

Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work

Highlights of the Gender Equality Index 2020

Main findings

The overall Gender Equality Index score for the EU in 2018 is 67.9 points, showing the urgent need for progress in all Member States. The score has increased by only 0.5 points since 2017 and by 4.1 points since 2010. At this pace – 1 point every 2 years – it will take more than 60 years to achieve gender equality in the EU.

The gender balance in decision-making is a major driver of change in almost all Member States. In the long term (2010–2018), the domain of power has contributed 65 % of the overall increase in the Gender Equality Index in the EU. In 2017–2018, the contribution was even more significant, reaching 81 %. Progress in the domains of work and knowledge contributed only 8 % and 6 %, respectively, to the overall improvement in gender equality in the EU.

Initial results of analysis of the economic impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic suggest that there is a risk that the fragile gains achieved with regard to women's independence in the past decade will be rolled back. Physical distancing measures have had a substantial impact on sectors employing a high proportion of women, with women's employment falling more sharply than it did during the 2008 recession. In addition, the closure of schools and other care services has greatly increased childcare needs, with a likely disproportionate impact on working mothers.

Domain of work

Gender equality in the world of work is advancing at a slow pace in the EU. The Index score reached 72.2 in 2018, having increased by about 0.2 points since 2017 and 1.7 points since 2010. This growth was driven almost entirely by increases in women's employment, with barely any change to gender segregation in the EU labour market. The prospect of further increases in employment in the near future are in doubt in the light of the COVID-19 crisis.

The gender gap in the full-time equivalent (FTE) employment rate has decreased in the EU since 2010, reflecting reduced gaps in 15 Member States, compared with increased gaps in only eight. However, inequalities are worsening among vulnerable groups, including lone parents, people with migrant backgrounds and those with low educational achievement.

Reducing gender gaps in employment is crucial to achieving the Europe 2020 strategy (EU2020) employment rate target of 75 %. All five countries with the smallest gender employment gaps in the EU have already surpassed this target, while four of the five Member States with the highest gender employment gaps remain below the target.

Domain of money

With a score of 80.6, the domain of money showed minor improvements – up 0.2 points since 2017 and with an increase of only 2.2 points since 2010. Closing gender gaps in monthly earnings and income from pensions, investments and other benefits is particularly slow.

Since 2010, the gender gap in earnings has increased in 17 Member States, while the gender gap in income has gone up in 19 Member States, leading to an overall increase in gender inequality in earnings and income in the EU. Gender inequalities grow substantially with age and level of education, peaking for women living in couples with children, and lone mothers.

The poverty gender gap has increased in 14 Member States since 2010 and in 21 Member State since 2017. Poverty or social exclusion are concentrated among certain particularly vulnerable groups of women and men: lone mothers, women above 65 years of age, women and men with disabilities, women and men with a low level of education, and migrant populations.

Domain of knowledge

The score for the domain of knowledge (63.6 points) has remained virtually unchanged since 2017 and improved only fractionally (1.8 points) since 2010. Gender segregation in higher education and low participation in adult learning remain the key challenges blocking more significant progress in this domain.

Since 2010, gender segregation in education has increased slightly, with the situation worsening in 13 Member States and in other cases remaining almost unchanged (with very few exceptions). Gender segregation in education remains a major barrier to gender equality in the EU.

The engagement of women and men (aged 15 or older) in formal or non-formal education and training remained low and stood at 17 % in the EU in 2018. Adult learning gradually stalls with age, increasing the risk of skills mismatches and a premature end to women's and men's careers.

Domain of time

With an EU score of 61.6 points, the domain of time points to persistent gender inequalities not only in relation to informal care for family members but also in terms of access to leisure time and activities. Increasing time pressures from both paid and unpaid work, combined with gender norms and financial constraints, limit access to leisure for many groups of women, which can have ramifications for their overall well-being and even their health.

A lack of availability of formal care services is linked to long-standing gender inequalities. Rising long-term care needs and lack of care services intensify gender inequalities within families and in employment. Care responsibilities are keeping 7.7 million women (aged 20–64) out of the labour market, compared with 450 000 men. Far more women than men also work part-time (8.9 million versus 560 000) owing to their care responsibilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Europe and the associated closure of schools and lack of availability of social support systems (carers, childminders, grandparents) has considerably aggravated the pressure on families – especially women and lone mothers – to combine care work for children and older family members with paid work. Early data show that women have experienced an even greater burden of childcare and children’s education while teleworking.

Domain of power

Even though the score for the domain of power has increased by almost 12 points since 2010, and by 1.6 points since 2017, it remains the lowest of all domains, at 53.5 points. The EU has come just halfway towards gender equality in key decision-making positions in major political, economic and social institutions.

The gender gap is narrowing in political decision-making. Many Member States have instituted legislative candidate quotas to increase gender balance in national parliaments, with strong results.

The subdomain of economic power has made significant progress, with a 17.9 point increase since 2010. The presence of women on the boards of the largest publicly quoted companies has increased strikingly with the application of quotas by Member States or other soft measures to address the gender imbalance.

Domain of health

Only marginal progress (1.8 points) has been made since 2010, with the domain of health backsliding by 0.1. points since 2017. The score for access to health services decreased by 0.2 points and there were no changes in health status. The latest comparable data for health behaviour are from 2014, so the change cannot be monitored at this time.

Health inequalities are accumulating for women with low education and women and men with disabilities, who have both the poorest health and the most limited access to

health services. Health status, as well as access to services, is connected to labour market status and level of income.

The COVID-19 pandemic will have repercussions for the mental and physical health of women and men well beyond the immediate effects of the virus, reversing progress already achieved in health equality. The mental health of women and men, as well as that of girls and boys, will require particular attention.

Domain of violence

The lockdowns imposed in all Member States as a result of COVID-19 have proved a substantial threat to women victims of violence, who are forced to remain at home for a prolonged period of time and thus are constantly exposed to their abusers. The increased use of the internet and social networks that has resulted from lockdowns and social distancing measures, especially among young people, has been associated with a spike in cases of cyber-violence against women, such as sharing of intimate pictures without consent.

Analysing data on femicide presents long-standing challenges, owing to the lack of a uniform EU legal definition of femicide and significant differences in data collection between the Member States. Nevertheless, in 2017, Eurostat recorded 854 women victims of homicide by a family member or intimate partner.

Gender-based violence intersects with multiple axes of oppression. For this reason, Muslim women, women with disabilities and older women face more severe forms of discrimination and are exposed to a higher risk of violence. Within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex (LGBTQI*) community, the gender component exacerbates the risk of falling victim to violence, with the most vulnerable individuals being those whose gender expression does not match their assigned sex at birth and intersex people.

Digitalisation and the future of work

Gendered patterns in use of new technologies

Women and men are online to a more or less equal extent: 78 % of women and 80 % of men use the internet daily. However, older women and women with lower education lag behind. In addition, 25 % of women aged 55–74 (compared with 21 % of men) and 27 % of women with low education (21 % of men) have never had the chance to use the internet. Men are more likely to participate in professional networks, download software and look for online learning materials. Women outpace men in social networking and searches for information about education and training.

In the EU, young women and men are the most digitally skilled generation and benefit equally from basic and above basic digital skills. However, at a later age, the gender divide is widening. Men are more advantaged in terms of the digital skills necessary to thrive in a digitalised world of work than women, particularly among older people (aged

55 or older). Women also experience bigger obstacles than men in acquiring and upgrading digital skills.

Despite the overall growth of the information and communications technology (ICT) sector in recent decades and the high demand for ICT skills in the labour market, only 20 % of graduates in ICT-related fields are women and the share of women in ICT jobs is 18 % (a decrease of 4 percentage points (p.p.) since 2010). Beyond ICT, a striking gender gap exists among scientists and engineers in the high-technology sectors likely to be mobilised in the design and development of new digital technologies. The untapped potential of talented female scientists, alongside gender-blind research, prevents the realisation of the full potential of technological and scientific advances.

Digital transformation of the world of work

The digital transformation of the labour market brings with it several important challenges for gender equality. Notably, women are at a slightly higher risk than men of being replaced in their jobs (e.g. in clerical support work) by digitally enabled machines; and newly emerging jobs (e.g. ICT professionals) are often concentrated in the male-dominated ICT and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sectors. There is potential to promote gender equality as well – for example by breaking down the old patterns of labour market segregation or by upskilling certain jobs held mostly by women.

Women are underrepresented among platform workers, accounting for about one third of this workforce. So far, it seems that platform work mostly reproduces, rather than challenges, key gender inequalities from the broader labour market, such as gender segregation and the gender pay gap.

Platform work poses challenges for the application of the EU's gender equality and non-discrimination legislation in the area of employment, partly because of the fragmented and irregular nature of this work and partly because of new workforce management practices. For example, online customer ratings play a big role in evaluating workers' performance in some forms of platform work, often with consequences for job access and pay. Yet such ratings can mirror gender and racial stereotyping on the part of customers, rather than providing an objective assessment.

Most platform workers are classified as self-employed or independent contractors, which results in limited access to social and work protection measures, including those essential for achieving gender equality. For example, around half of all self-employed mothers may not be entitled to maternity benefits in the EU, and access to parental leave is also limited for the self-employed in a number of Member States. The lack of social protection became especially problematic during the COVID-19 crisis, which highlighted the importance of access to, for example, unemployment benefits and sick pay.

Some forms of platform work are highly flexible and provide important opportunities to combine paid work with unpaid care responsibilities. This is likely to support women's work participation in particular, since women usually undertake the lion's share of unpaid care. However, such opportunities do not seem to challenge the unequal distribution of unpaid work per se, and in some cases may even reinforce it. For example, women are more likely to perform online tasks via platforms because they need to work from home owing to caring responsibilities, while men are more likely to do so to top-up income from their other work. Thus, platform work is unlikely to change the unequal division of unpaid care between women and men; this requires specific measures to support work–life balance, such as affordable, high-quality care provision and well-paid care-related leave available to all.

Broader consequences of digitalisation

Artificial intelligence (AI) systems have the power to create an array of opportunities for European society and the economy, but they also pose new challenges. The increasing use of AI in every aspect of people's lives requires reflection on its ethical implications and the assessment of potential risks, such as algorithmic gender bias and discrimination. The lack of gender diversity in the development of AI technologies and the quality of the data used in algorithms are the key risk factors for potential biases and unfair treatment.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is sadly a common experience for women in the EU. This form of gender-based violence is now increasingly mediated by digital technologies and affecting women's working lives in dramatic ways. Women public figures are particularly targeted, especially on social media, as a strategy to silence them and undermine their authority. Women platform workers are exposed to abuse and violence from users of platform services. Such abuse often stems from a situation of 'information asymmetry' between workers and users resulting from the platform's design and terms of service. On the one hand, these platforms give users access to a high volume of private information on the worker (e.g. including age, gender, location and photograph); on the other hand, they restrict the information accessible to the worker, which can limit their ability to assess the safety of a 'gig' before accepting it. The number of women and men needing long-term care is bound to increase, given the ageing population and increasing life expectancy across the EU. To contain costs and sustain the pressure of the growing number of patients, countries aim to promote independent living in any care setting (residential, home or community-based) together with greater use of ad hoc technological solutions (i.e. assistive technology, gerontechnology). Such technologies enable personalised interventions based on data collected from the environment or directly from the care recipient, and to some extent alleviate the caregiver burden.