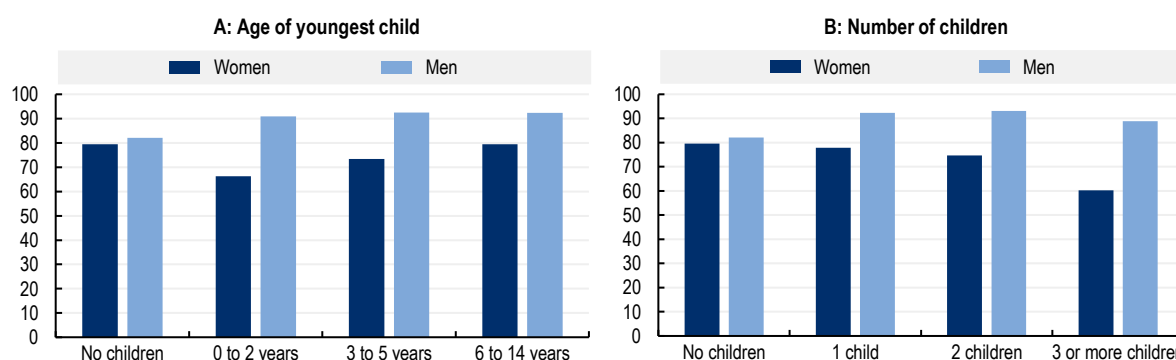
What gender gaps exist in paid and unpaid work and why?

Several factors contribute to gender gaps in paid and unpaid work

In all EU and OECD countries, women are less likely to be in the labour force than men. Although many factors explain differences in labour market outcomes between women and men, disproportionate unpaid childcare and household responsibilities keep women from reaching their full potential in paid work – even as young women today have higher levels of education than men. Indeed, a descriptive comparison of women with and without dependent children shows employment gaps that are higher when there are more children and when children are younger. For fathers, there is no discernible difference in employment rates by the number and age of children (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Employment rates for women are more sensitive to age and number of children

Employment rate (%), women and men (25-54), EU-26 average, by age of the youngest dependent child (Panel A) and by number of dependent children (Panel B), 2021



Note: EU-26 is an unweighted average. See StatLink for details.

Source: OECD (2025^[1]), see Figure 5-A1, data available in <https://stat.link/kvf72n>.

Key factors behind these gender gaps include:

- **Gender norms and stereotypes:** Many people continue to believe that children suffer with a working mother and/or that a father's primary role should be to provide (financially) for his family. In the face of such beliefs, fathers and mothers may internalise that the only way to be a "good parent" is to conform to gender norms, with a mother staying home to care for children and a father working outside the house for pay.
- **Family leave:** Women are more likely than men to take time off to care for young children, which can negatively impact employment, earnings and career advancement. Gender gaps in the use of parental leave result from the rules and incentives of maternity, paternity and parental leave systems, and are also strongly influenced by gender norms and stereotypes – as evidenced by fathers' still-lower (than mothers) rates of leave-taking even when governments offer strong incentives for fathers to take parental leave.
- **Pre-school and childcare:** Without accessible and affordable good-quality childcare during a child's early years, one parent may be forced to stay at home, and this parent tends to be the mother (or a grandmother – with implications for older women's employment rates).
- **Out-of-school childcare:** A lack of access to affordable, good-quality out-of-school hours (OSH) care can negatively affect women's labour supply as school hours typically do not coincide with

business hours. This contributes to higher part-time rates among mothers. The summer months are no exception, as schools can be closed for weeks or months at a time.

- **Tax-benefit systems:** While gendered tax-benefit systems *directly* and *explicitly* treat women and men differently, even gender-neutral tax-benefit systems can do so *indirectly* as a result of interactions between system rules and a household's behaviour. Joint personal income taxation, the progressivity of the tax system, and the removal of tax credits and allowances when a part-time worker enters full-time work are well-known sources of potential implicit bias that disincentivise second earners – who are most often women – from entering the labour force.
- **Gender-based violence (GBV):** Many women experience GBV, and intimate partner perpetrators may control or try to control a victim's employment situation, income or assets. Some women may also experience technology-facilitated GBV while at work, with perpetrators using technology to monitor and disrupt women at work from afar. The barriers and challenges faced by women victims/survivors of violence translate into lower employment. In work, the experience of violence (including harassment) by a colleague perpetrator can discourage continued employment.

Gender gaps in labour supply exist between older women and men as well. Many of the factors above – e.g. caregiving responsibilities – can help to explain gaps among older workers, but additional factors may also play a role at older ages. Older women, for instance, are more likely to be providing unpaid care to older relatives, which can interfere with paid work. Discrimination may also be a factor, with older women facing stronger negative perceptions than older men about inadequate or outdated skills, difficulties adapting to new tasks and not meeting job expectations. Limited or no workforce accommodations for menopause and gendered pension eligibility rules may additionally negatively impact older women's employment.

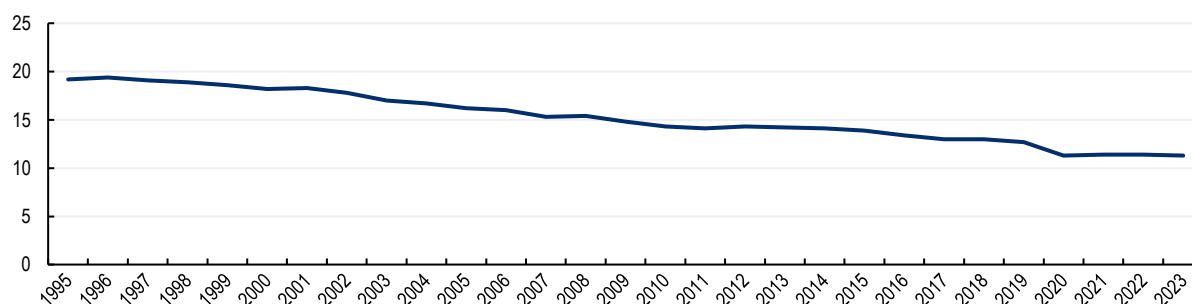
Occupational segregation – the unequal distribution of women and men across jobs or sectors – is another important feature of OECD and EU labour markets. This segregation is a product of gender norms and stereotypes that collide with economic opportunities, policies and practices to reinforce existing gender differences. Some occupations, for instance, may offer greater flexibility (e.g. flexible hours, part-time, remote work, etc.), making them more compatible with unpaid work responsibilities. These jobs, however, may also come with lower wages, creating a trade-off between pay and work-life balance.

A persistent gender wage gap reflects gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work

Gender wage gaps are another pernicious feature of labour markets. In 2023, the median full-time working woman earned, on average, 11% less than the median full-time working man – meaning she earned 89 cents to every euro or dollar earned by her male counterpart. This poor outcome is an 8 percentage point improvement upon 1995, when the gender wage gap was 19% (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Gender wage gaps have steadily closed over time, but women continue to earn less

Gender wage gap at the median, percent, OECD average, 1995-2023



Note: The gender wage gap is unadjusted and defined as the difference between median wages of women and men relative to the median wages of men using upper limits for gross earnings of full-time employees by earnings deciles. See StatLink for details.

Source: OECD (2025^[1]), see Figure 5.8, data available in <https://stat.link/kvf72n>.

Stubborn gender wage gaps are a product of social, economic and institutional factors, including the combination of those mentioned above and the following:

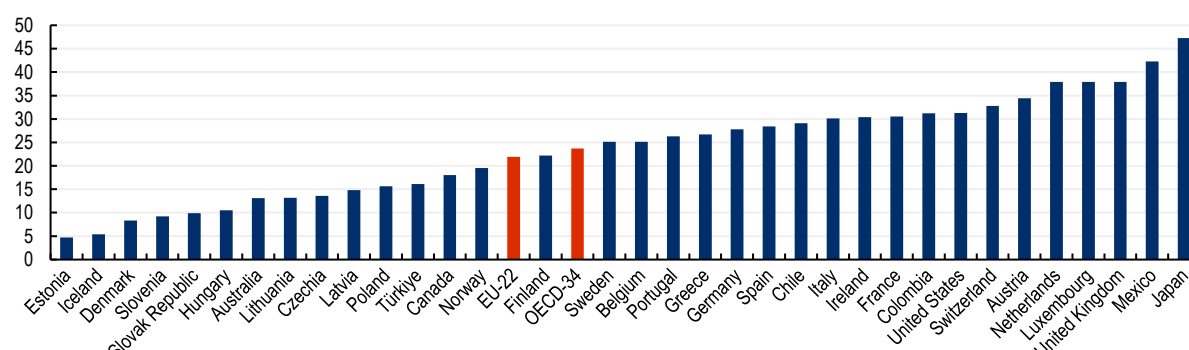
- **Career breaks:** Career breaks, including those for family leave, affect earnings levels through their impact on the number of weeks worked in a given year, but also by negatively impacting career development.
- **Work intensity:** Part-time work not only tends to pay less per hour than full-time work, but also reduces overall annual earnings through fewer weeks and fewer hours worked.
- **Horizontal segregation:** Gender differences in occupation and industry contribute to the gender wage gap since women are more likely to work in low-paid jobs than men.
- **Vertical segregation:** Many women do not make it to the top – to the highest paid positions – even when women may be adequately or even overly qualified.
- **Firm segregation and compensating differentials:** Even when women and men work in the same jobs (using a very narrow definition), there remains a gender wage gap. Some of this gap is explained by women sorting into lower paying firms, which may reflect discriminatory hiring practices and the trade-off between flexible working-time arrangements and pay. But even within firms, there exists a gender wage gap, some of which remains unexplained.
- **Salary negotiations:** Women and men may engage in and experience salary negotiations differently – levels of comfort in bargaining processes, amounts requested and/or received, resistance or backlash – which may contribute to disparities in earnings.
- **Discrimination:** While difficult to prove, discrimination against women persists in hiring and pay, and has been confirmed in audit studies and court cases.

Gender gaps in paid and unpaid work accumulate over the life course

Given that, on average, women earn less than men, take more and longer career breaks for family leave and are more likely to exit the labour market at earlier ages, gender gaps in pension income are not surprising. Older women are also at higher risk of poverty and social exclusion than are older men.

Figure 3. Pension gaps persist in all EU and OECD countries

Gender gap in pensions, women and men (65+) (among pension beneficiaries), 2018 or latest year



Note: EU-22 and OECD-34 are unweighted averages. The gender gap in pensions is calculated as the difference between the mean retirement income of women and men over the mean retirement income of men, among pension beneficiaries. See StatLink for details.

Source: OECD (2025^[1]), see Figure 5.11, data available in <https://stat.link/kvf72n>.

What can policy makers do?

- Continue to invest in access to good-quality affordable childcare and long-term care and well-paid parental leave, including “use it or lose it” provisions that incentivise fathers’ take-up.
- Allow flexible working, such as hybrid and remote working arrangements, across all workers, to limit discrimination against caregivers. Prevent unfavourable treatment of workers who take caregiving leave.
- Implement gender transformative legislation, regulations and procedures, such as equal pay, pay equity and pay transparency rules.
- Improve pay, job quality and formalisation of predominantly women-dominated caregiving professions, and encourage (young) men to choose care-related careers.
- Challenge gender stereotypes and norms around paid and unpaid work through awareness campaigns, media standards, family leave, and more.
- Combat all forms of violence and harassment in and outside of work, as violence negatively impacts women’s ability to work for pay and their economic empowerment more broadly.
- Ensure equal opportunities for career advancement by encouraging or mandating companies to embed transparency and gender-equality criteria into hiring, pay and promotion processes.
- Eliminate gender pension gaps by addressing gender pay gaps, promoting longer contribution periods of women (including through well-designed work-life balance policies) and promoting financial literacy among women and girls.
- Reform tax and social protection systems to minimise disincentives for second earners (who are mainly women), such as through the promotion of individual taxation.
- Continue to improve access to, and to spur investment on, digital tools and technologies that could reduce the burden of unpaid work.
- Continue to close (intersectional) gender data, research and measurement gaps to improve our understanding of gender gaps in paid and unpaid work.

- Ensure that progress towards gender equality in paid and unpaid work is supported by a co-ordinated, multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral approach involving different levels of government, social partners, civil society, the private sector and other relevant actors.

For more policy options, see Chapter 5 in the full report: *Gender Equality in a Changing World: Taking Stock and Moving Forward*.

References

OECD (2025), *Gender Equality in a Changing World: Taking Stock and Moving Forward*, [1]
<https://doi.org/10.1787/e808086f-en>.

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