

Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work

10. Conclusions

Progress towards gender equality in the EU remains slow. The Gender Equality Index score in 2018 was 67.9 points, just 0.5 points higher than in 2017 and 4.1 points higher than in 2010. Sweden, Denmark, France and Finland took the top rankings in gender quality. Italy, Luxembourg and Malta experienced the largest improvements since 2010, and the situation remained almost the same in Czechia, Hungary and Poland. Romania, Hungary and Greece remained at the bottom of the rankings, although Romania and Greece had experienced a significant improvement in gender equality since 2010, particularly Greece since 2017.

Although there has been noticeable progress in the EU towards increased women's employment rates, lower risks of poverty for both women and men, improved gender balance in political and economic decision-making, and policy developments to support work–life balance, there remains a need for more structural change in all domains and Member States.

Gender equality in the EU is facing new, emerging challenges, including those brought about by digitalisation (the thematic focus of this report), recent migration flows and a mounting backlash against gender equality. Some Member States have seen a backlash against women's human rights that has undermined the discourse on gender equality or developed into measures to prevent progress on women's rights.

The backlash against gender equality has also contributed to the shrinking space for civil society and women's rights non-governmental organisations, a problem that has deepened and accelerated in several Member States in recent years (EIGE, 2020a).

Although further investigation is needed, emerging evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 poses new risks to and challenges for gender equality, in particular to women's economic independence and in relation to violence against women. Several aspects of the lockdown measures taken by Member States to curb the pandemic have had a considerable impact on economic sectors with a high presence of women and on professions dominated by women.

Women have also experienced additional childcare burdens owing to the closure of schools and crèche services, with a particularly marked impact on working mothers. The lockdown and social distancing measures have been associated with an increase in requests for support from women victims of intimate partner violence in many Member States.

Domain of work

Today's world of work is characterised by several important gender inequalities. The employment rate of women is significantly below that of men. The labour market is heavily gender segregated, and women tend to be found more often in temporary, part-time or precarious employment. This contributes to significant gender gaps in pay and pensions.



Such inequalities have particularly dire consequences for vulnerable groups of women, including younger and older cohorts, lone mothers with dependent children, and those from migrant communities or other minority groups. These inequalities are often rooted in the unequal distribution of care and other responsibilities within the household.

Progress on eliminating these inequalities is slow and, looking to the near future, uncertain. According to the Index, gender equality in the domain of work has grown only slightly (by about 1.7 points) since 2010. That growth has been almost entirely driven by increases in women's employment, which makes its sustainability questionable in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This crisis is likely to lead to a sharp downturn in employment in the EU, at least in the short term: initial ILO estimates for Europe and Central Asia indicate that the first quarter of 2020 saw working hours decline by 2 %, with a projected decline of almost 12 % during the second quarter. The immediate job loss impacts of the crisis are likely to be borne equally by women and men, unlike the situation during previous crises, where the immediate impacts tended to affect men disproportionately.

This reflects the fact that the most severely affected sectors (accommodation and food service, real estate, business and administrative activities, manufacturing and wholesale/retail) account for a considerable share of women's employment. Women's employment may also be disproportionately affected by the unpaid care responsibilities resulting from childcare and school closures, for example in the case of lone mothers, or from additional care for older and other dependent family members.

In addition, more women than men are involved in precarious or informal work, with limited access to various work and social protections, placing them in especially dire circumstances.

In recent years, some promising steps have been taken towards achieving greater equality in the EU labour market. Most notably, the European Pillar of Social Rights was introduced in 2017 to ensure equal opportunities for women and men in areas such as working conditions and career progression.

Following the principles of the Pillar, the 2019 directive on work–life balance for parents and carers seeks to address the unequal distribution of unpaid care and encourage men to take up more caregiving responsibilities. Much remains to be done, however. The EU gender equality strategy 2020–2025 outlines several policy priorities, including the transposition and implementation of the Work–Life Balance Directive, increasing the gender sensitivity of national tax and benefits systems, ensuring sufficient availability and quality of childcare, and tackling gender segregation.

Following the COVID-19 crisis, it will be important to ensure that non-standard, flexible or informal forms of employment are better paid, formalised and covered by social protection. It will also be crucial to provide gender-sensitive support to those worst affected by the crisis, for example by making sure that targeted support measures reach beyond male-dominated sectors or by recognising the value of some female-dominated activities that proved critical during the crisis (e.g. healthcare) and investing in them appropriately.

Domain of money

Equal economic independence is a prerequisite for women taking full control of their lives, personal freedom and self-realisation. However, progress for women looks like nothing less than an uphill battle. Women persistently experience greater disadvantages in the labour market than men and earn less than men; with progress on closing the gender pay gap painfully slow, the feminisation of poverty continues.



The EU has only slightly narrowed gender gaps and improved overall performance on financial resources and economic situation since 2010, as shown by an increase of only 2.2 points in this domain. The current COVID-19 health crisis has brought new challenges for everybody, including undermining of women's economic opportunities. It has widened social and economic divisions and deepened the consequences of inequality, pushing many of the burdens resulting from it onto the most deprived among the labour force, primarily women.

In 2014, in response to long-standing pay inequality, the European Commission recommended that Member States adopt pay transparency measures. However, the 2017 report on the implementation of the recommendation revealed that such measures were entirely absent in one third of Member States and insufficient in others. The EU gender equality strategy 2020–2025 goes a step further, promising to introduce binding pay transparency measures.

Such measures are necessary to tackle the asymmetry of information between employees and employers on pay, the lack of information on wage structure, the lack of understanding of some existing legal concepts (the concepts of 'pay', 'same work' and 'work of equal value'), and the lack of gender neutrality in job classification and evaluation systems. This legislation is even more relevant now that the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic risks undermining the fragile gains in women's independence since the 2008 financial crisis.

A range of economic gender inequalities increase women's risk of exposure to poverty and social exclusion. These are often concentrated among certain particularly vulnerable groups, such as lone mothers, migrant and Roma women, and women with disabilities. The gender gap in poverty is highest among people aged 65 or older (18 % for women compared with 13 % for men). This underlines the cumulative effects of women's lifelong economic disadvantage in the labour market on pension income in old age.

Women's lower level of labour market activity stems primarily from their disproportionate caring and other household responsibilities, which are associated with unequal time-use patterns that result in time poverty (EIGE, 2020a). The COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate the gender aspect of time poverty, as the increase in unpaid work will hit women hardest.

While income constraints have always been recognised as an element of poverty by policymakers, time constraints have not. Consideration of time poverty is key for gender-sensitive poverty reduction strategies (Goldin, 2014, 2015). The EU gender equality strategy 2020–2025 provides a promising basis for putting care work more solidly at the centre of EU economic activity and for addressing structural discrimination and gender inequalities built into the current economic, fiscal and social systems.

It is crucial that the measures proposed by the strategy are given political priority in the context of the current economic disruption. They need to be placed at the core of the post-pandemic recovery strategies that are likely to reshape our societies.

Domain of knowledge

The domain of knowledge has remained unchanged since the previous edition of the Gender Equality Index, with progress slow overall over the past 10 years. Although educational attainment is increasing among young women and men, more significant progress is hampered by persistent gender segregation in higher education and by low participation in lifelong learning.



Young women continue to outpace young men in educational attainment, with the gender gap gradually widening to the detriment of men. This trend has already had an effect on the achievement of the EU2020 target, with the goal met only for young women in the EU (46 % have graduated from tertiary education). Access to high-quality inclusive education – in accordance with the European Pillar of Social Rights – could be further improved for women and men with disabilities and those from deprived socioeconomic backgrounds.

Lifelong learning activities are essential policy tools to promote employability, adaptability, and the professional and personal fulfilment of women and men. Yet participation in adult education remains below the EU framework for education and training 2020 benchmark of 15 % for both women and men. Participation in lifelong learning is especially low among women and men with low levels of qualifications, who could benefit most from it.

As highlighted in the Council recommendation ‘Upskilling pathways’, well-tailored and flexible learning opportunities could benefit those in need by upgrading their skills. Similarly, work–life balance policies could facilitate participation in adult learning by allowing women and men to better manage their training, work and family responsibilities.

Persistent gender segregation remains the most pronounced challenge for gender equality in the domain of knowledge. The share of men studying in education, health and welfare, humanities and the arts (and vice versa, that is, the share of women studying in STEM fields) is not increasing. The EU gender equality strategy 2020–2025 aims to address this long-standing gender equality challenge by reducing gendered choices in relation to study subjects and subsequent careers.

This could be done by developing gender-sensitive and stereotype-free education and career counselling and by carrying out media campaigns encouraging and enabling women and men to choose non-traditional educational paths and occupations.

Domain of time

The domain of time is characterised by a persistent lack of progress and growing inequality; since 2010, the EU score has stagnated, with a slight decrease of 0.6 points to 65.7. Owing to the absence of up-to-date data on time use, the score for the domain of time has not been updated since the last edition of the Index.



The European Pillar of Social Rights endorses everyone's right to accessible, good-quality and affordable long-term care services, in particular at-home care and community-based services. The Work–Life Balance Directive has bolstered entitlements to family-related leave and flexible working arrangements; for example, it introduced the new right for workers to take at least 5 working days of carer's leave per year in case of a relative's serious illness or dependency. These provisions seek to remove some of the barriers faced by informal carers, especially women, in entering and staying in employment.

A strong commitment to the implementation of both instruments is essential in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with regard to long-term care needs. In addition, Europe's rapidly ageing population will increase the need for long-term care – already insufficiently met across the EU – and potentially add to women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care responsibilities. Although long-term care challenges have been on the EU policy agenda for some time, the policies seldom take a gender equality approach.

Domain of power

The domain of power has shown the biggest and most sustained improvement against the Gender Equality Index (an increase of 1.6 points since 2017 and almost 12 points since 2010), despite being the lowest scoring domain (53.5). The improvement in gender balance in political and economic decision-making can be attributed to the implementation of gender quotas, both binding and voluntary.



Gender parity is essential for a democratic society. The presence of women in parliaments has increased in 2020, with more Member States reaching gender balance (i.e. at least 40 % of each gender). Several countries have undertaken initiatives to improve the gender balance in their parliaments and speed up the rate of change. In fact, legislative candidate quotas are currently in place in 10 Member States and the representation of women generally improved following their application.

Gender balance among cabinet ministers in national governments has also improved, although there are significant differences between Member States. While the unequal participation of women in government is a priority, the sidelining of women in allocating portfolios is also an issue. High-profile portfolios (the so-called basic or economic functions) are assigned primarily to men, while sociocultural ('soft') portfolios, are predominantly assigned to women ministers.

In 2012, the European Commission proposed legislative action to guarantee that the under-represented sex would constitute at least 40 % of non-executive directors of listed companies. The gender equality strategy 2020–2025 commits to pushing for the adoption of this regulation. Substantial progress has been made in this area of decision-making, with a 2-p.p. increase since last year, but only France surpasses the 40 % representation threshold.

Several Member States have taken action to promote gender-balanced representation in corporate leadership, varying from soft measures, aimed at encouraging companies to self-regulate and take action independently, to hard regulatory approaches, including the application of legally binding quotas for the minimum representation of each gender and (in some cases) sanctions for non-compliance.

The impact of binding regulation is clear, with women accounting for 37 % of the boards of the largest listed companies in Member States with binding quotas, compared with 25 % in countries that have taken only soft measures or no action at all. It has had a similarly positive impact on other areas of decision-making as well.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of women's presence in the decision-making bodies managing the crisis unveils deeply rooted issues. This stark contrast is evident in the fact that the overwhelming majority of healthcare workers are women, yet they are absent from key decision-making positions. Gender continues to be a crucial determinant of health and it is necessary to include women in decision-making on recovery strategies.

Domain of health

The EU has shown few notable signs of progress towards gender equality in the domain of health in recent years. Progress since 2010 has been negligible (+ 0.8 points), with a minor loss recorded between 2017 and 2018 (– 0.1 points). Inequalities are most marked in the subdomain of health behaviour – smoking, alcohol consumption, eating fruit and vegetables and taking physical exercise – but progress in this area is impossible to monitor, owing to a lack of up-to-date data.



In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, health inequalities will continue to accumulate and be felt most by those more likely to be out of the labour market and in low-income situations, namely women with low education and women and men with disabilities. Despite healthcare in the EU being generally very accessible, these groups tend to have poor access to healthcare services while being most likely to suffer poor health.

In 2018, the most common reason given for unmet health and dental care needs was inability to afford the services. It can therefore be expected that the post-COVID-19 economic crisis and associated unemployment will continue to significantly restrict access to health services for even larger shares of people.

Gender inequalities in society have determined how COVID-19 has impacted the health and lives of all women and men. Apart from the direct health consequences of the virus itself, there are secondary impacts on health and mental health, which are often long-lasting and gender specific.

In this context, the strategic objectives of the EU health programme and the WHO strategy to improve health and reduce health inequalities within and between Member States will not be achievable unless a clearly gendered approach is applied to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health.

Domain of violence

Gender-based violence remains a pervasive issue in the EU, with serious ramifications for women's lives. Women from minority groups find themselves in particularly vulnerable situations that pose several threats to their physical and psychological integrity.



Europe has developed one of the most progressive legal instruments to combat this phenomenon: the Istanbul Convention. However, persistent challenges related to its ratification in some Member States, together with gaps in the implementation of national legislation on violence against women, are causes for concern.

Further progress requires that all Member States ratify the Istanbul Convention and provide training for law enforcement personnel and judges to ensure adequate implementation of legal instruments. It is also important to invest in support services for victims of violence against women and in the collection of high-quality, comparable data on all forms of such violence.

The emergence of cyber-violence (including online hate speech, cyberstalking, cyberbullying and cyber-harassment, and non-consensual pornography) is a growing concern. Such violence can silence women and discourage them from taking a prominent role in public life. Certain aspects of the digital world have a particularly negative impact on girls, including pornography, child sexual abuse material and cyberbullying. There is no specific EU-level instrument to tackle these forms of cyber-violence.

Research on gender-based violence points to the shrinking divide between the reality of offline and online spaces. In this era of digitalisation, these spaces should no longer be understood as separate. Rather, legal instruments, policies and programmes should approach and deal with them in a comprehensive way.

Digitalisation and the future of work

Using and developing digital technologies

Digitalisation is having profound effects on the lives of women and men. Together with new opportunities and high social transformational potential, digitalisation carries the promise of change for gender relations. Yet rapidly evolving technological innovations remain strongly embedded in pre-existing gender stereotypes and biases. Too few women are engaged in high-technology industries, research and innovation.

Here, even when women are recruited, they face gender prejudices and work–life balance strains that contribute to the gender pay gap and to horizontal and vertical segregation. It is imperative to take measures to actively shape digital change and use the potential of digitalisation in a way that promotes gender equality and women’s rights across all aspects of social, economic and political life.

The impacts of digitalisation on gender equality have rarely been explicitly recognised in EU digital policy, although, as shown in this report, societies with greater equality between women and men also perform better in the digital economy. The new EU gender equality strategy 2020–2025 reaffirms the EU’s commitment to integrating a gender perspective into all major European Commission initiatives, including the digital transition (European Commission, 2020c).

The EU has recognised that fighting gender bias and opening up new jobs for women in high-technology industries is a question of innovation, social equality and justice that requires targeted interventions across all levels of education, up to and including the highest levels of research careers. Crucially, integration of the gender dimension into the digital transition is a way to increase the responsibility and trustworthiness of new technologies and digital innovation.

Current initiatives to bring more women into the ICT sector and address specific labour market needs can be considered an initial step towards addressing the digital gender divide.

Gender differences in digital skills and use of digital devices, particularly among young people, are gradually levelling out. Young women and men are the most digitally skilled generation and benefit equally from digital skills. The gender divide widens with age, however. Women generally experience bigger obstacles than men in developing or updating their digital skills. Although women are more likely to participate in learning than men, they consistently report that they cannot participate in lifelong learning because of their family responsibilities.

Women tend to indicate somewhat lower confidence in their digital skills and use of technologies. Despite representing 58 % of tertiary graduates in the EU across all study fields, women make up only 19 % of graduates in ICT-related fields. Gender stereotypes affect young people’s career aspirations and occupational choices, leading to gender segregation in education and subsequently in the labour market.

The digital education action plan and the updated European skills agenda provide a promising basis for addressing gender stereotypes in relation to the use of digital technologies and taking concrete measures to address the gender gap in digital skills and competencies, including in self-confidence. It is necessary to take steps to prevent and combat gender stereotypes and gender segregation in education, as well as to raise awareness of the empowering potential of digitalisation.

Further analysis of intersectional inequalities in the acquisition of certain digital skills (problem-solving and software skills) is needed, especially given the fast pace of digitalisation and risk of exclusion. This is particularly relevant to closing the gender gaps for older people and people with low education. Lack of training opportunities is another obstacle to increasing and updating digital skills for women and men, highlighting the importance of increased attention to and resources for digital skills training.

The European Commission and the Member States have made some progress on implementing gender targets and quotas in research and innovation. However, the gender differences at higher levels of scientific careers remain striking. The EU and national government bodies should maintain and reinforce the structural change approach as a sustainable policy framework for integrating gender equality into research and innovation.

Research and innovation organisations, together with funding organisations and the business sector, need to take specific action to overcome persistent gender gaps in scientific careers and ensure gender balance in decision-making. Equally crucial is the integration of gender analysis into all phases of research, from deciding which technologies to develop to gathering and analysing data and transferring ideas to market.

The EU has recognised the concept of ‘gendered innovations’, which refers precisely to the potential to radically alter scientific knowledge and technological production by introducing gender perspectives, approaches and methodologies^[1] (European Commission, 2013). The untapped potential of talented female scientists, as well as the effects of gender-blind research, hold back the realisation of technological and scientific advances.

Digital transformation of the world of work

While gender segregation in research and innovation receives some attention in EU policy, the impacts of digitalisation on gender equality in the labour market are frequently overlooked. This is striking, as digitalisation is resulting in a profound labour market transformation, with many jobs automated or reorganised, often along highly gendered sectoral or occupational lines.

Notably, women are at a slightly higher risk of job loss due to automation, many new jobs emerging in the context of this transformation are concentrated in male-dominated sectors (ICT, STEM) and much of the benefit may end up in the hands of the wealthiest capital owners (primarily men).

Yet digitalisation of work holds out some prospects for increased gender equality. It offers opportunities to break down old patterns of segregation, to upskill certain low-skilled jobs usually held by women (with associated rises in pay), and to contribute to a more balanced distribution of paid and unpaid work among women and men. For such benefits to be realised, a number of policy interventions are needed.

Firstly, it will be necessary to ensure gender equality in relation to policies that support workers displaced by digitalisation; historically, such policies have often been inadvertently biased against women, focusing on industrial sectors dominated by men rather than the service sector.

Secondly, it will be necessary to involve women in the management of this transformation, for example by adopting the proposed directive on gender balance on corporate boards to ensure women's representation in business leadership.

Thirdly, the benefits of the transformation need to be broadly distributed among working women and men (e.g. through pay rises, especially for women; expansion of employee ownership of businesses; and better collective representation), rather than disproportionately benefiting wealthy capital owners (mostly men).

Finally, efforts will be needed to make new job opportunities available to all, for example by breaking occupational gender stereotypes and promoting sustainable employment that allows a good work–life balance. Ensuring full transposition of the Work–Life Balance Directive at Member State level will be a good starting point in this context.

Women may face challenges other than being replaced by machines, stemming primarily from some of the flexible modes of working that digitalisation enables, such as certain types of platform work. While flexibility can enable women with unpaid care responsibilities to undertake paid employment, it is often coupled with unstable working arrangements, including short-term, part-time and precarious forms of labour for the less privileged segments of the female workforce.

These are associated with a lack of social protection, limited access to welfare entitlements (including benefits and paid leave) and worker exploitation. Such precarious employment is common in certain forms of platform work, with a range of consequences for gender equality.

For example, exploited workers cannot fully enjoy the work–life balance benefits associated with increased work flexibility; lack of access to social benefits prevents workers from using maternity, paternity or parental leave; and certain workforce management practices expose workers to discrimination based on gender and other grounds. To date, platform work seems to replicate rather than challenge the inequalities in the traditional labour market, such as the gender pay gap and segregation.

Alongside measures to promote the participation of girls and women in STEM and ICT education, policies should urgently address the lack of stable working arrangements, as well as work and social protections, in the context of new forms of digitised work, such as platform work.

More generally, it will be necessary to implement the ILO Conventions on Decent Work and associated instruments to create a robust policy framework around the platform economy. This framework should be supported by high-quality, gender-disaggregated data on platform work, comparable across Member States. As yet, only piecemeal data from surveys with limited coverage is available, which severely limits the understanding of challenges faced by platform workers. Comprehensive, gender-disaggregated data would support more robust gender analysis of these challenges.

For the policy framework around platform economy to be gender sensitive, it will need to ensure that:

- 1 | traditional labour market policies to tackle pay gaps and gender segregation apply in the context of the platform economy;
- 2 | EU gender equality and non-discrimination legislation applies to the platform economy to prevent discriminatory practices based on gender and other grounds;
- 3 | platform workers have access to the social and work protections that are crucial for gender equality, such as parental leave and contributory pension schemes;
- 4 | flexible working arrangements meet workers' work–life balance needs (and prevent exploitative practices that limit worker autonomy);
- 5 | even the most vulnerable workers – such as the migrant women who are the group meeting the sharp growth in demand for domestic services provided via platforms – have decent working conditions.

Some steps have been taken in this direction, including highlighting the importance of mainstreaming gender into digitalisation policies in the EU gender equality strategy 2020–2025, the provision of policy guidance and recommendations through the Commission’s communication ‘A European agenda for the collaborative economy’, the adoption of a Council recommendation on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed, and the adoption of the directive on transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union.

However, these documents pay little attention to the different ways in which women and men are affected by the new forms of work. Much remains to be done if the principles of fair working conditions, access to social protection and gender equality, as outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights, are to become a reality within platform work.

Broader consequences of digitalisation

The effects of digitalisation on women’s and men’s lives extend far beyond the worlds of work and education. The increased presence of high-powered AI technologies creates huge opportunities to transform our economy and society but also recreates old risks and poses new challenges for fundamental rights and gender equality. A recent Commission communication on Europe’s digital future addressed both the challenges and the opportunities of digitalisation, highlighting that only trustworthy development of technologies can ensure sustainable growth and foster an open and democratic society.

Further steps have been taken in this direction with the release of the White Paper on Artificial Intelligence, the Ethics guidelines for trustworthy AI and the European data strategy. However, scope for broader action remains, for example, in promoting the participation of diverse groups of women and men in the development of AI, or supporting and building the capacity of national equality bodies to detect and address discrimination in the context of digitalisation, especially AI.

More effort is required to combat cyber-violence, which has become a common and often traumatising dimension of women’s work and lives. The EU’s accession to the Istanbul Convention would be a positive step forward. As the Convention does not cover the most pervasive forms of cyber-violence, synergies with other Council of Europe conventions (the Budapest Convention and the Lanzarote Convention) and their respective committees could be explored with respect to protection from, and prevention and prosecution of, cyber-violence against women and girls (EIGE, 2020a; European Parliament, 2018b).

In line with data collection commitments enshrined in both the Istanbul Convention and the Victims' Rights Directive, more emphasis should be placed on data collection to gain a better understanding of women's exposure to this form of violence and to design adequate responses. The inclusion of this form of violence in the upcoming EU-wide survey on gender-based violence will provide much needed information on women's experiences of cyber-violence in different contexts.

Assistive technologies (AsT) are likely to play a growing role in the provision of formal and informal home-based care. AsT facilitates home-based medical and social care by monitoring the health and daily life activities of care recipients and by creating better conditions for independent living. Broader use of AsT is highly relevant from a gender equality perspective, as women account for 83 % of the social workers who provide home-based professional care to people with disabilities and older people.

Women are also in greater need of long-term care, as they live longer than men and are more likely to develop serious health problems. AsT has potential to decrease the disproportionate amount of formal and informal care work that falls to women, but this alone is not sufficient.

Work in the care sector is hugely devalued, underpaid and characterised by a high rate of precarious and irregular work. Improving working conditions and attracting more men into the care sector (to overcome horizontal segregation) are essential steps towards guaranteeing more equity not within the care industry alone but in the economy and society overall.

Footnotes

[1] https://www.jst.go.jp/pdf/event_diversity160316.pdf
