

Gender Equality Index 2019. Work-life balance

10. Conclusions

Gender Equality Index 2019

Domain of work

The domain of work, with a score of 72.0, keeps the third-highest position in the Gender Equality Index. This score spotlights the incremental progress of 2 points made since 2005, pointing to the major challenges that remain. In particular, the segregation and quality of work sub-domain, with a score as low as 64.0, points to stagnation and low level of effectiveness of measures undertaken to reduce gender segregation and other gender inequalities in employment. Women not only remain over-represented in education, human health and social work, but their employment in these sectors increased by a further 2 p.p. between 2005 and-2017 to over 30 %.



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Domain of money

Recent years have seen wage and household disposable income increases in a large majority of Member States, but gender equality in financial and economic resources remains elusive, in line with steady gender gaps in accessing paid employment. The domain of money, with a score of 80.4 in 2017, has for the first time surpassed 80 points, ranking second only to the domain of health in the Gender Equality Index. This promising development nonetheless relates to **patchy progress on gender-equal access to financial and economic resources**. In 2005 the sub-domain of economic resources (which accounts for women's and men's exposure to poverty and income inequality among women and men) scored 89.7 points: it was 2 points lower in 2017.



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Domain of knowledge

The domain of knowledge remained virtually static between 2015 and 2017, and the overall progress in gender equality in the area of knowledge has been slow over the last 12 years. Educational attainment is rising, especially among women, but more significant progress is being impeded by persistent gender segregation in higher education and low levels of participation in lifelong learning.



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Domain of time

The enduring burden of care perpetuates inequalities for women. Gender inequalities in time use are persistent and growing: the 2017 score of 65.7 is not only 1 p.p. lower than that of 2005, it also represents a 3.2 p.p. drop from the gains that had been achieved up until 2012. This domain has the third-lowest score in the Gender Equality Index. Developments in this domain cannot be monitored post the 2017 Index because EU data has not yet been updated. The next data update for this domain is expected in 2021. More frequent time-use data would help more immediate tracking of progress in this domain.



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Domain of power

While the domain of power has the lowest score in the Gender Equality Index (51.9), it also shows the most improvement (an increase of 3.4 points since 2015 and 13 points since 2005). Much of the success in the Member States demonstrating notable improvements in gender balance in political decision-making since 2005 can be attributed to the implementation of either a gender quota law or voluntary party quotas.



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Domain of health

Gender norms and stereotypes undermine behavioural change, to the detriment of men's health. Despite being the highest scoring domain since the inception of the Gender Equality Index, the health domain score has stalled since 2015 (+ 0.7 points), and has barely progressed since 2005 (+ 2.2 points). Gender inequalities are most prominent in the sub-domain of health behaviour, with a score of 75.4 points. Largely due to dominant masculinity norms, men are more likely than women to be involved in risk behaviours such as smoking and excessive drinking, thereby increasing their risk of early death and morbidity in general.



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Domain of violence

The limited availability of high-quality EU-wide comparative data, broken down by gender and the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, makes it extremely difficult to measure the prevalence of violence against women in the EU. Only three indicators of the second tier of the measurement framework for the domain of violence for which recent data was available could be updated, although not for all Member States: femicide, FGM and trafficking in human beings. As a result, scores for each Member State could not be presented. The completion of the next EU-wide survey on violence against women is essential for the EU and its Member States to make progress in their efforts to prevent and eliminate violence against women.



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Work—life balance and gender equality

The analysis carried out within the framework of the thematic focus of the Gender Equality Index 2019 shows strong links between gender equality and work–life balance, as measured by the work–life balance scoreboard that EIGE has developed and proposed (see Section 9.1). The availability of care services, benefits and services to families, job protection provided by leave policies, public infrastructure and the overall child-friendliness of the society create or limit opportunities and establish conditions in which women and men take their decisions regarding both work and family.

For more effective policies on work–life balance, the discourse of work–life balance needs to be broadened. First, we call for a broader conceptualisation of work–life balance, which means welcoming more areas, such as lifelong learning or public infrastructure, into discussions and policies.

Second, the focus of the work–life balance discussion has to shift from separated fields of life and take a more holistic approach to life. Work–life balance is not just blocks of time allocated to work and other activities; it is determined by the ‘whole day’s schedule of multiple activities and trips taken by an individual’ (Dong, Ben-Akiva, Bowman, & Walker, 2006). Gender inequalities are not isolated within each field of life, instead they feed into each other, leading to multiple inequalities and amplified barriers to balancing work and life.

Third, work–life balance is not only a challenge for employed people or parents. Inactivity or low birth rates are often signs of failing reconciliation, where people are forced to give up or make major compromises in one of the major fields of life. For instance, a full-time carer of a child or adult with significant disabilities is unlikely to be able to take up paid work, or someone may decide not to have or to postpone having children as they anticipate being ineligible for leave policies.

Fourth, balancing work and life is not an individual task, but an everyday negotiation between members of the family. This is where the roots of gender inequalities lie. While women have quite successfully stepped into the world of paid work, men have not taken a similar step into the world of the home to equally share the responsibilities and pleasures of family life. Even with all the work–life policies in place, the family-related responsibilities never disappear – it is always the family that holds the first responsibility for the well-being of its members. As long as women, but not men, are expected to carry the double burden of work and family, gender inequalities will persist.

Work–life balance policies should be better coordinated and reflect changes in the labour market and society as a whole. For example, there should not be a care gap between the end of parental-leave provision and publicly subsidised high-quality formal childcare.

The importance of intersectional approach was once again confirmed. Certain groups of people are disadvantaged, no matter which aspect of work–life balance we look at. One example is low-qualified people – especially women – who are more likely to be out of paid work, are more likely to be ineligible for leave policies, have less flexibility in the labour market, are more often dependent on public transport and attend less lifelong learning. This situation is also very similar for women of pre-retirement age.

Leave policies

The thematic focus of the 2019 Gender Equality Index on work–life balance provides a unique insight into the gender inequalities that are caused and reproduced by parental-leave policy rules. While the parental leave directive (Directive 2010/18/EU) does set the minimum for the overall duration of the leave for working women and men, the conditions of access are defined by the Member States.

[Skaityti daugiau](#)

Childcare services

In addition to gaps in leave entitlements, sufficient care provisions are not always in place. There are five Member States (HR, IT, LT, RO, SK) where there is no obligation for authorities to provide a care or nursery place for a child should a parent so wish. Moreover, only in 12 Member States is the entitlement to public childcare in place immediately after the parental-leave entitlements end. Although care services may be provided in spite of there being no legal obligation, such a gap between parental-leave and care-service entitlements can extend to as long as 3 years, creating an obstacle to a smooth transition between work and parental leave.

[Skaityti daugiau](#)

Long-term care

In the context of an ageing population and increasing disability rates, the care needs for older people and people with disabilities are dramatically gaining attention. In addition to households having unmet needs for childcare, one in three households in the EU report having unmet needs for professional home-care services for older persons and/or persons with disabilities. In the majority of Member States, women bear such care responsibilities, putting additional pressure on their work–life balance and employment opportunities. In the EU-28, 15 % of women and 10 % of men provide informal LTC to older people and/or people with disabilities. In Member States with a more gender-unequal division of care responsibilities, the Gender Equality Index score is lower. Given this situation, an important further step would be to establish EU-level targets on LTC services, similar to the Barcelona targets on childcare.

[Skaityti daugiau](#)

Public infrastructure

In every person's life there is commuting, whether between work, home, schools, health, care and other public services, grocery shops, banks, leisure and volunteering activities, etc. Physical environment, geography and social organisation of public infrastructure, together with logistics and commuting options, play a major role in how well work can be combined with rest of one's life.

[Skaityti daugiau](#)

Flexible working arrangements

Possibilities to adjust one's working arrangements – either occasionally or on a permanent basis – according to family or personal needs is of paramount importance to a successful work–life balance. In the EU 57 % of women and 54 % of men have their working-time arrangements set by the company or organisation and still have no possibilities of any self-induced flexibility in changing them. Men have greater availability of flexible working-time arrangements than women, not least due to their higher uptake of jobs in the private sector, which by now offers greater flexibility of working arrangements in comparison to the public sector.

[Skaityti daugiau](#)

Lifelong learning

Participation in education and training is another time-intensive activity competing for time, adding complexity to the daily exercise of logistics. Europe's desire to increase the proportion of adults participating in education and training initiatives should be looked at, together with the aim of striving towards a better work—life balance.

[Skaityti daugiau](#)