Intersectionality in the Field of European Labor: Precarious Work Among Migrant Women Workers

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Abstract

This paper offers an intersectional literature review of precarious labor in the European Union, synthesizing research that examines how gender intersects with migrant status, ethnicity, age, disability, and socioeconomic background to shape unequal exposure to labor market insecurity. Existing studies from the European Parliament, Eurofound, OECD, EIGE, and recent academic work consistently demonstrate that precarious employment disproportionately affects migrant and minority women, young women with limited education, single mothers, and women with disabilities. For these groups, precarity emerges not as a temporary phase but as a structural and enduring condition. Building on this body of scholarship, the paper reviews how major EU policy instruments—including Directive (EU) 2019/1152, Directive (EU) 2022/2041, the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, and the European Pillar of Social Rights—have been interpreted in existing research. While these frameworks signal a growing institutional concern with inequalities in the labor market, the reviewed literature highlights their persistent limitations, particularly the reliance on gender-neutral and universalist approaches that insufficiently address intersecting forms of disadvantage. The review also draws on comparative analyses of national labor reforms in Member States such as Germany, France, and Italy, which are frequently cited in the literature as examples of policy interventions with the potential to mitigate precarity. These cases illustrate broader scholarly debates on the conditions under which targeted reforms can contribute to reducing structural vulnerabilities. Overall, the paper synthesizes the main findings within the field and identifies recurring gaps in both policy design and scholarly attention, underscoring the need for future research to systematically integrate intersectionality into the study of European labor markets and employment governance.

Keywords: intersectionality, precarious labor, European employment policies, gender equality, migrant workers

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the European Union labor market has undergone profound transformations, characterized by the accelerated expansion of atypical forms of employment such as fixed-term contracts, involuntary part-time work, variable-hour arrangements, and digital platform labor. This dynamic has contributed to the proliferation of precarious work, defined by instability, low remuneration, and restricted access to social protection.

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Although precarious work affects a wide spectrum of workers, recent research conducted by the European Parliament (2020) demonstrates that women are disproportionately impacted—particularly those located at the intersection of multiple axes of vulnerability: young age, minority ethnic background, migrant status, low levels of education, and heightened family responsibilities. This pattern is confirmed across both EU policy frameworks—such as recent employment Directives, the EU Gender Equality Strategy, and the European Pillar of Social Rights—and empirical evidence from Eurofound, OECD, EIGE, and contemporary academic studies, all of which show that migrant and minority women remain disproportionately affected by precarious work.

This reality transcends the notion of multiple discrimination understood merely as the accumulation of disadvantages; rather, it reveals a more complex dynamic in which distinct forms of inequality interact, reinforce, and amplify one another. Intersectionality therefore becomes an indispensable analytical framework for comprehending the ways in which systems of oppression interlock and generate specific, often invisible, effects within public policy.

The concept of intersectionality, first theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) in her seminal contribution to the *Stanford Law Review*, entails an examination of the interconnections among various axes of inequality—such as gender, ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic position, or migrant status—that cumulatively shape the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. Without this perspective, public policies risk addressing inequalities in isolation, thereby failing to adequately respond to the concrete needs of the most vulnerable groups.

The purpose of this paper is to review how existing research and institutional analyses address the intersectional dimension of precarious labor within the European Union. By examining the main legislative and strategic instruments discussed in the literature, alongside studies that document patterns of vulnerability among migrant women workers, the paper synthesizes current knowledge on the extent to which European employment policies acknowledge or overlook intersecting inequalities. Special attention is given to how scholarly and institutional sources conceptualize the relationship between intersectionality and exposure to precarious work. The goal is to provide an integrated overview of the field and to highlight the central argument emerging from the reviewed research: that a meaningful understanding of labor market inequalities in the EU requires systematic engagement with intersectional perspectives.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

2.1. What Is Precarious Work?

Precarious work has become an increasingly salient concept in the analysis of contemporary labor markets, particularly within the European Union, where structural transformations of the economy have led to the heightened flexibilization of labor relations. Broadly defined, precarious work encompasses forms of employment characterized by contractual instability, inadequate remuneration, lack of social protection, and restricted access to collective rights or opportunities for professional development.

According to the definition employed by the European Parliament (2020) study, precarious work includes occupations in which workers are exposed to financial insecurity, rely on short-term or insecure contracts, lack access to health insurance, paid leave, or pension schemes, and are often excluded from trade union representation. Moreover, such employment is frequently associated with unstable or fragmented working hours, particularly in sectors such as tourism, cleaning, digital platform deliveries, and care services. This reality disproportionately affects specific social categories—especially women, young workers, persons with disabilities, migrants, and ethnic minorities. For women, for instance, involuntary part-time employment occurs at twice the rate observed among men (Eurofound, 2025). In addition, occupational segregation and the burden of family responsibilities often compel women to accept forms of employment that are inferior in status and protection, thereby perpetuating social inequality.

Migrant women workers, however, represent one of the groups most acutely exposed to precarious labor, situated at the confluence of gender-based, ethnic, and social discrimination. For many of them, professional instability is not a temporary stage but a persistent condition of life, exacerbated by the uncertainty of legal status in a foreign country and by the lack of access to rights and legal protection. Within such a framework, uniform policies that disregard identity-specific circumstances and the accumulation of vulnerabilities prove inadequate. It is precisely for this reason that an intersectional perspective becomes essential to effectively address these inequalities.

Within the European Union, precarious work is not a marginal phenomenon but a direct consequence of the dynamics of labor market neoliberalization, wherein economic flexibility is often prioritized at the expense of social security. Thus, the understanding of precarious work cannot be reduced merely to contractual characteristics but must instead be situated within the broader context of structural inequalities, unstable working conditions, and the systemic exclusion of particular groups from the benefits of decent work.

2.2. Comparative Evidence Beyond the European Parliament Report

Although the 2020 European Parliament report on precarious employment provides an important overview of the structural vulnerabilities faced by women in the European labor market, relying exclusively on this document would obscure the broader scholarly and institutional consensus regarding the gendered and intersectional dimensions of precarity. Comparative evidence from Eurofound, the OECD and recent academic studies reinforces and expands many of the report's findings, while also revealing additional mechanisms of inequality.

Eurofound's 2024 Labour Market Inequalities report[1], for instance, shows that migrant women remain systematically overrepresented in low-paid, low-protection sectors such as domestic care, cleaning, and hospitality—patterns that predate and extend beyond the cases identified in the European Parliament study. Similarly, OECD data from the Employment Outlook 2022 (2022a) confirm that women with a migrant background face significantly higher

[1] Eurofound. (2025, May 8). *Living and working in Europe 2024*. https://doi.org/10.2806/1894535

risks of involuntary part-time work and unstable contracts, even after controlling for age, education, and occupation. Women's employment gradually recovered after the initial shock of the pandemic, even though they took on a significantly higher share of unpaid care work. While women were hit harder than men in most OECD countries at the beginning of the crisis, by 2022 the gender employment gap had narrowed compared to pre-pandemic levels. Throughout the crisis, women carried most of the additional care responsibilities caused by school and childcare closures—even in households where fathers were unemployed and mothers remained in work. These increased care demands may still have long-term labour market effects, as many women shift toward part-time or flexible jobs that offer less career progression and slower wage growth (ibid.)

Academic research further substantiates these trends. Rubery (2019) argues that gender-neutral or universalist employment regulations fail to address the structural segmentation that pushes women—particularly migrant and racialized women—into precarious forms of labor. Lombardo and Agustín (2022) highlight the persistent gap between EU gender equality strategies and the actual design of employment policies, noting the absence of systematic intersectional monitoring mechanisms.

Taken together, these studies confirm that precarious employment in Europe is not merely a statistical outcome but the result of long-standing structural patterns that disproportionately affect women at the intersection of gender, migration status, ethnicity, race, disability, and socioeconomic marginalization. Incorporating these sources therefore situates the European Parliament report within a wider body of evidence and strengthens the analytical foundation of this paper.

2.3. What Is Intersectionality?

Intersectionality is a foundational theoretical concept in the analysis of social inequalities, introduced in the 1990s by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American legal scholar, in the context of legal studies on the discrimination faced by African American women. In her seminal 1989 essay on this new integrative tool (Crenshaw, 1989), the term designates the simultaneous interaction of multiple forms of oppression—such as gender discrimination, racism, classism, homophobia, ageism, or ableism—that cannot be understood in isolation, as they manifest in fused and indivisible ways within the lived experiences of those affected.

Unlike the concept of multiple discrimination, which implies the accumulation of distinct forms of disadvantage, intersectionality advances an integrative analysis in which these axes do not merely coexist but actively influence and amplify one another, producing new and specific forms of inequality. For instance, the labor market experience of a migrant woman cannot be explained solely through the prism of gender or migrant status; it must instead be understood as the outcome of the intersection between these two dimensions, which together generate unique and often invisible barriers when measured against general equality policies.

Research conducted by Lombardo and Rolandsen Agustín (2016) further demonstrates that, although intersectionality is increasingly invoked as a term within European policy discourses, its implementation remains superficial and fragmented. Their case study on gender-based violence reveals that EU policies often individualize the issue and detach it from other critical factors such as race, class, or migrant status. This observation is equally relevant in the

case of precarious work, where gender-oriented approaches are frequently articulated within a universal framework, thereby failing to capture the complexity of experiences lived by women situated at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities.

In the field of labor, the intersectional perspective becomes indispensable for analyzing complex forms of exclusion from the labor market, given that many public policies address inequalities in a fragmented manner—for example, treating gender separately from race or disability. Such an approach inevitably produces incomplete interventions, incapable of responding to the realities of those whose identities and vulnerabilities intersect.

Consequently, intersectionality provides not only a conceptual but also a methodological framework for understanding not simply who is affected by precarious work, but why certain groups are disproportionately exposed. Applying this perspective to the analysis of European employment policies allows for the identification of structural deficits and the formulation of genuinely inclusive solutions.

2.4. Research Objective and Scope of the Literature Review

The primary objective of this paper is to synthesize how existing research and institutional analyses assess the extent to which European Union employment policies address intersectional vulnerability within the labor market. More specifically, the review examines how strategic documents, directives, and policy frameworks have been interpreted in the literature with regard to their capacity to acknowledge and respond to multiple and interdependent inequalities affecting marginalized groups—particularly migrant women, minority women, young women with limited education, single mothers, and women with disabilities.

The scholarly and institutional sources reviewed consistently underline that policies targeting gender inequality alone may overlook the combined effects of ethnicity, migration status, socioeconomic precarity, or disability. Consequently, the literature highlights the risk that gender-neutral or universalist approaches may fail to capture the complexity of the inequalities experienced by the most vulnerable workers.

In line with these debates, this paper also surveys the academic and institutional literature that discusses examples of promising national measures—such as Italy's expanded parental leave or Germany's minimum wage reforms—often cited as potential models for addressing precarity. By synthesizing these contributions, the review aims to map the main findings, recurring critiques, and policy gaps identified across the field, as well as the recommendations formulated by scholars and European institutions for strengthening the intersectional dimension of EU employment policy.

3. SCIENTIFIC CONTEXT ("STATE OF THE ART") AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.1. Precarious Work in the European Union

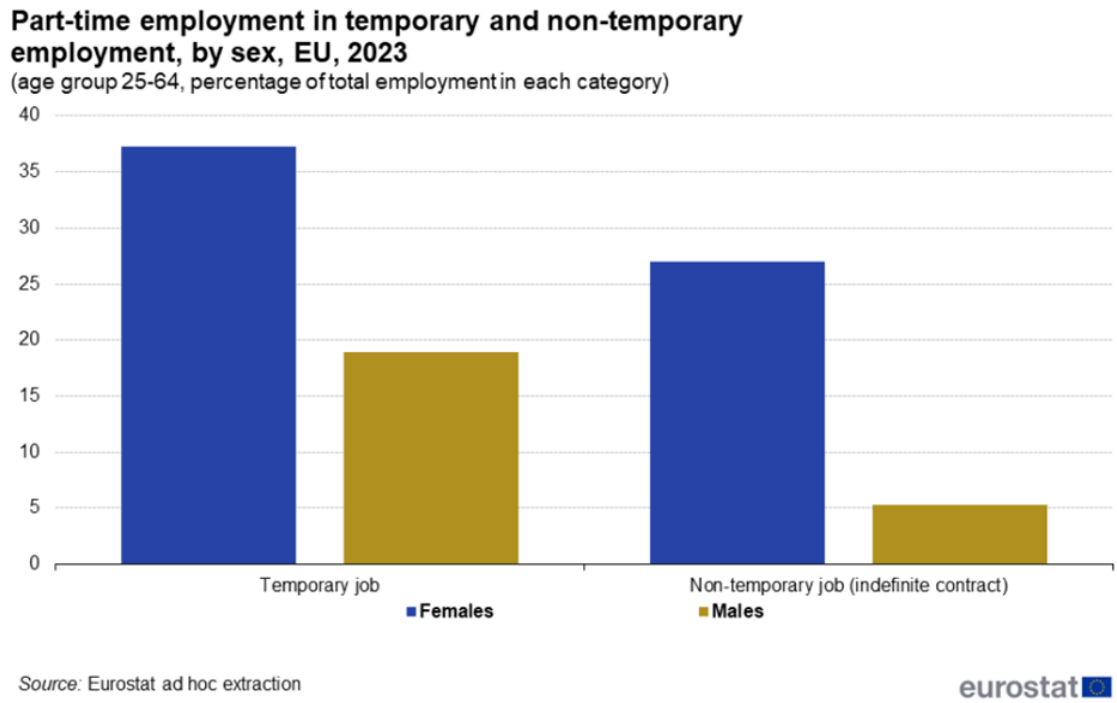
In recent decades, precarious work has emerged as one of the most visible and contested issues within the European Union labor market. Although no single, universally accepted definition exists, the concept is generally associated with forms of employment characterized by contractual instability, low wages, unpredictable schedules, and the absence of social protection. Among the most prominent forms of precarious work are involuntary part-time employment, fixed-term contracts, seasonal work, platform-based labor, as well as informal or undeclared work.

The specialized literature highlights that labor precarity does not affect all workers equally. In this regard, research conducted by Barroso (2024) underscores that European Union employment and social inclusion policies frequently fail to analytically account for the overlapping effects of gender, migration, and educational attainment in shaping vulnerability. Barroso argues that such policies are often grounded in universalizing and ostensibly neutral assumptions, neglecting the reality that educational exclusion among (im)migrant women is not merely an individual outcome but a consequence of structural barriers perpetuated by the European legislative and institutional framework. This analysis reinforces the view that precarious work must be understood not solely in economic terms, but also as the product of intersectional inequalities that persist through omission in public policies[5]. Precarity is unevenly distributed along lines of gender, age, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, remaining disproportionately concentrated among already marginalized groups (ibid.). European-level studies consistently reveal that women—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with migrant status—are overrepresented in sectors marked by precarious work, such as informal care, cleaning, hospitality, and retail.

Moreover, there is an alarming tendency toward the normalization of precarious labor within economic models that prioritize labor market flexibility over stability. While certain forms of atypical work may provide limited autonomy or work–life balance, the majority of workers engaged in these arrangements do not voluntarily choose such employment but are compelled by the lack of viable alternatives. This reality is supported by Eurostat data, which indicate that a significant proportion of part-time workers would prefer full-time contracts but are unable to secure them (Eurostat, 2024).

Precarious labor in the European Union thus represents not merely a contractual issue but also reflects structural dysfunctions of the labor market, wherein certain groups are systematically excluded from access to decent work. Analyzing this form of employment is essential for understanding the ways in which economic and social inequality is reproduced within systems that appear neutral or inclusive on the surface.

Figure 1. ***Part-Time Employment within Temporary and Non-Temporary Contracts, by Sex, EU-27, 2023*** *(Source: Eurostat, 2024)*
(Age group 25–64, percentage of total employment in each category)

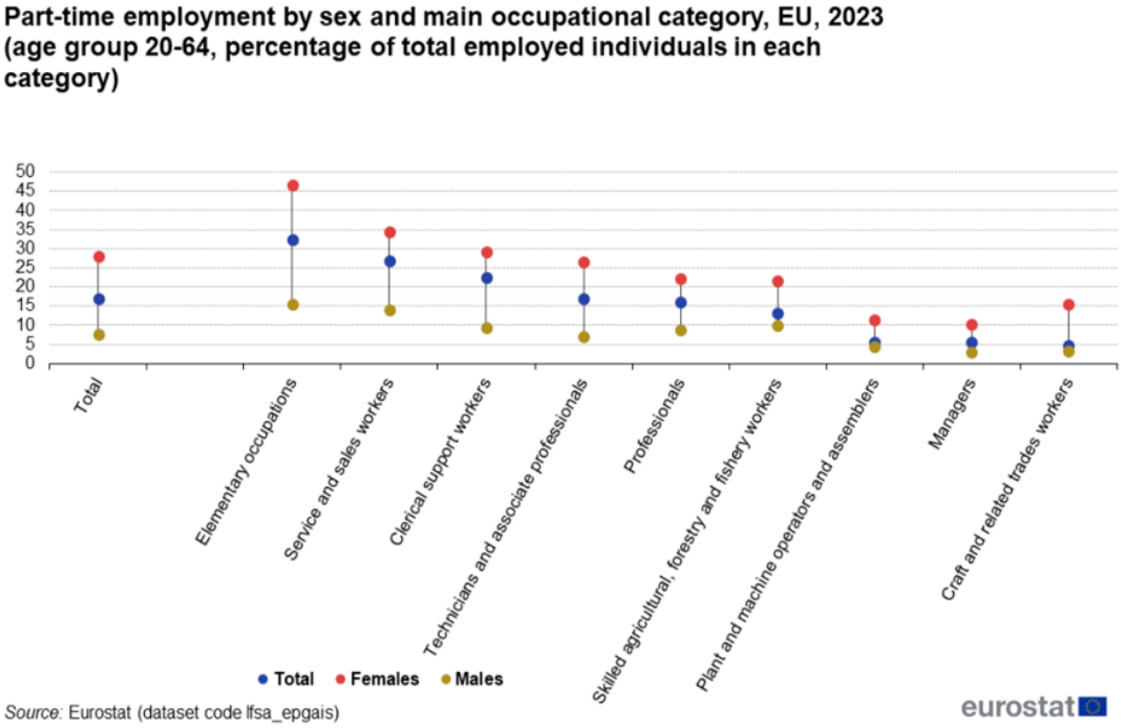


Eurostat data for 2023 confirm the existence of significant gender disparities with respect to part-time employment, particularly when examined through the lens of contract type. The proportion of women working part-time is markedly higher than that of men, both in the case of temporary and permanent contracts. Specifically, 37.3 percent of women employed on temporary contracts work part-time, compared with only 18.9 percent of men in the same situation. Among those holding permanent contracts, 27.0 percent of women work part-time, as opposed to merely 5.3 percent of men. This divergence indicates that part-time work is not only more prevalent within temporary employment but also profoundly feminized.

While part-time arrangements may in some cases represent a voluntary choice, for women the decision is often tied to caregiving responsibilities for children or other family members—29.5 percent of women report this as the primary reason, compared with only 8.2 percent of men. By contrast, men more frequently cite reasons related to education or health when opting for part-time work.

It is equally noteworthy that 27.5 percent of men and 18.1 percent of women identify the lack of available full-time positions as the main reason for working part-time. This finding challenges the notion that part-time employment is unequivocally a matter of personal choice and highlights the structural dimension of precarity, particularly in the case of women burdened with family responsibilities or situated in conditions of vulnerability.

Figure 2. ***Part-Time Employment by Sex and Main Occupational Categories, EU-27, 2023***
(Source: Eurostat, 2024)
(Age group 20–64, percentage of total persons employed in each category)



The figure reveals significant gender disparities in the distribution of part-time employment across the main occupational categories in the European Union. In every category examined, the proportion of women working part-time exceeds that of men, thereby confirming the structural tendency of the European labor market to feminize part-time employment, regardless of skill level or occupational status. The most pronounced gender gaps can be observed in the following categories:

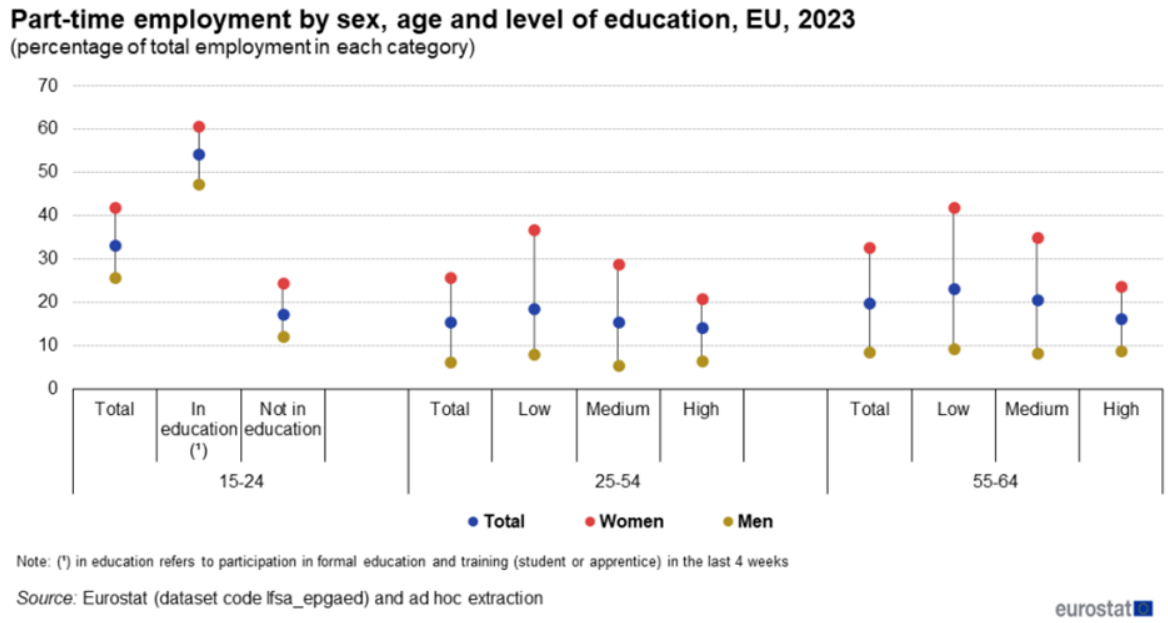
- **Service and sales workers**, where nearly half of all women are employed part-time, compared with less than one-quarter of men;
- **Elementary occupations**, where part-time work is frequent among women but considerably less common among men;
- **Clerical support and customer service workers**, where a consistent gap of approximately 15–20 percentage points persists between the genders.

By contrast, in higher-status categories—professionals, managers, and technicians—the overall incidence of part-time employment is lower, yet the gender gap remains, suggesting that occupational segregation by working time is not confined to low-skilled sectors. Moreover, in male-dominated occupations, such as skilled agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers or machine operators, the share of part-time work is minimal, especially among men.

This unequal distribution reflects not merely individual choice but also structural constraints and socially constructed gender roles that shape women's access to stable, full-time employment. Thus, an occupationally disaggregated analysis confirms that part-time

employment is not a uniform issue but rather a profoundly intersectional one, manifesting differently depending on class, gender, and occupational type.

Figure 3. ***Part-Time Employment by Sex, Age, and Educational Attainment, European Union, 2023*** *(Source: Eurostat, 2024)*
(Percentage of total persons employed in each category)



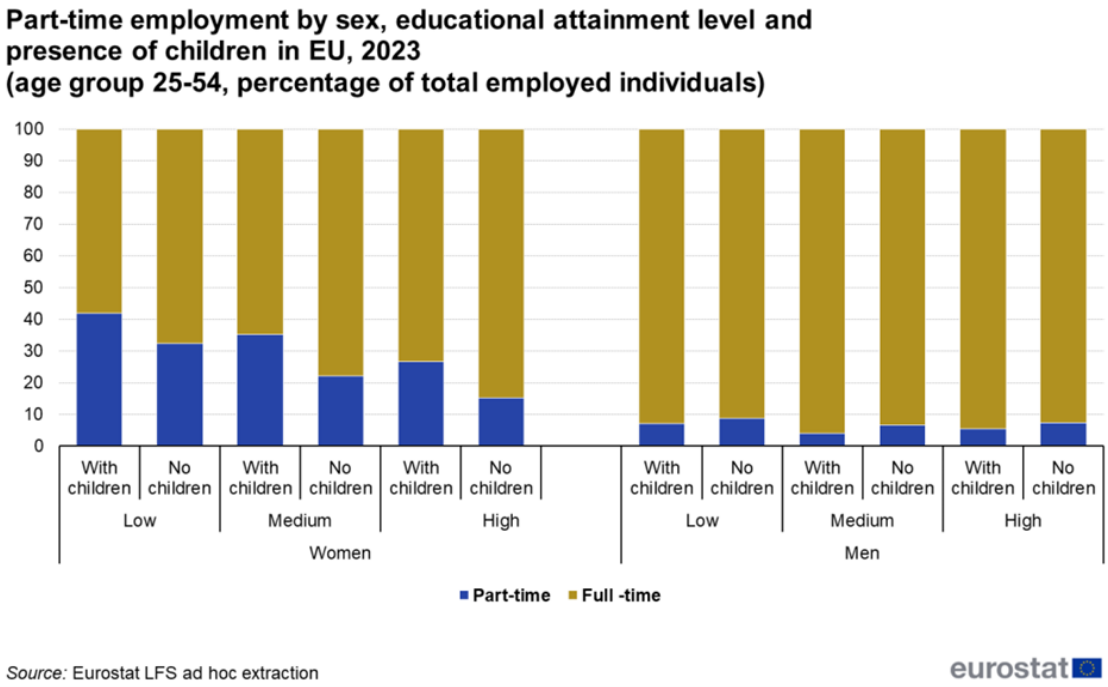
Eurostat data clearly illustrate the unequal distribution of part-time employment in the European Union when disaggregated by sex, age, and educational level. Among individuals aged 15–24, part-time work is most prevalent among those engaged in formal education (students), which is an expected outcome. However, even outside the educational system, young women continue to engage in part-time employment more frequently than young men, suggesting the presence of barriers to full-time employment from the very outset of their careers.

In the 25–54 age group, the figure reveals that women with low or medium levels of education are most affected by part-time employment. This trend reflects both the pressures of domestic responsibilities and the limited availability of full-time opportunities for women with lower qualifications. Although the incidence of part-time work decreases with higher levels of education, gender disparities persist even among those holding tertiary degrees.

For individuals aged 55–64, part-time employment becomes more frequent for both women and men, yet the gender gap remains evident, particularly among those with lower educational attainment. This pattern may reflect both preparation for labor market exit and difficulties in securing full-time employment at an older age.

The data substantiate the argument that part-time employment is a phenomenon profoundly shaped by intersectional factors. Women—especially those who are young or possess limited education—remain the most exposed to unstable forms of employment. Consequently, European employment policies must address precarious work not only through the lens of gender but also by taking into account education, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic factors and family contexts.

Figure 4. ***Part-Time Employment by Sex, Educational Attainment, and Presence of Children, European Union, 2023*** *(Source: Eurostat, 2024)*
(Age group 25–54, percentage of total employed persons)



The data reveal a clear gender disparity: women are far more likely to be engaged in part-time employment, and this tendency is significantly shaped by family responsibilities and educational status.

For women, the presence of children is strongly associated with increased part-time employment. For example:

- Over 40 percent of women with low educational attainment and children work part-time, compared with approximately 30 percent of their counterparts without children.
- A similar pattern is observed among women with medium and higher education, although the proportion decreases progressively with rising levels of education. Nevertheless, even among women with tertiary education, more than 15 percent of those with children work part-time, compared with fewer than 10 percent of those without children.

This distribution confirms the hypothesis that caregiving responsibilities are disproportionately assumed by women, thereby restricting their access to full-time employment, particularly in the absence of robust public policies on work–life balance.

In contrast, men—regardless of educational level or parental status—overwhelmingly remain in full-time employment. The proportion of part-time work among men is extremely low, consistently below 10 percent across all subcategories analyzed. This finding highlights the persistence of traditional social norms in which men are regarded as the primary financial providers, while women adjust their professional trajectories in accordance with family needs.

These data provide a clear example of how gender, educational attainment, and parental status intersect to amplify the risk of professional precarity for women with children. While higher education may offer some degree of protection against part-time employment—particularly for childless women—no educational category fully neutralizes the gender imbalance in this form of labor. The persistence of this gap underscores the structural nature of labor market inequalities and reinforces the importance of adopting an intersectional approach in analyzing precarious forms of employment.

3.2. Intersectional Discrimination as a Determinant of Exposure to Precarious Work

Intersectional discrimination constitutes one of the underlying causes of heightened vulnerability to precarious work within the European Union. The concept entails not merely the accumulation of disadvantages (such as sex, ethnicity, migrant status, or low educational attainment), but rather their systemic interaction, which generates social and economic effects distinct from those produced by discrimination on a single axis.

Thus, a migrant woman with low educational attainment and significant family responsibilities is not subject to three independent forms of discrimination, but rather faces a compounded form of vulnerability that proves particularly resistant to traditional inclusion policies. According to Masselot (2007), legislative and institutional approaches within the EU remain largely unidimensional, thereby leading to the inadvertent exclusion of such groups from the benefits of social policy and the protections of the regulated labor market. Similarly, Rubery (2019) demonstrates that migrant women and ethnic minority women are disproportionately represented in informal, unstable, and poorly paid jobs—particularly in domestic work, service sectors, and the platform economy. These forms of employment not only evade labor protection regulations but also reproduce and amplify pre-existing social hierarchies, thereby maintaining marginalized groups in a state of continuous vulnerability.

Another relevant example emerges from the agenda developed by Talia Meer and Helene Combrinck (2015), which illustrates how the intersection of disability, gender, and social class contributes to the isolation of women with disabilities in peripheral forms of labor, often rendered invisible within official statistics. In the absence of explicit measures acknowledging this particular combination of factors, public policies fail to achieve meaningful inclusion.

Moreover, according to the European Network of Equality Bodies (Crowley, 2016), complaints concerning intersectional discrimination remain underreported and insufficiently documented by national authorities, owing to the lack of a clear legal framework recognizing even multiple discrimination as a distinct category.

3.3. Key European Union Documents on Labor, Gender Equality, and Equal Opportunities

The European Union has adopted a series of strategic and legislative instruments aimed at improving working conditions, combating discrimination, and promoting equal opportunities. Nevertheless, the implementation and impact of these instruments vary considerably across Member States, and the intersectional dimension is often referenced only at a declarative level rather than being effectively embedded in concrete policies.

A first reference document is **Directive (EU) 2019/1152**[2] on transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union. The directive seeks to guarantee workers a minimum set of rights, including access to clear information on the employment relationship, limits on abusive probationary periods, protections for on-demand work (zero-hour contracts), and the right to engage in parallel employment. While this directive has the potential to curb extreme forms of precarious labor, it does not contain explicit provisions concerning intersectional discrimination, thereby limiting Member States' ability to adapt its implementation to the specific needs of vulnerable groups. The Directive's provisions remain largely gender-neutral and do not explicitly address the differentiated impact of precarious work on groups such as migrant women or ethnic minorities. As several analyses point out, this limits the Directive's capacity to respond to intersectional vulnerabilities documented in empirical research.

Another essential framework is the **EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025**[3], which includes among its objectives the reduction of gender inequalities in the labor market, the narrowing of pay gaps, and the promotion of work–life balance. Although the strategy recognizes the importance of intersectionality as a horizontal principle, its treatment of the concept is often symbolic: there are no clear indicators or monitoring mechanisms to systematically assess the impact of policies on immigrant women, Roma women, LGBTQ+ individuals, or women with disabilities. The Strategy lacks clear indicators, targeted instruments, and monitoring mechanisms capable of capturing how gender inequalities intersect with migration status, ethnicity, disability, or family responsibilities.

Similarly, the **European Pillar of Social Rights**[4], adopted in 2017, sets forth 20 principles for a fairer Europe, including the right to decent work, education and training, social protection, and equal opportunities. While the Pillar serves as an influential policy framework, it does not carry binding legal force, and its principles are articulated without an explicit intersectional dimension—leaving open the risk that subsequent policies inspired by it will inadequately address the differentiated needs of marginalized groups.

Taken together, these documents represent an important step toward consolidating a European framework for decent work. Nonetheless, the absence of clear, measurable, and binding provisions that place intersectionality at the core significantly limits their real effectiveness in combating the complex inequalities that define precarious labor in the EU.

3.4. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Precarious Workers: Deepening Existing Inequalities

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the European Union labor market, disproportionately affecting workers already in vulnerable positions, particularly those engaged in precarious forms of employment. This health and economic crisis acted as an

[2] European Parliament, & Council of the European Union. (2019, June 20). *Directive (EU) 2019/1152 on transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union*. Official Journal of the European Union.

[3] European Commission. (2020). *Gender equality strategy 2020–2025*. European Commission.

[4] Publications Office of the European Union. (2017). *The European Pillar of Social Rights*. Official Website of the European Union.

amplifier of existing inequalities, further highlighting the structural nature of labor market exclusion. Data provided by Eurofound (2020) and the European Commission (2021) indicate that workers in sectors with the highest incidence of precarious labor—such as hospitality, cleaning, home care, and platform-based deliveries—were most exposed to the risks of dismissal, income reduction, or lack of health and social protection.

Women, migrants (OECD, 2022a), and young workers were particularly affected, experiencing significant losses in income and access to stable employment, thereby heightening the risk of poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, the pandemic revealed that many essential activities for the functioning of society were performed by individuals employed under vulnerable labor conditions. For instance, women working in health care or eldercare—sectors dominated by atypical contracts and low wages—were simultaneously exposed to heightened risks of infection while having limited access to protective equipment or paid leave.

Research conducted by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2021) shows that during the pandemic, involuntary part-time work and temporary unemployment increased substantially among women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities. This dynamic contributed to a re-entrenchment of traditional gender norms within households and to a decline in women's overall participation in the labor market. Furthermore, according to the OECD (2022b), migrant workers were twice as likely as national citizens to lose their jobs during the COVID-19 crisis, especially in sectors such as construction, seasonal agriculture, and cleaning services—areas characterized by insecure and informal labor.

The pandemic did not generate new forms of precarity but rather deepened pre-existing structural inequalities, underscoring both the fragility of social protection mechanisms for certain groups and the urgent need for genuinely inclusive public policies that explicitly acknowledge the intersectional vulnerability of workers positioned at the margins of the labor market.

4. PROPOSED SOLUTION AND APPLIED ANALYSIS

4.1. Identified Vulnerable Groups

A comprehensive examination of precarious labor in the European Union requires more than enumerating vulnerable populations; it must incorporate an analytical framework capable of showing why certain groups become structurally overexposed to labor market insecurity. This section adopts such a framework by situating vulnerability at the intersection of gender, migration, ethnicity, age, disability, and family responsibilities. Rather than reproducing pre-established institutional categories, the classification developed here draws on empirical evidence to reveal how these axes of inequality compound one another in ways that existing policy instruments fail to recognize. The purpose is not simply to identify groups "at risk," but to demonstrate that vulnerability is produced through structural arrangements—legal, economic, and social—that systematically shape access to employment, job quality, and social protection. By foregrounding these mechanisms, the analysis shifts the focus from individual disadvantage to institutional responsibility, illustrating that precarious labor is not accidental but structurally patterned.

The first group consists of women from ethnic minority backgrounds and migrant women workers. They are frequently employed in poorly regulated sectors such as cleaning, informal care, food services, or seasonal labor, where temporary, informal, or part-time contracts predominate (European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Policy Department A: Economic and Scientific Policy, 2016). Studies demonstrate that discrimination based on ethnicity and migrant status often remains invisible in both national and European policies, exposing these women to heightened risks of economic exploitation and institutional exclusion.

The second affected group comprises young women (under the age of 25), particularly those with low levels of education. These women face significant barriers to labor market entry, often finding themselves confined to unskilled, part-time occupations with little prospect for professional advancement. According to Eurofound (2024), young women are frequently affected by occupational segregation, concentrated in sectors with low economic value and limited social protection. The high incidence of unemployment and instability during initial employment experiences directly shapes their long-term professional trajectories, consolidating precarity as a normalized condition of life.

A third group essential to the intersectional analysis of precarious labor includes women with disabilities and single mothers. They are particularly vulnerable to marginalization due to the convergence of multiple barriers: stigmatization, limited access to support infrastructure, multiple discrimination, and the absence of tailored protective measures. According to the OECD (n.d.), single mothers face heightened risks of poverty and exclusion, exacerbated by the lack of family support, insufficient workplace flexibility, and inadequate access to childcare services.

4.2. Sectors Dominated by Precarious Work

Understanding the unequal distribution of precarious labor across European economies requires interrogating the historical and institutional forces that have rendered certain sectors structurally fragile. The sectors examined in this section—care work, cleaning, hospitality, early childhood education, and platform-mediated services—are not inherently precarious due to the tasks performed, but have been shaped into precarious domains through regulatory neglect, devaluation of feminized labor, and fragmented employment arrangements. By analyzing these sectors through an intersectional lens, this section demonstrates how gendered and racialized divisions of labor intersect with institutional design to generate persistent insecurity. The aim is not merely descriptive: it argues that sectoral precariousness reflects broader patterns of power, policy failure, and social undervaluation, all of which disproportionately affect women, migrants, and young workers. In doing so, the analysis positions precarious sectors as political constructs rather than economic inevitabilities, thereby challenging dominant narratives that naturalize low-quality work.

One of the most affected areas is the **formal and informal care sector**, which includes workers providing eldercare, childcare, or support for persons with disabilities, in hospitals, social institutions, and private households. This sector is marked by precarious conditions, contractual instability, and a general lack of professional recognition, despite its essential contribution to social welfare. According to data from the European Institute for Gender

Equality (EIGE, 2021), more than 80 percent of workers in this field are women, and a significant proportion are migrants or members of ethnic minorities.

The **cleaning sector** is also among the most exposed to precarity. Workers in this domain are often employed through fixed-term contracts, part-time arrangements, or subcontractors, which results in unstable pay and the absence of basic benefits such as paid sick leave or pensions. Furthermore, cleaning remains a sector where harassment and abuse are widespread, with access to legal remedies often obstructed by language barriers or uncertain migration status.

Tourism and HoReCa (hotels, restaurants, catering) are seasonal industries where employment is frequently temporary and tied to fluctuating demand. Economic crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have underscored the fragility of these jobs, with the majority of those affected being women and young workers—many of them employed involuntarily part-time or on fixed-term contracts.

The **education sector**, particularly in auxiliary segments (non-teaching staff, early childhood education assistants), also registers high levels of precarious employment, especially among young women or those re-entering the labor market after maternity leave. The lack of career advancement opportunities and the heavy burden of unpaid labor (such as lesson preparation or grading) contribute to burnout and professional instability (Stevenson et al., 2024).

A rapidly expanding, though relatively new, domain is **digital platform work**, including services such as Uber, Glovo, or Bolt. While often promoted as flexible and innovative, these forms of labor typically involve unregulated employment relations, lack of insurance, and absence of protection in cases of illness or accident. Workers in this sector generally do not benefit from collective rights or stability. Notably, many migrant women or those with limited access to education turn to platform work in the absence of other viable options (Pesole et al., 2018).

4.3. Examples of Best Practices

Best practices in addressing precarious labor must be understood not as isolated national successes, but as evidence that structural inequalities can be mitigated when policy interventions are intentionally designed to address intersecting vulnerabilities. The comparative perspective adopted in this section highlights how reforms in Germany, France, and Italy illustrate the transformative potential of targeted measures such as minimum wage legislation, limits on temporary contracts, or expanded childcare and parental leave. These examples demonstrate that political will, adequate institutional capacity, and sustained investment can reshape labor market outcomes even in contexts marked by high levels of precariousness. Importantly, the section argues that the effectiveness of such policies lies not solely in their technical design but in their capacity to redistribute power, enhance predictability, and strengthen workers' ability to negotiate fair conditions. Although outcomes vary depending on the national context, such policies provide models of intervention that can be adapted and scaled, particularly if designed from an intersectional perspective (European Parliament, DG IPOL, Policy Dept. A, 2016).

Germany introduced in 2015 a national statutory minimum wage (Mindestlohngesetz – MiLoG; see Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015), aimed at combating precarious labor and reducing wage inequalities. Since its implementation, the minimum wage has been gradually increased, with a particularly positive impact on women, migrants, and low-educated workers who were previously concentrated in sub-living-wage occupations. In addition, the **Wage Transparency Act (Entgelttransparenzgesetz)**, adopted in 2017 (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2017), has enabled employees to request information about pay levels by gender, thereby contributing to the reduction of indirect pay discrimination.

In **France**, one of the key measures has been the limitation of fixed-term contracts, which previously represented a widespread form of atypical employment, especially in sectors dominated by women, youth, and low-educated workers. The French Labor Code imposes strict limits on the renewal of temporary contracts and mandates their automatic conversion into permanent contracts after a certain number of renewals (Ministère du Travail, 2020). In parallel, the French state has provided financial support to employers offering stable jobs to workers under the age of 26 and to individuals at high risk of social exclusion. These measures have had direct effects on reducing recurrent precarious labor and increasing contractual stability (Ministère du Travail, de l'Emploi et de l'Insertion, 2021).

Italy provides a relevant example regarding work–life balance policies, particularly parental leave and childcare support measures. In 2021, through its National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), Italy extended the duration of paid paternity leave and significantly increased investments in early childhood care services (LGCA News, 2022).

4.4. Recommendations from the European Parliament

In its 2020 report, the European Parliament (DG IPOL, Policy Dept. A, 2016) offers a set of essential recommendations for reducing precarious work and promoting equal opportunities in the European labor market. These recommendations are explicitly framed from both a gender-sensitive and intersectional perspective, emphasizing that uniform, undifferentiated policies cannot effectively address the diverse needs of vulnerable groups.

One of the key recommendations concerns the effective implementation, across all Member States, of the **Pay Transparency Directive** proposed by the European institutions in 2021 (Council of the European Union, 2021). Among other provisions, the directive obliges employers to provide clear information regarding pay criteria, prohibits inquiries into candidates' previous salaries, and grants workers the right to request transparency regarding the salaries of colleagues at the same level. This measure is crucial for combating indirect pay discrimination, particularly in the case of women and migrant workers, who are frequently remunerated below average for equivalent work.

A second major recommendation consists of **expanding rights for workers employed under atypical contracts**, such as temporary employment, involuntary part-time work, digital platform labor, or informal employment relationships. The report calls for these categories of workers to enjoy equal rights with respect to remuneration, access to vocational training, paid leave, and social protection, in line with the principles of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** (European Union, 2021). In addition, the establishment of EU-wide minimum standards for

working conditions and access to insurance for all workers, regardless of contractual form, is strongly recommended.

Third, the European Parliament advocates for an **integrated approach to parental leave and work–life balance policies** (DG IPOL, Policy Dept. A, 2016), one that avoids reinforcing gender stereotypes. Recommendations include extending the duration of paid paternity leave, introducing incentives for the equitable sharing of parental leave between parents, and developing accessible childcare infrastructure. These measures are essential for reducing the disproportionate pressure placed on women, who, in the absence of alternatives, often opt for part-time work or temporarily withdraw from the labor market.

While the European Parliament's recommendations represent an important normative step toward reducing precariousness, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the extent to which Member States and employers are held accountable for implementation. The persistent gap between EU-level commitments and national practice reveals a structural problem of responsibility: progressive directives lose transformative potential when monitoring remains weak, compliance is voluntary, or enforcement disproportionately relies on individual workers—often women, migrants, and those in precarious positions—who lack the power, resources, or legal security to challenge violations. Without robust accountability mechanisms, pay transparency risks becoming symbolic, equal rights for atypical workers remain aspirational, and work–life balance reforms continue to reproduce gendered inequalities rather than dismantling them. Therefore, genuine progress requires not only adopting intersectional policies but also establishing binding oversight structures, transparent reporting obligations, and sanctions for non-compliance. Ensuring responsibility at both institutional and employer level is essential to prevent precarious labor from being normalized and to guarantee that the rights promised on paper result in substantive improvements in the lives of the most vulnerable workers.

5. REVIEW OF THE MAJOR EU EMPLOYMENT POLICY FRAMEWORKS

This section synthesizes the main critical perspectives identified in scholarly and institutional analyses regarding major EU employment policy frameworks. While each instrument acknowledges structural inequalities to some extent, their design, scope, and legal architecture reveal substantial limitations when evaluated through an intersectional perspective. Taken together, these documents advance a universalist and gender-neutral policy vision that insufficiently accounts for the compounded disadvantages faced by migrant women workers and other intersecting vulnerable groups.

5.1. Directive (EU) 2019/1152[5] on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions

Directive 2019/1152 constitutes the EU's most ambitious attempt to regulate employment predictability, focusing on written information obligations, probation periods, exclusivity clauses and minimum predictability for on-demand work. While the Directive aims to benefit workers in precarious jobs, its legal construction embeds several structural blind spots.

[5] Directive (EU) 2019/1152 of the European Parliament and of the Council.

First, its gender-neutral language obscures the fact that the categories most affected by unpredictable work schedules—domestic workers, platform workers, part-time workers, seasonal agricultural workers—are overwhelmingly occupied by migrant and women. Because the Directive treats "workers in non-standard employment" as a homogeneous group, it fails to consider how gender, migration status or ethnicity shape access to rights or the ability to enforce them. For example, written information obligations are irrelevant to undocumented or semi-formal migrant women employed in domestic care, who often lack any contractual documentation despite the Directive's requirements.

Second, the Directive leaves Member States significant discretion in defining "reasonable predictability" and "sufficient notice," which generates uneven protection. Such variability disproportionately disadvantages women in low-wage and migrant-dominated sectors in Member States with weaker enforcement traditions.

Third, the instrument does not address structural power asymmetries that prevent vulnerable women from challenging employers, such as fear of job loss, dependency on residence permits, language barriers or employer retaliation. The Directive assumes that transparency alone empowers workers, but for migrant women in domestic, agricultural or cleaning work, transparency without enforcement mechanisms creates no substantive change.

Thus, while important in principle, Directive 2019/1152 does not meaningfully alter the precarious conditions of the groups most exposed to unpredictable work, precisely because it fails to integrate an intersectional analysis into its binding provisions.

5.2. Directive (EU) 2022/2041[6] on Adequate Minimum Wages

Directive 2022/2041 aims to reduce wage inequality and improve access to adequate minimum wages through statutory mechanisms and strengthened collective bargaining. Its relevance for women in precarious employment—especially migrant women—is significant, yet its intersectional potential remains underdeveloped.

From an intersectional standpoint, the Directive's major weakness lies in its focus on aggregate wage adequacy, without monitoring how different subgroups benefit from wage increases. Migrant women working in cleaning, caregiving and hospitality—sectors where undeclared or informal arrangements are common—remain outside the protective scope of statutory minimum wages altogether. The Directive's provisions on collective bargaining are similarly limited, as many migrant and racialized women are employed in sectors where unionization is structurally weak or actively discouraged.

Another limitation is that the Directive assumes that raising minimum wages automatically improves conditions for all low-wage workers. However, wage increases may bypass women in informal or semi-formal work, or may be absorbed by agencies and subcontractors in fragmented supply chains. Without explicit obligations for Member States to disaggregate wage data by gender, migrant status, ethnicity or sector, the Directive cannot ensure equitable outcomes.

Nevertheless, when implemented robustly—such as in Germany's 2015 and 2022 minimum wage reforms—adequate minimum wages can substantially improve the material

[6] "Directive - 2022/2041 - EN - EUR-Lex," Europa.eu, 2022, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2022/2041/oj/eng.

conditions of women in low-paid sectors. Yet such improvements are heavily dependent on national enforcement capacity, confirming the need for stronger intersectional monitoring at EU level.

5.3. EU Gender Equality Strategy[7] 2020–2025

The Gender Equality Strategy represents the EU's principal political commitment to gender equality in employment. However, its approach to intersectionality is symbolic rather than structural. Although the Strategy acknowledges the existence of intersecting forms of discrimination, it lacks mechanisms for systematically integrating intersectionality into policy design, implementation, budgeting or monitoring. Intersectionality appears as an aspirational value rather than an operational framework.

The Strategy remains limited by:

- a singular focus on one axis of vulnerability, without detailed attention to how gender interacts with migration status, ethnicity, disability or socioeconomic class;
- absence of concrete intersectional indicators and action plans in employment, care, pay gaps or gender-based violence;
- reliance on soft-law instruments, which provide political guidance but no enforceable rights for women located at multiple axes of vulnerability.

Furthermore, the Strategy's emphasis on increasing women's labor market participation may unintentionally exacerbate precarious conditions for low-income and migrant women, who often enter the workforce through highly flexible and low-paid sectors. Without safeguards against segmentation, feminist activation policies risk reinforcing precarity rather than alleviating it.

5.4. The European Pillar of Social Rights[8] (EPSR) and Its Action Plan[9]

The EPSR articulates principles such as fair working conditions, equal opportunities and access to social protection. While central to EU social governance, the Pillar is characterized by broad universalism that overlooks intersectional inequalities. Its principles are framed around "everyone" or "all workers," without identifying the differentiated barriers faced by migrant women, racialized workers or women with disabilities. This universalist framing risks reproducing the false assumption that identical rights automatically lead to equal outcomes.

Moreover, because the Pillar is largely non-binding, its impact depends on national political will. Countries with weak welfare states or limited enforcement capacities may adopt the language of the Pillar without implementing any substantive reforms, leaving migrant and low-income women unprotected.

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[7] European Commission. (2020). *Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025*. European Commission.
[8] Publications Office of the European Union. (2017). *The European Pillar of Social Rights*. Official Website of the European Union.
[9] Publications Office of the European Union. (2021). *The European Pillar of Social Rights action plan*.

The Action Plan accompanying the Pillar includes quantitative targets (e.g., employment rate of 78%, reduction in social exclusion), yet these are not disaggregated, making it impossible to evaluate whether marginalized subgroups benefit. Without intersectional indicators, policy successes may reflect improvements for majority populations while masking worsening conditions for the most vulnerable.

Despite its progressive vision, the Pillar remains structurally incapable of addressing the root causes of precarity among migrant women workers unless its universalist principles are supplemented with targeted, intersectional measures.

5.5. Synthesis: Intersectional Gaps Across EU Employment Policies

Across all frameworks, several common limitations emerge:

- Gender-neutral or universalist language erases the specific vulnerabilities of migrant and racialized women.
- Lack of mandatory intersectional indicators prevents effective monitoring of how policies affect different groups.
- Variable national implementation leads to uneven access to rights, disproportionately affecting women in low-protection Member States.
- Soft law dependency (EPSR, Gender Equality Strategy) limits enforceability.
- Invisibility of informality & undeclared work, where many migrant women are located.

These findings demonstrate that although EU policies increasingly address precarious work, they fail to integrate the intersectional framework necessary to redress compound inequalities.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Precarious employment constitutes an increasingly visible structural problem within the European Union, disproportionately affecting categories already marked by social and economic vulnerability. Although European policies over the past decades have sought to modernize labor relations and promote the principle of equal opportunities, the reality demonstrates that inequalities not only persist but manifest with greater intensity in certain segments of the population. In this context, an intersectional perspective becomes essential for understanding the complexity of precarious labor and for formulating public policies that effectively respond to the actual needs of those affected.

Women from ethnic minority backgrounds, migrant women, persons with disabilities, single mothers, and young women with low levels of education experience a form of precarity that is not only economic but also institutional and social. These groups are overrepresented in sectors characterized by contractual instability, low remuneration, and lack of social protection, such as informal care, cleaning, tourism, and platform-based delivery services. The cumulative impact of these vulnerabilities results in systematic exclusion from the regulated labor market and reduced visibility within social protection policies.

The European Union's strategic documents—such as the Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions, the Directive 2022/2041, the Gender Equality Strategy, and the European Pillar of Social Rights—provide an important framework for strengthening workers' rights. Nevertheless, the absence of clear implementation mechanisms and the lack of a coherent intersectional approach significantly limit the impact of these instruments. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these inequalities, exposing the fragility of social protection for workers and underscoring the critical relevance of "invisible" labor, particularly that performed by women.

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