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WHAT GENDER MAINSTREAMING HAS TO OFFER RESEARCH

THE BENEFITS AND PITFALLS OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN RESEARCH

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Introduction

What Gender Mainstreaming Has to Offer Research: The Benefits and Pitfalls of Gender Mainstreaming in Research

Laura GRÜNBERG

From the classic binary definition of gender to the much more nuanced ones which approach gender as embodied, as a performance, a structure, a multidimensional process, a spectrum, concepts and theories in the area of Gender Studies/Feminist Studies have evolved rapidly and consistently in the last decades.

Gender is seen today as a key analytical category of analysis, not only a descriptive and explanatory variable in social and political science research. Gender mainstreaming research, integrating gender sensitivity and gender awareness within interdisciplinary research, paying attention to gender aspects in all stages of research is considered by many a key component of research excellence. Nevertheless, in the current conservative global and local environments, more than ever, strengthening and improve the quality and visibility of the research in the area of Gender Studies/Feminist Studies should be an academic responsibility.

Starting from the premise that gendering research is necessary condition in order to better grasp the dynamics of the social worlds we live in, we provided for this issue of *AnaLize Journal* an academic open space mainly for young academics to propose gender mainstreamed articles based on their research interests coming from various fields, and to critically reflect on the benefits and pitfalls resulting in the process of gender mainstreaming the research projects.

We selected articles that investigate diverse gendered aspects using diverse epistemological and methodological perspectives: how gender balanced governance affects social welfare, health, equity and the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming policies in specific countries (Marijke Russo); the universe of subjective meanings that women with jobs attribute to remote work during the pandemic (Raluca-Mihaela Molea); the multilayered phenomenon of obstetric violence, such a marginalized subject in many countries (Cătălina Nicoleta Anghel); the deliberate/strategic performance to avoid domestic responsibilities within heterosexual relationships (David-Theodor Fejér) and also an essay on the concept of citizenship- reflecting on how being a woman intersects with structures of power, identity, and participation in public life (Andrada-Cristiana Bercioiu).

We hope this issue, giving voice to the young academics, will bring some valid arguments for the benefits of gendering research.

A Phenomenological Analysis of the Subjective Experience of Women Working from Home During the Pandemic

Raluca-Mihaela MOLEA

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Abstract

This study focuses on the phenomenon of working from home during the pandemic, highlighting the universe of subjective meanings that women with jobs attribute to remote work through a qualitative methodological approach. Based on a phenomenological paradigm, the results highlight that family-work conflict blurred the formal boundaries between the different spheres of work and personal life during the pandemic. The phenomenon of family-work conflict manifests as an experience of time pressure and role conflict, being subjectively experienced as an assumed motherhood, driven by the internalisation of care, responsibility, and guilt as normative standards. The study consists of 10 interviews conducted in April-May 2021 in Bucharest, Romania, with women active in the labour market who have worked from home during the pandemic. The study affirms the need for a more nuanced understanding of how gender norms and societal expectations intersect with individual experiences, particularly in work and family life. Thus, the study emphasizes the need to create more equitable and inclusive workplaces that support individuals in balancing their career and family responsibilities without compromising their personal and professional growth.

Keywords: family-work conflict, subjective experience of working from home, role conflict, phenomenological approach, gender roles

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant changes at both societal and individual levels. Macro-social changes and challenges have consisted of the health crisis felt across all countries and the economic crisis characterised by waves of closures of various small and medium-sized enterprises or mass layoffs in different sectors of activity. Among the consequences of the pandemic felt at the micro-social level were the restrictive isolation measures, which created a sense of loneliness, helplessness, or uncertainty among individuals. Additionally, at the family level, changes occurred due to the transition to remote work, where professional life activities increasingly merge with household chores and childcare responsibilities.

Recent research developed right after the pandemic, analysing the changes caused at the family level, has revealed that both partners experienced significant pressure in the early

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months of the pandemic due to the high number of tasks arising from family life. (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Collins et al., 2021; Craig & Churchill, 2021). Especially women have been more affected as the burden of domestic work fell more on their shoulders. Women's working hours decreased while the time spent on household chores and childcare increased during the pandemic, unlike that of fathers. Moreover, when working, women were more interrupted by children, experiencing a more fragmented work time as their attention was distracted by the needs of the children (Collins et al. 2021; Sullivan and Gershuny 2018; Sevilla et al. 2020). Additionally, studies reveal that women felt overwhelmed, disappointed, sad, and unsatisfied with the balance between work and family during that period (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Craig, 2020).

Therefore, this study complements previous research and aims to phenomenologically analyse what it means to be a woman working from home. Specifically, the study aims to answer research questions such as: (1) What are the ways in which women make sense of working from home? (2) How does the phenomenon of the intertwining of professional and family life appear relevant in defining the subjective experience of working from home? (3) How are gender inequalities created and recreated through remote work, and what subtle forms of inequality manifest in the practice of working from home? To achieve this, the research used semi-structured interviews as a technique to delve into the universe of meanings shaped by the interviewed women, thus providing a subjective perspective on working from home from the standpoint of women's lived experience.

BACKGROUND

Establishing borders: A phenomenological approach

Borders are demarcation lines between domains, representing the point where specific behaviours for a certain domain begin and end. The literature considers these borders to have three main forms: physical, temporal, and psychological. The physical border refers to the walls of the workplace or the walls of the house, defining where specific behaviours occur. Temporal borders, such as established work hours, divide when work is performed and when family responsibilities can be fulfilled. Psychological borders are rules created by individuals that dictate when thinking patterns, behaviours, and emotions are appropriate for one domain but not for the other (Clark, 2000).

Considering these specifications, the "border theory" (Clark, 2000) has developed, explaining how individuals organise and negotiate the sphere of work and family and the borders between them to achieve balance. The central idea of this theory is that work and family constitute different domains or spheres that influence each other. Considering their contrasting cultural nature, work and home can be likened to two countries with differences in linguistics, acceptable behaviours, and task fulfilment. For some individuals, the transition is easy, such as between two adjacent countries with the same language, currency, and customs. Still, the contrast between work and family is much greater for others, requiring a more complex transition. People cross these borders, transitioning between the two spaces daily, often

adjusting their attention, goals, and interpersonal style to better fit each domain's unique demands (Clark, 2000).

Although various aspects of work and household are difficult to alternate, individuals can, to some extent, shape their work and household domains, building borders and bridges between them to create the desired balance (Clark, 2000). Thus, work-family balance is defined as "the extent to which an individual is engaged in – and equally satisfied with – his or her work role and family role" (Kalliath & Brough, 2008, p. 325). Another definition argues that work-family balance represents the absence of conflict or interference between work and family roles (Frone, 2003). Furthermore, work-family conflict represents a form of role conflict in which the pressures of work and family roles are mutually incompatible in some respects, meaning that the responsibilities of the family role hinder participation in the work role (Frone, 2003).

Family life and professional life in a subjective experience

The discussion regarding the relationship between work and non-work involves the importance of time allocation (Thompson & Bunderson, 2001). Time allocation is crucial in balancing various roles and commitments. In the following part, a subjective way to conceptualise the family-work conflict (ibid.) by using the metaphor of time as a "container of meanings" will be detailed.

On one hand, this metaphor imposes a fixed nature of temporal resources. On the other hand, the container metaphor allows us to address the nature of the activities that occupy our time, including their significance. The image of the balance captures the finite nature of time allocation, suggesting that time spent in one domain comes at the expense of other domains. Also, the image of the container emphasises the finite nature of time through its external limits, considering that the sides of the container cannot expand. Therefore, we are all given a fixed number of hours per day. However, the containers are distinguished by their contents, not their loading capacity. Thus, we can choose to cram a multitude of diverse things into a container or leave it empty; we can also fill the allocated hours with a series of small activities or a single large activity, or practically with nothing. The decision about what content we put in the container leads us to a discussion about significance. In an ideal world, the activities that occupy our time entail deeply rooted values and reflect our identity. The time container can thus encompass meanings that affirm identity or put it into discrepancy. The individual experiences and outcomes associated with these two different types of time content are likely different, even if the size of the containers (i.e., the time spent on an activity) is the same (Thompson & Bunderson, 2001).

The container metaphor doesn't divide time into separate chunks for different aspects of life that compete against each other. Instead of imagining work time on one side of a scale and non-work time on the other, the container image suggests that different aspects of time can coexist and interact with each other in the same space (Thompson & Bunderson, 2001).

(Re)structuring family-career boundaries during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has forced thousands of individuals to change their workspace, work from home, or even temporarily or permanently lose their jobs. This has blurred the temporal and spatial boundaries between paid work, household work, and childcare (Sevilla et al., 2020; Craig, 2020). "This dramatic change has opened up the possibility that long-standing patterns in work, family, and gender relationships, central concerns of sociology, will be tested and disrupted during the pandemic" (Craig, 2020, p. 1). Thus, these norms have gradually shifted as women began to enter the workforce, but even so, the share of domestic work for men has not increased significantly, as some studies have found over time (Craig, 2020). Therefore, in the pandemic, individuals following gender conventions regarding task distribution may conclude that the additional work that has emerged in the household and childcare should fall back on women. Even couples deviating from these gendered divisions of domestic work often rely on hegemonic gender conventions in uncertain situations or when equality is difficult to achieve (Carlson et al., 2022). Therefore, the anomic and difficult conditions of the pandemic may encourage partners of different sexes to adhere to gender norms in uncertain times (Carlson et al., 2022).

Regardless of the doubling of households where both partners work in recent decades, women still bear the burden of domestic work and childcare in developed countries (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir 2021). Furthermore, studies conducted in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Italy, and the United States indicate that parents were under significant time pressure in the early months of the pandemic, and mothers spent less time in paid work because they had more household responsibilities compared to fathers (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021).

Studies support the idea that toddlers tend to seek help and attention from their mothers, thus interrupting their activities, and their time is experienced as fragmented (Collins et al., 2021; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018). Other studies have found that men have greater control over their non-paid work time than women, with women feeling much more rushed and compelled to perform specific household tasks (Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018; Craig & Brown, 2017). Some women have admitted feeling nervous, disappointed, and sad because of this situation (Craig, 2020).

Traditional gender roles have historically depicted men as the breadwinners and women as caretakers of the household and children. These roles have established and challenged social norms regarding gender relationships and family dynamics (Ferree, 2010). In this context, men who have worked from home have had the opportunity to observe the invisible work regarding domestic tasks and childcare, considering that they can no longer easily ignore these responsibilities, especially childcare responsibilities when schools have been cancelled. The workspace, otherwise, serves as the children's play and learning space (Collins et al., 2021). Thus, this can be beneficial, leading to the hypothesis that the pandemic could equalise gender roles regarding domestic and childcare tasks (Collins et al., 2021; Craig, 2020).

The peak of the pandemic in the United States led to an increase in gender disparities in working time, where mothers reduced their working time by up to 5 times compared to fathers. Consequently, gender disparities in working hours increased by 20-50% (Collins et al., 2021). The study conducted by Collins et al. (2021) investigated how partners adjust their working time during the pandemic to cope with other domestic and childcare tasks, testing the hypothesis that the pandemic will lead to an equality of gender roles in domestic work. They found that mothers with children aged between 1-5 years reduced their working hours by 1.8 hours, while mothers with older children had the smallest reduced working hours. Also, women reduced their work hours more to spend time with their children than fathers. Therefore, Collins

et al. (2021) found that the pandemic increased gender inequality, as women had to take on childcare duties and reduce their working hours more than fathers in order to be able to take care of family tasks, which refutes the hypothesis made by other researchers.

Similar to what Collins et al. (2021) found, Sevilla et al. (2020) also identified that women spent less time in paid work and more time in domestic work compared to fathers. Also, as Collins et al. (2021) and Sullivan and Gershuny (2018) argue, the time women spent in paid work was interrupted more by other responsibilities in the family (Sevilla et al., 2020). Mothers work 2 hours less in paid work but take care of the house and children 2 hours more than fathers. Women also combine paid work with childcare activities for 47% of their working time, compared to men who do so for only 30% of their working time (ibid).

Subjective experiences of women working from home

A study (Craig, 2020) analysed a series of open-ended survey responses received in which women said that they felt as if they had returned to an earlier era, such as the 1950s period when women's work was solely domestic and childcare, others mentioned feeling like their primary responsibility was household chores, but now they were also expected to continue their paid work. Some respondents mentioned that when it came to working from home, domestic resources were unevenly distributed. Men often had the privilege of having their own workspace, while women had to juggle working and caring for children simultaneously (Craig 2020).

Another study (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021) took a different methodological approach, conducting real-time diaries that collected data over a period of two weeks during the peak of the pandemic in Iceland from a total of 37 women (mothers). The women described intense emotional labour, as it was their duty to provide comfort to other family members. They also had to handle domestic tasks, which caused periods of stress and frustration, saying that they felt tense and stressed, using words such as overwhelmed, tired, and nervous. For example, one mother who works from home reported that she felt she had no energy for anything other than the bare necessities, that her children wore pyjamas all day, and that this period made her feel anxious and drained of energy. Another woman says that she has experienced a small panic attack thinking about all the tasks she has to juggle, saying, like the first one, that no one has the energy to do various things, such as even putting the children to bed. She also said that she feels guilty because she doesn't get everything done. Also, women in normal situations are more likely to experience guilt in terms of work-family balance, feeling this guilt because they are not the best in various situations, such as spending time with children, despite being always on the run (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021). Moreover, women multitask more than men, thus experiencing greater time pressure and burnout from all the tasks. At the end of the study, when some restrictions on the Covid-19 pandemic were lifted, women said they only now realized how constrained they were because they had to remove the boundaries between work and family life. Other mothers also described the same in relation to work-life boundaries, where these experiences indicate that working from home can be difficult for parents, particularly for mothers, since their working time is interrupted by other household duties. From this, it can be inferred that women's time is more fragmented, as they are easily interrupted by other household or family-related chores (Collins et al., 2021; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018). Also, the idea that the pandemic has brought back the 1950s period regarding the distribution of gender roles was also reflected in the descriptions of some of the participants in the study of Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir (2021).

Furthermore, a trend was identified in the women's descriptions, namely that many of them were surprised by how unequal the distribution of work in the family during the pandemic

was and how much time and energy they devoted to housework and family care. This lived experience of women sustains the experience of gendered time (Bryson & Deery, 2010). This conceptualisation emphasizes the social differences between women's time as a cyclical, qualitative, relational, natural time, predominantly associated with private life and caregiving, and men's time as a linear, quantitative, commodified, clock-measured time, associated with the capitalist workplace (Bryson & Deery, 2010).

Even so, the pre-pandemic situation is still characterized by the presence of subjective time pressure, multitasking, fragmented time, and a large amount of domestic tasks that burden women more than men (Mattingly & Blanchi, 2003; Craig & Brown, 2017; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018). Time pressures, which can be both objective, in the sense of a heavy workload, and subjective, with reference to feeling on the run and rushed can arise both from the public life (the workplace) and the private sphere of one's own home (Kleiner, 2014). Time is both an individual and a family resource and how each family member spends their time has implications for how other family members spend their time (Craig & Brown, 2017). Women, on average, have more contaminated leisure time and less 'pure leisure time', doing more unpaid, multitasking work than fathers (ibid.). Women and men experience the demands coming from work and family differently, so there is a greater likelihood of gender differences in this situation. This means that women are more involved in housework and childcare and fathers spend more time on paid work. Moreover, gendered constructions of family roles not only lead men and women to use their time differently but also to subjectively experience family time as gendered (Craig & Brown, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study sought to understand how the family-work conflict was shaped and experienced during the pandemic from the perspective of women. The research examined various aspects of women's social lives during the crisis that has affected the economy, health, and society. The study aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) How do women make sense of working from home? (2) How does the phenomenon of the intertwining of professional and family life appear relevant in defining the subjective experience of working from home? (3) How are gender inequalities created and recreated through remote work, and what subtle forms of inequality manifest in working from home?

The study was conducted in a qualitative manner to emphasise women's subjective experience. This research explores how women interpret and experience this phenomenon, aiming to identify subtle gender inequalities that result from the conflict between work and family. As a descriptive research, this study examined women's experiences during the pandemic. It involved an in-depth analysis of the subject to produce accurate and consistent results. The study sought to understand this phenomenon better and provide relevant descriptions using appropriate techniques. Subsequently, this study's approach is phenomenological. This approach implies "searching for the meaning and essence of the experience" (Mapp, 2008, p. 1), which is obtained through the respondents' descriptions of their experiences during the interviews (Mapp, 2008). Thus, the object of research in the phenomenological approach is the lived experience of a phenomenon (Larsson & Holmström, 2007).

The research instrument is the semi-structured interview. Through these interviews, the study expected to discover women's lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the family-work conflict. The semi-structured interview offers the possibility of

flexibility in the data collection process, thus allowing questions to be introduced or removed as the interview unfolds. I have also opted for the interview technique because I aimed through this research to make an intrusion into the universe of lived experience in order to gain a deeper and more complex understanding of how women experienced the period under analysis, namely the pandemic period that caused changes in the way the imbalance between work and family is subjectively experienced.

The collected interviews were conducted online via Zoom, over the phone, and face-to-face. Thus, 6 interviews were conducted online, 2 were done over the phone, and another 2 were conducted face-to-face, totalling 10 interviews. The interviews were conducted in April-May 2021 in Bucharest, Romania. The sample for analysis consists of women active in the labour market who have worked from home during the pandemic. Snowball sampling was used to identify the respondents. They are mothers of children between 2-10 years old and have agreed to participate in the study by providing information about how they experienced the conflict between work and family and how it influenced them. Also, the work domains of these women include education, marketing, healthcare, law and public relations.

RESULTS

The respondents express a series of subjective perceptions that can be observed from the responses provided. The initial thoughts that arise in the mind of a woman working from home revolve around concern about how she could manage her time to balance both work and family life successfully:

> *"She might feel pulled in two directions because she has to divide herself between work at home and everything that involves household chores and children while also performing well at work. She might worry that she can't do both, thinking: How can I divide my time and energy, and how well will I mentally cope?"*

> "*How will I manage to work... to complete tasks for the office or those related to my professional life at home? What will I do with the children during all this time while I'm working from home? When will I be able to finish so I can spend time with my children? At what time can I talk to my husband today?"*

> *"I think she would consider how to balance work and home, and if she has children, this would also involve school closures. I believe she would worry about how this would work with working from home, having the children around her and if she had someone to help her."*

> *"Chaos."*

> *"Frustration, concern, sadness."*

> *"Probably how she could divide her time, working from home, between work tasks and family, children especially and household chores. "*

Additionally, women's thoughts are directed towards both work and children, as well as household chores, indicating that the families they come from adhere to a traditional model in terms of the division of household tasks and childcare responsibilities, where women

predominantly undertake these tasks. A significant concern for women arises from the uncertainty of how they will manage working from home while simultaneously needing to supervise and care for their children, a task that falls mainly on them, especially in situations where partners are not at home or are also working from home, with a tendency for children to gravitate towards mothers:

"I think the child prioritises relationships very strongly, so when the mother is at home, they tend to go to the mother first, so the mother is the one who is much more interrupted than the father."

"I refer to my own experience where my children prefer me for activities over my husband."

This phenomenon has been noted in previous studies (Collins et al., 2021; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2018) that identified that when children are young, they tend to initially seek help or attention from their mothers, interrupting their activities and causing them to perceive work time as more fragmented. From women's perspective, what determines these thoughts is the overlap between their professional and family lives, which leads to role conflicts in a context where it becomes difficult to balance the responsibilities from work with those from the family domain.

Thus, the pandemic threatens the boundary between work and family, leading to the closure of schools and kindergartens. Now, parents must take on the responsibilities of schools and kindergartens while working, which puts pressure on them, especially women. According to the respondents, being a mother while holding a job creates challenges for women as they struggle to balance their work and home responsibilities. This can lead to role conflict, where they feel torn between behaving as a mother and homemaker at the office and acting as an employee at home. Such a dynamic can cause difficulties for women in completing all their tasks effectively:

"Well, it's about household chores. If I am also working and must take care of cooking, cleaning, and everything else, this question arises: How much energy will I have, how much time will I have to do both, and will I still have time for myself?"

"I think it's exactly about balancing plans. I have two young children, and when both of them were at home most of the time, there was a very strong pressure on me to divide my time very well between work and family life."

"The idea that I have to fulfil both work obligations and household chores, children."

Based on the interviews, it can be observed that most women identified more with the role of a mother than an employee during the daytime. They prioritised caring for their children, who were often very young, and the level of dependency on the mother was relatively high. Thus, this confirms what the mentioned studies have identified, namely that mothers sacrificed their working time to take care of children and household tasks (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Craig & Brown, 2017; Sevilla et al., 2020).

The fragmentation of daily routines

When the actual working hours ended and women became wives and mothers, the opposite happened; they became employees who worked at night to make up for the time during the day

when they had to give up their status as employees to become mothers. In terms of describing how remote work looked during that period, women generally said that the work period was intertwined with the period during which they had to take care of their children:

> *"With much interference... I was teaching with the doors closed; the kids were crying; it was very hard. It was very complicated to explain to a 3-year-old, 'Mommy needs to spend 2 hours in an office teaching, and you can't come in.' Theoretically, he understood, but there was an immediate need, and he would burst in during the class. […] was extremely hard, especially because this 8-hour work interval wasn't just 8 hours of work, not even consecutive, with a little break; they were very fragmented, working in pieces, always adapted to the kids' schedule."*

> *"I'm lucky to have children who are quite understanding; I'm okay because even if I'm interrupted, I usually get back into the task quite easily. My problem was that, with interruptions like making them food and attending to them, my work schedule was extended into the night. When the children went to bed, I still had some work to finish because I couldn't fit it all in.*

> *"In the first part of the day, being with the little one for kindergarten and speech therapy, I really adjusted my activities to his schedule. And after finishing activities with him, only then could I resume my work, and I stayed up later in the evening."*

> *"I worked at the Red Cross, and somehow I was on the front line, but from home and the workload was extremely heavy. The actual work would start at 6 am and finish at 12 midnight with very short breaks. My husband worked, also being on the front line, and then I was alone with the baby and working at the same time. For me, it was extremely stressful, exhausting, frustrating".*

Women who worked from home overlapped their work schedule with childcare duties, meaning they adjusted their work hours according to their children's schedules. This led to women working in the evening or overtime, as they may not be able to complete all their work during the day while also caring for their children. Women also reported that they had many interruptions in their working hours due to childcare duties, which resulted in women not being able to finish all their work that day and needing to continue working in the evening after the children went to bed. Thus, working from home during the pandemic meant that women experienced a fragmented, prolonged evening work schedule, where some women felt stressed, tired and frustrated because they had to balance their work and childcare tasks.

Childcare duties also caused many interruptions, resulting in fragmented working time. As a result, the experience of working from home is closely tied to the family context, with children playing a major role in the working routine. Women interviewed declared that they faced interference between their work and family life. Specifically, respondents reported the occurrence of situations where work tasks interfere with their family life and vice versa. This interference is predominantly felt due to the shared space and time in which both activities are carried out. The co-existence of work and family in the same space and time leads to the previous overlap, which can have negative implications for women, such as increased stress and decreased productivity:

"Yes, family life did intervene. I couldn't work on weekends because I had children to take care of, so it was impossible. But there were indeed Saturday evenings when I was working after putting the children to bed."

"Yes, there were moments when the children might cry; maybe they were sleepy, or grandma couldn't put them to bed. You had to stop your work, and often, you might have had meetings that needed to be postponed or rescheduled because sometimes the little one throws a fit, and you can't just put it 'on hold,' the need of a small child is paramount."

"Yes, there was interference between work and family because I had to do everything in the same space and simultaneously. There were moments when I was working, and the children were at home, and I had to detach myself a bit […] I couldn't detach completely because they were toddlers; I still had to keep an ear out for them to make sure nothing went wrong."

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting stay-at-home orders have blurred the lines between work and family life. The usual boundaries between these two aspects of life have been erased, forcing women to juggle household chores, childcare, and work tasks simultaneously. This has resulted in an overwhelming burden on women, who must complete these additional tasks on top of their regular work responsibilities.

Care, responsibility and guilt as normative standards

Two tendencies were observed during the interviews regarding how the women coped with housework and childcare. For some of the women interviewed, sharing these tasks with their husbands was possible. At the same time, this was not possible for others because the amount of work for the job was too much and housework and children were put on the secondary plan, making these women feel guilty regarding their family and children. From the structure of the interviews, care, responsibility and guilt emerge as normative standards:

"I felt overwhelmed at one point because I didn't have any time to cook, for example. I mean, I started to feel guilty because I'd put some chores on the second plan."

"We tried to share the domestic chores as much as we could [...]. Regarding childcare, the options were either one parent taking one child and the other parent taking the other child or one parent looking after both children. My husband would cook, or sometimes I would ask him to sit and play with the kids while I cooked."

"The cleaning lady couldn't come, so we did more cleaning, but we shared the cleaning tasks. I also prepared food when needed… Well, my husband also makes cookies, so he used to make cookies, and I used to cook food."

"When the kids were at home, and the schools were closed, it was much more difficult to get work done and take care of the house and the children. They would constantly ask me to play with them and engage in various activities. However, when they are in kindergarten, things are a bit easier."

"I didn't do very well as a mom. I mostly fed my child sandwiches and occasionally managed to make a soup or healthy meal. I left my child alone a lot with the phone, the TV, and similar things. I couldn't cope and, in a way, I sacrificed my child..."

For example, care regarding children is maintained by organizing a schedule in which parents take turns supervising the children so that they can also take care of tasks at work. In other situations, care is more difficult to maintain when only the mother is responsible for the children because the father is not at home. In some cases, the responsibility for household chores may have been shared between the partners, while in others it fell to the women's shoulders who either had difficulty or failed to take care of them, leading to feelings of guilt, especially in the case of the woman who confesses that work caused her to neglect her child and be unable to look after him or her properly. As another study describes, women in normal circumstances are more likely to feel guilty about work-family balance. This guilt arises from feeling inadequate in various situations, such as not spending enough time with their children, despite always being busy (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021).

In this instance, the significance of schools and kindergartens in helping parents manage their work schedules when their children are away is highlighted. This is in comparison to when children stay at home and parents, especially mothers, have to juggle both work and childcare, which can be demanding and make it difficult for them to work.

The subjective feeling of uncertainty and emotional overwhelm

Regarding how the women felt in relation to housework and childcare chores, they declared that they felt overwhelmed, which means that there was a large number of tasks that came from this area of family life that burdened the women both physically and mentally:

"I had moments when I felt extremely overwhelmed with everything that was coming at me [...] They were screaming; they were crying; you couldn't get them to sleep, it was difficult to get them both to sleep at the same time. Most of the time in the evenings, even though I planned to work, I often couldn't do it, I often fell asleep with them in bed."

As can be seen from the previous responses, it was the childcare tasks that made one of the women interviewed feel overwhelmed, as she had two young children who required extra attention due to their young age and the dependency they had on their parents. Women had to do a lot of emotional labour, which made them feel overwhelmed, tired and frustrated because they had to provide comfort and comfort to their families all the time (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021).

The heavy assumption of motherhood is also evident in the situation, as women working from home often find it difficult to detach themselves entirely from their role as mothers, as in the following excerpt: "I couldn't detach completely because they were toddlers; I still had to keep an ear out for them, to make sure nothing went wrong". This invasion of psychological boundaries makes it challenging for women to navigate the different roles they play throughout the day, leading to a constant role conflict between being a mother and being an employee.

In other cases, women reported that they found it difficult to cope because they were left alone with the children and household chores because the husband was away at work or had a lot of work to do, but was also at home. Even though the women also worked, the household chores implicitly fell to them, as they were the only ones who could take care of

them, which meant that they had to take care of double the number of tasks, alone, which explains the feeling of overwhelm and the difficulties they experienced:

"There were times when it was really hard for me, because my husband works a lot, from morning till night, which meant that everything that involved the household chores fell on my shoulders, and it wasn't easy."

Women keenly feel the experience of overlapping professional and family life during the pandemic period. The fact that they were required to fulfil their roles as employees and parents within the same context made accomplishing these tasks difficult due to the overlap of the two domains. This entire situation has caused women to feel worried and fearful and to question whether they will indeed be able to cope with this new challenge. From a phenomenological perspective, their time container has been overloaded with new activities that need to be carried out, jeopardising the maintenance of balance between the professional and family domains. Even though the tasks have doubled, the time available to execute them remains the same. Women have reported that household tasks were distributed, but they still ended up doing more work due to their role as the primary caregiver and homemaker:

"I shared some tasks, but overall, I ended up with more, so to speak. I'm aware that I had more, but there was also an implicit part, me being at home, he couldn't do them."

"Well, the chores are divided very simply with my husband who is always away from home, so most of them fall on me. He takes care of very few purchases that are not easy for me online or around the house, and that's all, the rest is on me because I'm at home."

"I've taken on more than I had before."

Therefore, gender inequalities are created and recreated through the practice of household work in the pandemic context, giving rise to subtle forms of inequalities that predominantly affect women in terms of household chores. Another study (Carlson et al., 2022) has identified that in the pandemic context, individuals tended to believe that the new household chores that arise should fall on women because of specific gender conventions whereby women carry out household tasks.

The construction of the gendered self in defining the lived world

Women identify themselves through the multitude of statuses they possess, including being a wife, a mother, an employee, and so on:

"More of a homemaker than someone with a job."

"Like a woman who managed. Women who stay at home know how much they have to do and are pulled in all directions, and it's hard, and for that reason, I call them heroines, and that's my opinion about women who work from home."

"Multilaterally developed. I discovered in myself some qualities I had no idea about. So practically, you're an employee, you're a mother and a wife, you also do shopping, you cook."

"You know that picture of the woman with many hands who does everything, that's me. The one who, at the same time, thinks, organises, talks, and does. The octopus mom."

Additionally, some women identify more with the status of a homemaker than an employee, indicating that they have dedicated more of their time to household chores than to work-related tasks. Previous studies have noted this, which found that women felt more like homemakers, similar to the conditions of the 1950s, because they were the ones primarily responsible for household chores while their husbands were at work (Craig, 2020).

Furthermore, other respondents describe themselves as "multilaterally developed" because they have so many tasks to fulfil. Women describe themselves through the lens of the multiple activities they undertook while working from home. The workplace and the roles of mother, wife, and homemaker determine how women describe themselves.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results of the study reveal that the experience of being a woman working from home entails a role conflict due to the overlap of the employee status with the role of mother, where women are challenged to manage both work tasks and household and childcare duties. Additionally, during that period, women have felt more like mothers than employees, prioritising their dependent toddlers. These findings confirm what previous studies have indicated, namely that mothers have sacrificed their work time to take care of children and household chores (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021; Craig & Churchill, 2021; Sevilla et al., 2020).

Therefore, women make sense of working from home by intertwining the two spheres of professional and family life, where there are numerous interruptions due to children's needs and household chores. Regarding the distribution of household chores between spouses, women have reported that there was an attempt to distribute tasks, but ultimately, they ended up doing more work, as they were the ones staying at home. Consequently, gender inequalities are created and reinforced through the practice of working from home in the pandemic context, giving rise to subtle forms of inequalities that prevail, especially in household tasks, which largely remain the responsibility of women. As identified by previous studies (Carlson et al., 2022) in the pandemic context, individuals may tend to believe that newly arising household chores fall to women because they follow gender-specific conventions that household chores are performed by women. Even in the case of couples who discard these gendered divisions of domestic work, they often still rely on hegemonic gendered conventions in times of uncertainty or when equality is hard to achieve (Carlson et al., 2022).

From the point of view of the construction of the gendered self, women described themselves through the lens of the multiple activities they undertook while working from home. Both work and being a mother, as well as being a wife and housewife lead women to use them in their self-descriptions. Therefore, women identify themselves by the multitude of statuses they possess, namely that of being a wife and a mother, an employee, etc.

The relevance of this study lies in its ability to offer a portrait of women working from home during the pandemic in a context where few qualitative studies have explored this subject, as most research has focused on quantitative analysis. Additionally, this study is relevant because it confirms previous studies regarding working from home during the pandemic, but from a qualitative perspective.

Therefore, during crises like economic downturns or health emergencies such as COVID-19, women's unpaid work intensifies, including caregiving, household chores, and

emotional support. To address this, policies should recognise and value unpaid caregiving work through social benefits and financial support, such as caregiving allowances, tax credits, and pension credits for caregiving periods. Moreover, public awareness campaigns can help shift societal perceptions to appreciate these roles. Also, creating supportive work environments with flexible work arrangements, remote work options, and employer-supported childcare services is crucial. Encouraging employers to offer on-site childcare or subsidies can help working parents. Gender-equitable policies, such as substantial paternity leave and programs promoting shared caregiving responsibilities, can encourage a more balanced division of tasks at home. Also, community and government support are essential, including increased funding for affordable and accessible childcare services, flexible options, and mental health resources for caregivers. Thus, collaboration among government agencies, employers, civil society organisations, and families is crucial for effective policymaking. Public-private partnerships can support families by leveraging resources and expertise.

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Controversies in Defining and Recognizing Obstetric Violence in Europe and Romania

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Abstract

Obstetric violence remains an insufficiently documented and researched issue on the European continent (especially in Romania), despite its growing visibility and extensive documentation in Latin America, particularly in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Panama, Venezuela, Paraguay, Suriname, and Uruguay. In Romania, the concept is largely unknown to the general public and insufficiently explored in academic research. To date, only one study, conducted by the Association of Independent Midwives in 2024, has examined obstetric violence in Romania, collecting through an opinion poll the experiences of women who gave birth in Romanian hospitals between 2018 and 2023. Recently, several Romanian organizations have initiated projects aimed at raising awareness and addressing the effects of gender base violence(including abortion, obstetric violence, femicide). Feminist organizations have staged protests in response to cases of obstetric violence that have caused public outrage. The protests have highlighted systemic deficiencies in the healthcare system. In Europe, only a few regions, such as Catalonia, Portugal and Valencia, have adopted legislation that explicitly addresses obstetric violence, while others, including Spain as a whole, refer to it only indirectly in their legal frameworks. There have also been countries that have attempted to legislate against obstetric violence, including Croatia, France, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg. The purpose of this article is to examine how obstetric violence is addressed in Romania, compared to other European Union member states. Using content analysis as the main research method, this article analyzes existing legislation, reports, and various opinions on obstetric violence (opinions of specialists in the health, legal, and academic fields). A major limitation of this research was the lack of Romanian resources related to this topic. This limitation is caused by the general neglect of the subject in national discourse. By tracing the evolution of the concept of obstetric violence in the European Union and examining existing sources in Romania, this article aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion about forms of gender-based institutional violence in healthcare and to promote awareness of obstetric violence as a public health and human rights issue.

Keywords: obstetric violence, reproductive rights, informed consent, gender-based violence

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Understanding the Concept: Definitions, Professional Views, and Critiques

From a terminological point of view, the term obstetric violence is used in Latin America, in the academic field and in feminist research. A synthesized definition of obstetric violence can be found in the article "A concept analysis of obstetric violence in the United States of America" by Lorraine Garcia (2020). According to this definition: *"Obstetric violence is abuse or mistreatment by a health care provider of a female who is engaged in fertility treatment, preconception care, pregnant, birthing, or postpartum; or the performance of any invasive or surgical procedure during the full span of the childbearing continuum without informed consent, that is coerced, or in violation of refusal. It is a sex-specific form of violence against women (VAW) that is a violation of human rights"* (Garcia, 2020).

As for the WHO, it intentionally avoids using this term. The WHO prefers to use the phrase "disrespect and abuse during childbirth" instead of obstetric violence. This means that the WHO does not recognize inappropriate treatment of women as an explicit form of violence. The WHO's choice is not coincidental. Among medical professionals, there is a reluctance regarding the use of the term "obstetrical violence." The reluctance of medical staff is caused because they believe the term "obstetric violence" can lead to violence against obstetricians.

According to a 2014 document, WHO defined the expression of "disrespect and abuse during childbirth" as: "Reports of disrespectful and abusive treatment during childbirth in child care centers have included physical treatment and physical abuse, profound humiliation and verbal abuse, coercion or unconventional medical procedures (including sterilization), lack of privacy, failure to obtain full informed consent, refusal to administer pain medication, rough treatment gross violations of privacy, refusal of admission to health care facilities, neglect of women during childbirth to suffer life-threatening and preventable complications, and detention of women and their newborns in facilities after birth due to inability to pay" (WHO, 2014).

According to the article written by Sylvie Lévesque and Audrey Ferron-Parayre (2021), the WHO definition of forms of abuse of women during childbirth is flawed in two ways. First, the definition sees violence as a public health problem: "a phenomenon that has harmful effects on the health of populations that are exposed to it" (Lévesque & Ferron-Parayre, p. 1012). Forms of violence could be viewed as other activities that produce harmful effects on health such as malnutrition, alcohol consumption, tobacco use, etc. Secondly, the WHO definition does not prioritize violence that occurs in the medical system, as a result the definition could be considered outdated in the current conception of forms of violence in various contexts. The authors believe that the WHO definition was never intended to be applied in the context where the abuses were carried out by medical professionals. One of the authors faced reluctance from medical professionals when she presented a study about obstetric violence at a medical conference in Dublin.

The effects of obstetric violence can be divided into two categories: physical effects and psychological effects. Physical effects may include breastfeeding problems, episiotomy, incontinence (urinary and fecal), and unnecessary cesarean sections. The breastfeeding process can be affected by how labor went. In the case of a cesarean section, the patient experiences pain, and the breastfeeding process is unpleasant. If the patient suffers from post-traumatic stress, breastfeeding is impossible or even difficult. Psychological effects may include

postpartum depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety. Worldwide, 15% of women suffer from postpartum depression. In the case of postpartum depression, the most terrible complications are suicide and infanticide. Post-traumatic stress syndrome is caused by poor care of the patient during childbirth. The effects of this syndrome are "impaired breastfeeding and rejection of the newborn by the mother" (Valiente et al., p. 75).

When it comes to using the terms "obstetric" and "gynecological violence," the greatest reluctance is found among medical professionals. In many EU member states, medical professionals are opposed to using the word violence for several reasons. The first reason is that the use of the term violence refers strictly to individual malpractice, and that these forms of violence are not systemic. Obstetricians and gynecologists believe that the use of the term violence leads to the interpretation of acts of mistreatment as intentional.

A 2024 study commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) outlined the reactions of doctors in several EU countries to the use of the term obstetric violence. In Italy, following an online survey on obstetric violence, representatives of the Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in Italian Hospitals issued a press release regarding the accuracy of the study. They considered that the use of the term "obstetric violence" was damaging to the medical profession. *"Indeed, the words 'obstetric violence,' at the moment of communication, already become in themselves and in their immediacy, a tool for damaging the reputation of healthcare professionals, transcending into a blatant attack and aggression on the moral sphere of others"* (Colombo, 2017, p. 1). In France, medical staff initially refused to use the term "obstetric violence" and did not participate in the working groups. In the Netherlands, medical professionals prefer to use the term used by the WHO: "disrespect and abuse" or "maltreatment," and when the term "obstetric violence" is used, they react defensively.

In an advisory opinion issued by the Council of Obstetrics and Gynecology of the Portuguese Medical Association, it is believed that the use of the term "obstetric violence" alarms patients and causes them to lose trust in medical staff who are working hard to provide them with the best possible treatment. The institution emphasizes that, "in Portugal, these crimes or ethical violations are already provided for in the Penal Code and the Code of Ethics, as mentioned in the draft law in question, and penalties can include imprisonment, with temporary or permanent disqualification from practicing the profession" (Ordem dos Medicos, 2021, p. 2).

In Spain, in 2021, obstetrics and gynecology associations denied the existence of the problem caused by obstetric violence in several statements. These statements were in response to roundtable discussions organized by the Ministry of Equality. The Ministry of Equality wanted to create a law to combat forms of obstetric violence. Between September and October, the Ministry of Health held meetings with civil society, medical experts, and various activists. Several obstetrics and gynecology associations have reacted negatively to obstetric violence. Among them is the Spanish Association of Obstetrics and Gynecology. The association released a statement titled *"Obstetric violence: an illegal, immoral, and scientifically unacceptable concept"* (S.E.G.O., n.d.). As a result, in March 2023, the legislative initiative on obstetric violence did not include the term "obstetric violence." Instead, it was preferred that the term be used indirectly.

An article published in 2024 by the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* mentions that in Latin America and the Caribbean, the term obstetric violence is misused. The authors mention that national legislation includes interventions aimed at easing the birth process and saving the lives of the mother and baby under the category of obstetric violence. These interventions include "induction of labor, cesarean section, episiotomy, and even the supine position during delivery, among others" (Chervenak et al., 2024, p. 3). For the authors of this study, obstetric violence refers strictly to disrespectful treatment by medical staff during childbirth. This article also mentions that the principle of autonomy over one's own body is misunderstood. They mention that the principle of autonomy over one's own body is misunderstood when it refers strictly to the patient's personal preference (ignoring the obstetrician's suggestion).

A 2023 study, based on a press release from the Spanish Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology, states that the use of the term obstetric violence without knowledge of its meaning can affect the relationship between patients and doctors. The same study also found that 354 obstetricians believe that the term obstetric violence has a negative effect (73.9% of the total number of participants). The Spanish Society of Gynecology and Obstetrics recently issued an official statement on the internet on this subject: "We consider the term 'obstetric violence' to be inappropriate, biased, and unfair because of its malicious legal meaning, as an intention to cause harm, to injure, to use force, or to threaten, which is criminally liable and which we must reject entirely" (Terribile & Filho, 2023, p. 252).

An article published in 2020 in the Brazilian Journal of Maternal and Child Health presented another critique of the concept. Some obstetricians believe that the use of the term obstetric violence in turn brings violence upon obstetricians. As a result of this opinion, there was an attempt by the Minister of Health to remove the term from public documents. What obstetricians forget is that this term does not only refer to abuse committed by them. Obstetric violence as a concept represents a form of systemic violence. Violence can be the result of systemic failures at different levels of care in health systems, so the expression cannot be understood as a synonym for "violence committed by the obstetrician" (Katz et al., 2020, p. 625).

Another study suggests that using the term "obstetric violence" is harmful to both doctors and patients. The authors of the study say that using the term "obstetric violence" does not encourage change in the field of obstetrics. The authors of the study claim that the WHO definition of violence is outdated. Lapperman and Swarts have questioned the way feminist literature has analyzed obstetric violence. From the authors' perspective, it should be viewed as follows: "The question in this paradigm is not who is good and who is bad, but how different types of relational engagements and interventions can lead to different outcomes in terms of well-being, in this case, of mothers and infants" (Lappeman & Swartz, 2021, p. 991).

Their study focused on the experiences of women in a delivery room in South Africa. According to the authors, the delivery room was predominantly quiet, with even the babies not crying much. The authors also noted that the women who participated in the study were not accompanied by their partners, which is contrary to the recommendations made in the specialized literature. The women refused to bring their partners into the delivery room, even when the medical staff recommended it.

In the article "Emerging human rights standards on obstetric violence and abuse during childbirth", Camila Pickles offers a legal perspective on the evolution of the concept of obstetric violence. The term obstetric violence has evolved from "safe motherhood" to the point where the emphasis is now on respectful care. "Safe motherhood" emerged in 1987 as a United Nations initiative. The concept emphasized reducing infant and maternal mortality, with a focus on developing areas. Due to the relevance of the topic, several human rights organizations clarified the international human rights that apply to this concept. These included: the right to life and the right to the highest possible standard of health. In its early stages, the concept of safe motherhood focused on ensuring that medical facilities were adequately equipped and that medical personnel were well trained by the government.

However, following a decision by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a more comprehensive version of Safe Motherhood was sought. In the case of Alyne de Silva Pimentel v. Brazil, a Brazilian woman of African descent died as a result of inadequate treatment and complications in a local health facility and hospital. The Committee found that the woman's right to life, right to health, and right to non-discrimination had been violated. The Committee also noted that Alyne's right to medical care had been violated. The CEDAW decision in the case of Alyne da Silva Pimentel v Brazil demonstrated that the young woman's death was caused by inadequate care. The Committee also emphasized that Alyne da Silva's experience highlighted the systemic discrimination faced by "marginalized women on the basis of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status" (Pickles, 2025, p. 509).

In another article by Camilla Pickles, she offers a feminist-legal perspective on how the term obstetric violence may be affected by an overly broad definition. The author recommends limiting the concept of obstetric violence to women who give birth and that this violence occurs during prenatal, intrapartum, and postpartum care. This does not deny the connection that obstetric violence may have with other forms of violence occurring in reproductive health. The author explains how obstetrics has historically been considered an exclusively male specialty. Due to issues of racism, sexism, and colonialism, women and indigenous people have been excluded from the field of healthcare. According to the author, the biomedical perspective focuses on a highly medical and interventionist approach and excludes the social aspect. The social aspect is the part that includes women's experiences and feelings about childbirth.

The author explained that there are two perspectives in the literature. Perspective A is more restrictive and refers exclusively to forms of violence caused intentionally. Perspective B(1) refers to obstetric violence as disrespect and inappropriate treatment during childbirth. This perspective is not very clear on what exactly constitutes inappropriate treatment or disrespect, as it does not include any criteria for fulfillment. Perspective B(2) is much more comprehensive. Like perspective B(1), this perspective attempts to broaden the definition of obstetric violence. Obstetric violence is viewed as a form of systemic violence that affects women, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This comprehensive perspective can be beneficial for activism, but it raises legal issues. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have recognized obstetric violence as gender-based violence, but they focus on the individual actions of doctors rather than institutional problems.

Another issue is how certain jurisprudences interpret obstetric violence. In addition, violence against women, trans women, and non-binary women may differ *"in different*

geopolitical contexts, with the nature and the extent of violence correlating with different people's social status, race and sexual orientation/identity" (Pickles, 2024, p. 629). Pickles suggested that obstetric violence should be understood as a violation of physical and psychological integrity during labor and/or birth. This perspective could encourage reforms and view obstetric violence as a *"continuum of violence"* (ibid., p. 644). This would allow for the recognition of forms of obstetric violence and links to other forms of reproductive violence.

The article "A critique of the conceptualization and criminalization of obstetric violence in international human rights frameworks" (2024) offers a legal perspective on how countries have adopted legislation criminalizing obstetric violence and how international organizations approach this concept. In Latin American countries, laws combating obstetric violence have been adopted as a result of advocacy by feminist movements. Although the laws have their own particularities, they have one thing in common: they classify "obstetric violence as a form of gender-based violence against women" (Barbosa et al., 2024, p. 7). Efforts to criminalize obstetric violence are diminished in some countries by the existence of criminal laws that already cover offenses such as bodily harm, abuse of power, and endangering the patient. International human rights organizations have been influenced by how Latin American countries have treated the concept. Although there is no international treaty that explicitly mentions obstetric violence, the bodies that interpret treaties have called on states to take action against this form of violence (Neither the *Belém do Pará Convention* nor the *Istanbul Convention* include the concept).

However, MESECVI, which analyzes the progress of states in implementing the Belém do Pará Convention, mentioned obstetric violence in its 2012 report. It also recommended that states criminalize it. "*For all these reasons, the Committee reiterates its Recommendation to the States that they not only adopt provisions to criminalize obstetric violence, but also respect what constitutes a natural process before, during and after childbirth, without arbitrary or excessive medicalization"* (MESECVI, 2014, p. 63).

The CEDAW convention does not include the term obstetric violence either. However, the commission has used the term in its recommendations. It should be noted that its recommendations vary from case to case. In the case of Bulgaria, CEDAW made a recommendation on Obstetric Violence in its Concluding Observations on Bulgaria's eighth periodic report. The recommendation appears in paragraph 34 (a): "*Criminalize obstetric violence and other forms of violence during delivery and ensure adequate and accessible standards of care in all maternity wings of hospitals*" (CEDAW, 2020, p. 11). The inclusion of sexual and reproductive rights in the mandatory school curriculum is another CEDAW recommendation. This should be inclusive and adapted to the age of the students. In the case of N.A.E. v. Spain, CEDAW upheld the victim's complaint for violations of articles 2 (b), (c), (d) and (f), 3, 5 and 12 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Commission recommended that the victim be awarded compensation. CEDAW also recommended to "*conduct research into obstetric violence in the State party in order to shed light on the situation and thus provide guidance for public policies to combat such violence*" (CEDAW, 2022, p. 17). Another recommendation is professional training in women's reproductive rights for obstetricians and other medical workers. The latest CEDAW recommendation aims to provide easy avenues of appeal for victims of obstetric violence and train legal personnel on women's reproductive rights.

In the special report by rapporteur Dubravka Šimonović and presented to the UN Human Rights Council, "A *human rights-based approach to mistreatment and violence against women in reproductive health services with a focus on childbirth and obstetric violence*" uses the term obstetric violence rather than violence against women during childbirth. However, it does not include the criminalization of this offense among its recommendations, focusing instead on the creation of public policies to combat the issue. A legal criticism of the criminalization of obstetric violence is that criminal law focuses more on punishing the guilty rather than on training doctors to prevent further cases of violence.

As an alternative, the special report includes a series of legislative and policy recommendations to reduce obstetric violence. These include civil law measures such as compensation claims against medical facilities and medical professionals, and administrative law measures (disciplinary complaints). One of these recommendations includes cooperation between medical professionals, NGOs, and feminist movements. *"States should establish constructive cooperation between health institutions and professional associations on the one hand, and women's non-governmental organizations, feminist movements, and independent human rights institutions dealing with reproductive and obstetric care on the other"* (Šimonović, 2019, p. 21).

The European Context

In the case of obstetric violence, there are only a few regions on the European continent that currently have the concept introduced into legislation (the Region of Catalonia, the Canary Islands and Portugal). However, in recent years, the subject has begun to be known through various articles and debates. The international Roses Revolution movement began in Europe. This movement started in 2011 in Spain and is a form of fighting against obstetric violence. The movement was created by Jesusa Ricoy, and the campaign logo was created by the creative agency Cuatro Tuercas. "Initially, it was created in response to the incredibly offensive cartoons that the Spanish Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists published in their medical journal, in which they humiliated their own patients, their conditions, and their births" (Ricoy, n.d.). This movement proclaimed November 25 as the day against obstetric violence (it was also known as the day against all forms of violence against women).

On November 25, women who have been victims of obstetric violence lay a pink rose at the medical facility where the assault took place. In a 2019 session of the European Union Parliament, a definition of the concepts of obstetric violence and gynecological violence was adopted. According to this definition, "Obstetric and gynecological violence is a form of violence that has long been hidden and is still too often ignored. In the privacy of a medical consultation or childbirth, women are victims of practices that are violent or can be perceived as such. These include inappropriate or non-consensual acts such as episiotomies and vaginal palpation performed without consent, pressure on the uterine fundus, or painful interventions without anesthesia. Sexist behavior during medical consultations has also been reported" (Council of Europe, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on obstetric violence. Specifically, it has exacerbated certain forms of obstetric violence (lack of autonomy over one's own body, inadequate care). The pandemic has also led to an increase in unnecessary interventions (episiotomies, induced caesarean sections). For example, in France during the

pandemic, women were not allowed to be accompanied, in addition to sanitary measures (wearing a mask). This creates a state of insecurity and loneliness for the future mother. In Portugal, a study was published on neonatal care during the pandemic. A total of 1,845 women were surveyed as part of this study. "Of the 1,845 women who responded to the questionnaire, 66.2% had restrictions imposed on them regarding the presence of a companion of their choice due to COVID-19 restrictions" (Brunello et al., 2024, p. 37).

In April 2024, a report on obstetric and gynecological violence was released by the European Parliament. This article analyzed how these two forms of violence operate in the 27 EU member states. According to this study, there is currently no EU member state that has adopted a legislative proposal to combat obstetric and gynecological violence. Moreover, these forms of violence are not recognized as a violation of women's rights. "Even if there is no legislation yet, women can seek compensation based on the current civil and criminal code" (ibid., p. 10).

One of the most common forms of abuse is prohibiting the partner from accompanying his partner during prenatal check-ups, labor, and the postpartum period. This was seen in most European countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a 2021 study in Portugal by Dulce Morgado Neves and Catarina Barata, women who tested positive for COVID-19 weren't allowed to breastfeed their babies or even touch them. In fact, "women have reported discriminatory attitudes by health personnel in the face of the slightest suspicion they might be COVID-19 positive" (Barata et al., 2020, p. 2).

A similar situation occurred in Italy. A sociological study conducted by Brenda Benaglia and Daniela Canzini showed that of the 49 respondents (29 from the Bologna region and the remaining 20 from other regions), 20% of respondents from Bologna and 30% of respondents from other regions were unable to be accompanied by their partner due to Covid-19. Following a letter from the association *Voci di Nascita* (in English: *Voice of Birth*), "the most restrictive measures were corrected: starting on April 27, partners could be present from the beginning of active labor until after birth" (Benaglia & Canzini, 2021, p. 4).

According to the Report on Obstetric and Gynecological Violence published by the European Parliament, all member states have a document on patients' rights with minor differences between Member States. "*Furthermore, different degrees and forms of physical violence are covered by criminal law with slight differences from one MS to another*" (Brunello et al., 2024, p. 54). An example of this would be a doctor performing a cesarean section after an episiotomy without using anesthesia, in which case this act could be considered a form of torture. Another example is if a doctor performs a "husband stitch," he could be accused of genital mutilation. On the other hand, these actions are not considered crimes if the perpetrator presents an objective reason to justify them or if there is legislation in place. These actions are criminally punishable if they are not performed as required by law.

Legal framework on obstetric violence

Currently, in Europe, only the autonomous regions of Catalonia, Valencia, the Canary Islands and Portugal have adopted legislation on obstetric violence. In Catalonia, obstetric violence is mentioned in the "law on women's right to the eradication of gender-based violence" (Law 17/2020, adopted on December 22). This law includes elements related to both obstetric violence and reproductive and sexual health rights. A bonus of this law is the inclusion of

women with disabilities and lesbian women (who receive inadequate care from medical staff). In the case of women with disabilities, there is a popular belief that they do not have a sex life.

Under this law, obstetric violence appears in Article 3, letter d. According to Article 3, "Obstetric violence and the violation of sexual and reproductive rights consist of preventing or impeding access to accurate information necessary for autonomous and informed decision-making. It can affect different areas of physical and mental health, including sexual and reproductive health, and can prevent or make it difficult for women to make decisions about their sexual practices and preferences, as well as about their reproduction and the conditions under which it takes place in the long term, in accordance with the assumptions contained in the applicable sectoral legislation. It includes forced sterilization, forced pregnancy, prevention of abortion in legally established cases, and difficulty in accessing contraceptive methods, methods of preventing sexually transmitted infections and HIV, and assisted reproduction methods, as well as gynecological and obstetric practices that do not respect women's decisions, bodies, health, and emotional processes" (Portal Jurídic De Catalunya, 2022).

In the case of the Valencian Community, obstetric violence was introduced into health law in 2021. The provisions on obstetric violence appear in Chapter III, Article 59 ("Health care in the field of women's sexual and reproductive health" (Valencia Ministry of Health, 2021, p. 42). According to this article, combating obstetric violence is mentioned in accordance with the recommendations made by the WHO. This article also mentions provisions such as receiving appropriate training on childbirth and the postpartum period, informing women about all procedures. The article also includes the right to be accompanied by a person, facilitation of direct contact with the child, receiving advice on breastfeeding, and information on the benefits of breastfeeding, etc.

In the case of the Canary Islands, a legislative proposal on obstetric violence was initiated in 2022. This legislative initiative was proposed by the socialist group in parliament. As a result, the Canary Islands made several proposals to the Spanish government: "(I.) To introduce the concept of obstetric violence as an additional element in healthcare requests in all hospitals in the Canary Islands. (II.) Ensure effective training for health professionals, leading to safe practices during childbirth and throughout pregnancy, and early detection of cases of obstetric violence. (III.) Create protocols that are not invasive, risky, or painful, and ensure that births are treated with humanity and respect. (IV.). Promote research related to obstetric violence and implement interventions that strengthen women's autonomy" (Parlamento de Canarias, 2022, p. 7).

In the case of Portugal, obstetric violence was regulated by Law 33 of 2025. The law includes a definition of obstetric violence, prevention measures (including training sessions for medical staff and transparency regarding medical procedures), and sanctions for medical staff who treated patients disrespectfully or used harmful practices against them. The law published in Diário da República defines obstetric violence in Article 2. According to this article, "Obstetric violence is the physical and verbal action exerted by healthcare professionals on the body and procedures in the reproductive area of women or other pregnant individuals, which is expressed in dehumanized treatment, abuse of medicalization, or pathologization of natural processes, disrespecting the protection regime in preconception, medically assisted procreation, pregnancy, childbirth, birth, and the postpartum period provided for in section II of chapter III of Law No. 15/2014, of March 21 (Diário da República, 2025).

The law provides as preventive measures, the existence of notions of respectful care of patients in the curriculum of medical universities. Another measure is the implementation of awareness campaigns regarding obstetric violence. This measure is closely linked to the implementation of the annual report on patient satisfaction with medical services. These attributions fall within the newly established Multi-Professional Commission for Rights in Pregnancy and Childbirth. According to Article 11, this commission is composed of 9 members. The president elected at the proposal of the government, 4 members representing patients elected following a vote by Parliament and 4 members elected by the State Secretariat for Health (including specialists in maternal health, child health, obstetrics and gynecology).

In some European countries, there have been attempts to pass laws that include obstetric violence. One such attempt took place in Italy in 2016. The proposal came from politician Adriano Zaccagnini of the Progressive Democratic Movement. The name of the proposed legislation was "Rules for the protection of the rights of women and newborns at birth and regulations for the promotion of physiological birth" (Paganelli, 2023). This law aimed to criminalize obstetric violence. This legislative proposal was linked to the *#bastatacere* (translation: *keep silent*) campaign. As part of this campaign, 3,000 experiences of obstetric violence were collected through an online questionnaire. The legislative proposal was not adopted. Other countries that have attempted to legislate on obstetric violence: Croatia (2014, 2018—both unsuccessful), France (2023, still under discussion), Portugal (2021, 2023)[1], Lithuania, and Luxembourg.

Poland, although there is no legislation on combating obstetric violence, there is a law on medical treatment during childbirth (August 16, 2018). This law was published in 2019 and covers the following: treating women with respect, giving the mom-to-be the information she needs, respecting the patient's consent, and asking for the patient's consent (for procedures and exams). On the other hand, this law is not yet applicable. There are many reasons for this, the main ones being the lack of knowledge of patients and doctors on this subject. "This, in addition to the fact that there is a lack of awareness of this type of violence, not only among healthcare professionals, but among victims too (and legal professionals), limits the application of these principles and renders the applicable legal framework less effective" (Brunello et al., 2024, p. 60).

As a result, there is no consensus at European level on a coherent definition of obstetric violence. This causes problems in terms of understanding and acceptance of the concept at both societal and professional levels (particularly among medical and legal professionals). For example, in Catalonia, obstetric violence was introduced into the law on women's rights to eradicate gender-based violence in the same paragraph as violence in reproductive health. This can be confusing, given that some forms of obstetric violence are not necessarily related to other forms of reproductive health violence. In the case of the Valencia region, obstetric violence is only mentioned in health legislation, without including a definition or specifying what acts can be considered obstetric violence. There have also been European countries that have had legislative proposals on obstetric violence, but these have been rejected (Italy,

[1] In the case of Portugal, it should be mentioned that a legislative initiative on combating obstetric violence was adopted in 2025.

Croatia, France, Lithuania, Luxembourg). Even though Poland has a law on providing respectful treatment during childbirth, this law is not well known among patients and doctors.

Reproductive Rights and Gender-Based Violence: The Case of Romania

As with many EU countries, Romania has not yet adopted legislation on obstetric violence. The subject of obstetric violence is not well-known in society. Currently, several associations are trying to raise awareness of this concept. In addition, the issue of obstetric violence is closely linked to other problems in the Romanian healthcare system. The main difficulty of the healthcare system is the lack of funding in the medical field. This issue is closely linked to the poor conditions of public hospitals. In 2023, many hospitals missed the opportunity to obtain non-reimbursable European funds. The funds from the PNRR amounted to 750 million euros. Currently, "Romania has 368 public hospitals and 167 private hospitals. Some of these public hospitals are very old (some are even over 100 years old)" (Spiridon-Drăgodan, 2023).

Another problem is bribery in Romanian hospitals. "Romania ranks first among European Union countries with the highest percentage of bribes in healthcare, namely 19%" (Tănasie, 2023). People choose to bribe doctors to ensure they have access to healthcare services. There are cases where, if a person does not give a bribe to the doctor, their treatment will be delayed. The bribery issue affects people from vulnerable backgrounds much more because, in most cases, they do not have the financial resources to pay doctors. According to the bribery map[2] (data from October 2025), the counties with the highest percentage of bribes were Buzău (8.85), Teleorman (8.54), followed by Harghita (8.5%) and Dâmbovița (8.27%). The counties with the lowest percentage of bribes were Bistrița Năsăud (2.03%), Maramureș (2.74%), and Cluj (3.07%). Another problem is the lack of medical staff. In this case, the unattractive salaries of doctors were the main cause of the problem. Many graduates of medical universities in our country prefer to work abroad for higher salaries.

Obstetric violence is closely linked to access to reproductive health services. When it comes to reproductive health, vulnerable women in Romania have the most difficulty accessing reproductive health services. A 2025 study by the Roma feminist association E-Romnja analyzed the difficulty Roma women face in accessing reproductive health services and contraception. The study also showed that the public health system is designed for heterosexual couples from the dominant ethnic group (and with relatively good financial and social status). This excludes queer people, Roma people, people with low incomes, etc. The results of the research show that the most common problems faced by women are the poor development of medical infrastructure in some regions, the lack of medical personnel (felt in rural areas or small towns) and the inefficiency of transport services. "For some of the women interviewed, the lack of specialized personnel in the vicinity led to risky births in emergency situations or even the death of the newborn" (Obreja, 2025, p. 15). One of the biggest barriers identified by the E-romnja study is poverty. Because of poverty, women cannot benefit from public health services (even if they have health insurance) or private ones.

[2] Vana, Dragoș, Graphs.ro. "Noua Harta Șpăgii din Spitale. Dacă vi s-au solicitat bani sau alte tipuri de recompensații de către personalul medical, doriți să sesizați acest fapt?" (October 2025). https://www.graphs.ro/feed_auto_judet_harta.php?q=8&myfeed=2. Accessed: 5 December 2025.

In Romania, several organizations have initiatives against obstetric violence or that want to improve medical services. One of these associations is the Filia Center. In May 2021, the Filia Center launched the ACCESS Project – "Advocacy, Capacity Building, and Consolidation for Equality in Health and Safety". This project aimed to advocate for health and reproductive health rights in vulnerable communities. "Starting in May 2021, the Filia Center organized 24 informational events and mapped the problems faced by women in disadvantaged communities in the communes of Valea Mare Pravăț, Bughea de Jos, and Aninoasa in Argeș and Munteni-Buzău counties, and Ion Roată and Borănești in Ialomița county" (Active Citizens Fund, 2022).

Another initiative of the Filia Center is the project "Noi să fim sănătoase" (*Let us be healthy*). As part of this project, women are taught what to do when visiting a gynecologist, what the Pap test is, contraception methods, breast cancer prevention, health insurance, childbirth, etc. The Filia Center reminds us that women should be treated with respect by medical staff. It also says that, by law, "you have the right to the best medical care, without any discrimination" (Centrul Filia, n.d.). What's more, medical staff are required to answer every question. In addition, women have the right to refuse surgery. Any surgical procedure is performed with the patient's consent.

The VIF network also launched the Virginity is Untestable project in 2022. As part of this project, the VIF network started an online petition calling on the Ministry of Justice to ban virginity tests in hospitals. "The World Health Organization strongly condemns this practice and considers it barbaric, as it cannot prove a person's virginity and is, rather, a method of coercing women" (Declic, 2022). According to 2019 data from INML (the National Institute of Forensic Medicine), 2% of the procedures performed in the institution were virginity tests.

Another project of the Filia Center is Sănătate pentru Toate (in English: *Health for All*). Through this project, meetings are organized with various national organizations dealing with sexual and reproductive rights. These meetings focus on topics "such as access to contraception, screening for cervical and breast cancer, and sex education. Together, we will establish a common advocacy strategy and produce communication materials tailored to the beneficiaries of each organization" (Centrul Filia, n.d.).

In an interview for the publication Educație Privată (Private Education), Andrada Cilibiu, PR & Communications Coordinator at the FILIA Center, stated that "Obstetric violence is still a taboo subject in Romania—we don't talk about the suffering of women and girls in obstetrics-gynecology, about abusive practices, about the unequal power relationship between doctor and patient. Virginity tests are a form of obstetric violence, often directed against young women and adolescents. For ten years, international organizations have been fighting to eradicate these tests, drawing attention to the fact that it is an abusive practice that has no medical relevance" (Cibiliu, interviewed in Educație Privată, 2022).

The result of the campaign Virginity is Untestable was the elimination of the issuance of virginity certificates upon request by the INML on June 10, 2022. Nationally, virginity tests upon request were banned following a joint order issued by the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Health in May 2023. This means that virginity examinations can now only be carried out at the request of the authorities. According to the WHO, "Health professionals and their professional associations should be aware that virginity testing has no scientific merit and cannot determine past vaginal penetration. These examinations are not only a violation of the

human rights of women and girls, but in cases of rape, they can cause additional pain and mimic the initial act of sexual violence, leading to re-experiencing, re-traumatization, and re-victimization" (WHO, 2018).

During the 2023 Women's Safety March (organized by the VIF group), one of the protesters' demands was "Establishment of protocols for the prevention and management of gender-based violence in primary, secondary, and tertiary health services. Training for medical staff: doctors, residents, nurses, midwives, etc" (VIF, 2023) and "Introducing modules on obstetric violence (prevention, identification, intervention, inter-institutional collaboration) in medical and pharmacy universities and post-secondary health schools" (ibid.). The protesters also demanded that the right to have abortions in public hospitals be guaranteed.

Another association fighting for the rights of pregnant women is the Association of Independent Midwives. One of their projects is *Safe Motherhood - Safe, universal, free, accessible, non-discriminatory care services accessible, non-discriminatory care services provided with respect for all women who want to become mothers*. As part of this project, research was conducted on obstetric violence in Romania. The report, published in September 2024, was coordinated by Diana-Elena Neaga, Laura Grünberg, and Crina Radu.

The questionnaire focused on women who gave birth at least once between 2018 and 2023 in Romania. The report analyzed the responses to a questionnaire completed by approximately 5,635 people (5,623 responses were validated). Of this number of respondents, the majority came from urban areas (75.5%), had higher education (73.1%), and had stable incomes (78.7%). Of the 5,623, 37.7% gave birth vaginally, 33.7% gave birth by scheduled C-section, 16.1% gave birth by emergency C-section (after labor started), and 12.5% gave birth by emergency C-section (without going into labor).

Regarding the choice of cesarean section, the doctor decided this in 72.3% of cases, while the respondents decided in 27.7% of cases. "The most popular reasons why respondents chose scheduled C-section delivery were the fear of pain (59.8%), traumatic stories about vaginal deliveries (48.8%), because they considered it safer for them (30.1%), the safety of the child (22.1%), and fear of vaginal changes/impairment of sexual life (11.2%)" (Neaga et al., 2024, p. 14). Regarding awareness of the term obstetric violence, 35.6% of respondents were familiar with it, 30.6% were unsure, 30% were unaware of the term, and the remaining 3.7% did not respond.

Women who gave birth vaginally in public hospitals (1,754) experienced the following forms of obstetric violence: lack of opportunity to have their partner or a close person present during labor and delivery (83.6%), being forced into a specific birthing position (76.1%), and separation of the baby from the mother after birth (56%). Women who gave birth vaginally in private hospitals (364) experienced the following forms of obstetric violence: imposition of a certain position during birth (50.8%), difficult access to free consultations during and after pregnancy (40.1%), and lack of access to free consultations during and after pregnancy (38.7%)

Regarding ethnic origin, the respondents' testimonies showed that Roma women are more vulnerable to obstetric violence. "When I gave birth, there were several other women in the delivery room, including a 16-year-old Roma girl. They scolded her like a child because she was screaming in pain, and because her family was calling her at one point, then they took her phone and turned it off" (ibid., p. 46).

Conclusions

In conclusion, obstetric violence is a form of gender-based violence that affects both the mother and/or the child. The effects of this form of violence can be difficult to detect for people unfamiliar with the concept, and they must be treated quickly to avoid repercussions for the mother's health. Following the legalization of obstetric violence in some Latin American countries, discussions on obstetric violence have begun to emerge in European countries. In some of these countries, the discussions have led to the adoption of legislation on obstetric violence (the regions of Catalonia and Valencia), while in others, these discussions have been unsuccessful. In Poland, there is a law regulating respectful care during childbirth, but the law is not applicable because both patients and doctors are unaware of it.

In Romania, following the wave of European discussions on obstetric violence, the concept has slowly begun to be discussed in the public sphere with the emergence of research in the field. In September 2024, the first research on this concept in Romania was published by the Association of Independent Midwives. At present, there is no legislative initiative or national policy on combating obstetric violence. The problems of the Romanian state are not limited to obstetric violence, but also include poor access to abortion services on demand and the way Roma and queer women are treated in Romanian hospitals. Although abortion on demand is regulated up to 14 weeks of pregnancy, women encounter obstacles to the procedure (these include financial obstacles, religious/moral obstacles, and/or infrastructure obstacles). To these obstacles we can add various legislative attempts by politicians to restrict access to abortion.

In order to combat obstetric violence, we need a series of measures. The first measure is to conduct more research on obstetric violence. As a direction for research, my suggestion is to conduct research on obstetric violence among doctors in Romania. Such research could show us doctors' opinions on the concept and possible suggestions for managing obstetric violence from the doctors' perspective.

The second measure is advocacy. For advocacy, public campaigns could be carried out to raise awareness of forms of obstetric violence among the general public. This campaign could be organized through a series of public events, informational materials, and advertisements on television and/or online. The third measure is the recommendation of policies that could combat obstetric violence. This could include professional training for doctors and nurses during their studies. We need to have medical protocols that focus on the safety and comfort of the mother and child. For doctors who are already practicing, training courses should be provided that emphasize respectful care for both the mother and the child. These training courses can be conducted by feminist organizations that are familiar with the concept of obstetric violence.

Another policy recommendation could also be to include obstetric violence in the definition of gender-based violence in the Law on Equal Opportunities and Treatment between Women and Men (Law 202/2002). The definition of gender-based violence appears in Article 4(1). According to Article 4(l), gender-based violence means: “domestic violence, sexual violence, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, forced abortion and forced sterilization, sexual harassment, human trafficking, and forced prostitution” (Romanian Parliament, n.d.). Therefore, obstetric violence can also be included in the examples of gender-based violence. Finally, the section on sanctions should include sanctions for this type of violence. The

sanctioning of this type of violence should be dealt with by the medical council (for disciplinary sanctions) and by the courts (for obtaining moral damages and for punishing medical staff from a legal point of view).

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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

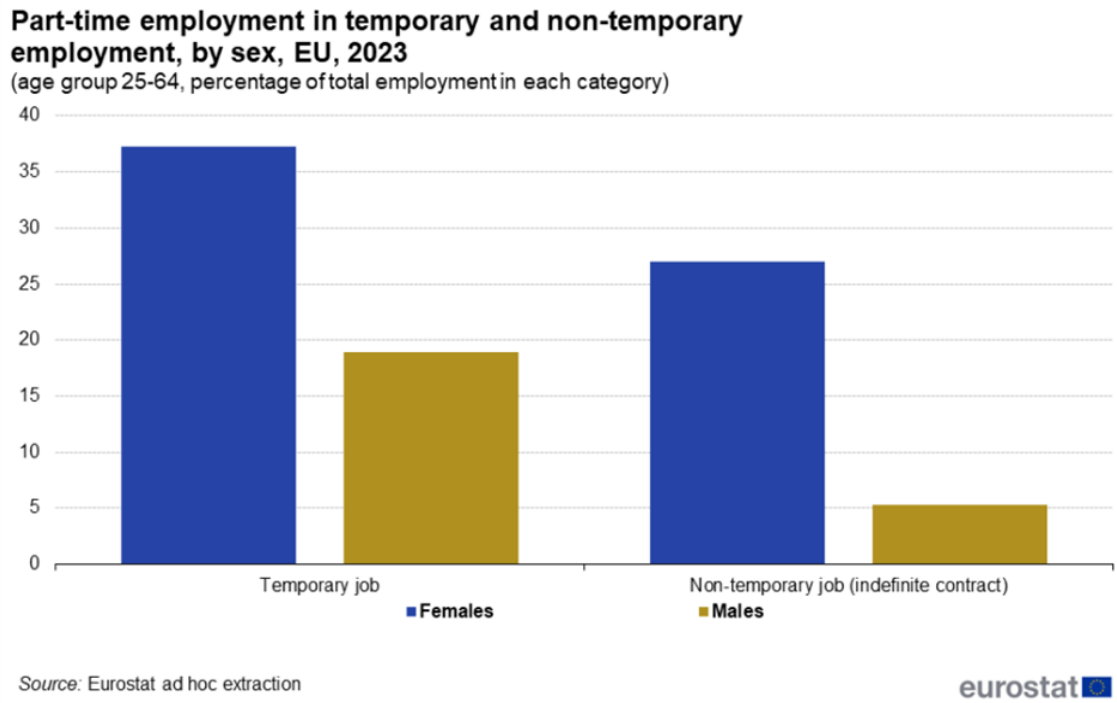
In recent decades, precarious work has emerged as one of the most visible and contested issues within the European Union labor market. Although no single, universally accepted definition exists, the concept is generally associated with forms of employment characterized by contractual instability, low 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)

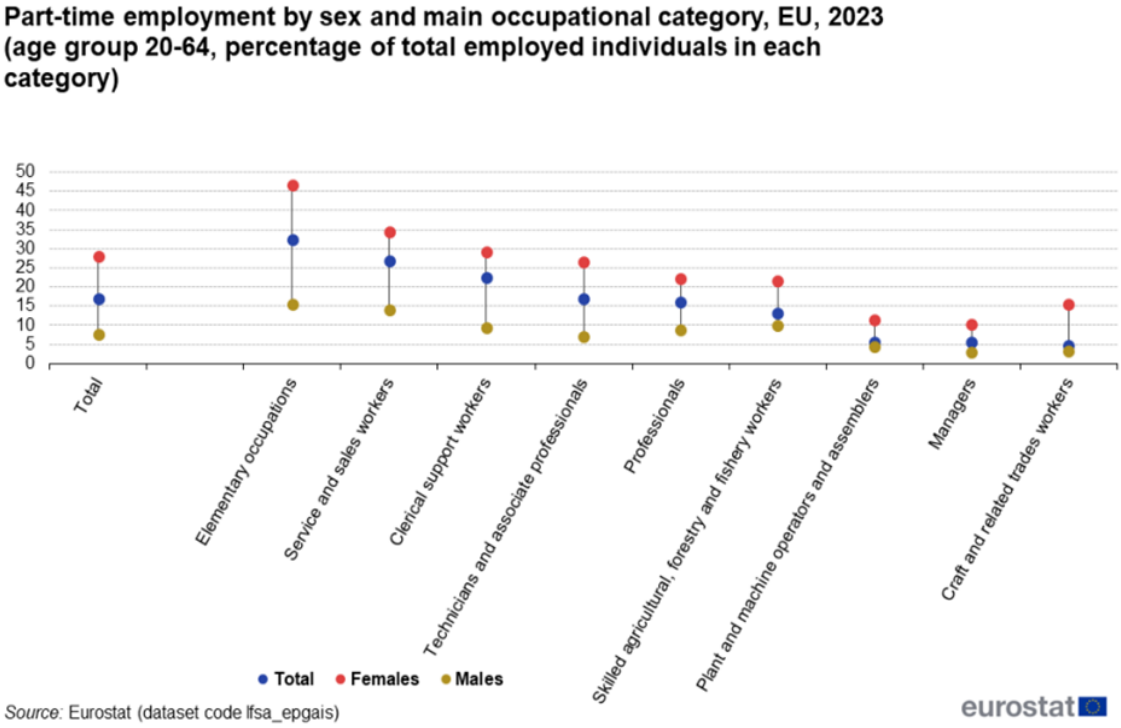


Eurostat data for 2023 confirm the existence of significant gender disparities with respect to part-time employment, particularly when examined through the lens of contract type. The proportion of women working part-time is markedly higher than that of men, both in the case of temporary and permanent 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:

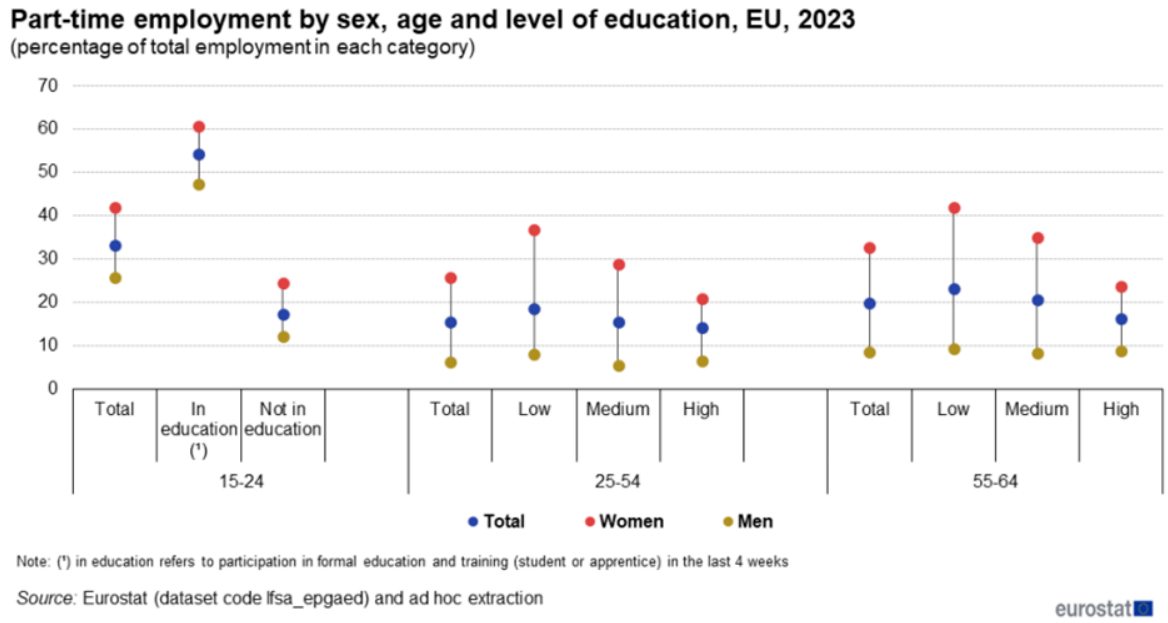
- **Service and sales workers**, where nearly half of all women are employed part-time, compared with less than one-quarter of men;
- **Elementary occupations**, where part-time work is frequent among women but considerably less common among men;
- **Clerical support and customer service workers**, where 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)



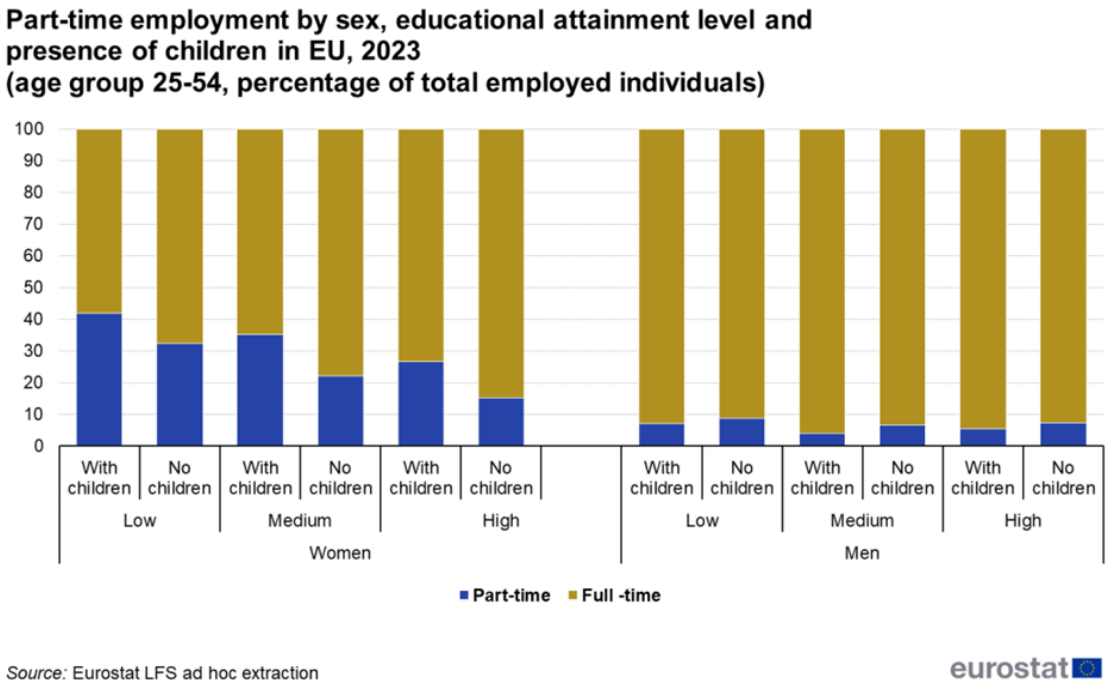
Eurostat data clearly illustrate the unequal distribution of part-time employment in the European Union when disaggregated by sex, age, and educational level. Among individuals aged 15–24, part-time work is most prevalent among those engaged in formal education (students), which is an expected outcome. 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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Cooking Up Change.
A Qualitative Exploration of Weaponized Incompetence in the Household

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Abstract

This study investigates weaponized incompetence, i.e. the deliberate or strategic performance of inability to avoid domestic responsibilities within heterosexual cohabiting relationships. While the concept has gained traction in online discourse, it has received limited scholarly attention. Drawing on Berger and Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality and feminist critiques of domestic and emotional labor, this paper situates weaponized incompetence as a socially embedded strategy that reinforces gendered inequalities in the household. Methodologically, the research combines four semi-structured interviews with two Romanian couples in their twenties with an autoethnographic reflection, supported by a collaborative witnessing exercise. Thematic analysis of interview data highlights recurring patterns: women consistently assume responsibility for cognitive and emotional labor, while men selectively engage in visible tasks or frame avoidance as incapacity. These dynamics are naturalized through habitualization, silent bargaining, and cultural scripts that prioritize harmony over equity. The autoethnographic component extends these insights by demonstrating how performances of incompetence operate not only in interpersonal relationships but also in the researcher's own lived experience. By conceptualizing weaponized incompetence as a form of epistemic capital, the article contributes to scholarship on gender, care, and domestic labor, highlighting the need for relational accountability and deeper engagement with the emotional dimensions of inequality.

Keywords: weaponized incompetence, second shift, gender roles, emotional labor, qualitative approach

Why do some men claim they "can't cook" or "don't know how to clean", and why does this often leave their partner picking up the slack? This article explores a phenomenon known as "weaponized incompetence", where individuals strategically present themselves as less capable in order to avoid responsibility. While it may appear as simple forgetfulness or clumsiness, weaponized incompetence often reflects deeper gender dynamics that shape everyday life inside the household.

The study focuses on young heterosexual couples living together in Romania, drawing on both interviews and personal reflection. Two couples, each in their early twenties, shared their experiences of negotiating household chores, from cooking and cleaning to managing bills and emotional support. Their stories reveal a common pattern: while tasks are sometimes

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divided informally, women frequently carry the heavier load of cognitive labor (planning, organizing, anticipating needs) and emotional labor (soothing tensions, maintaining harmony). Men, meanwhile, are more likely to contribute in visible or episodic ways, by taking out the trash and repairing items, or to frame avoidance as a lack of ability, such as "I don't know how to cook."

To complement these accounts, the article also includes an autoethnographic reflection, where the author revisits his own experiences of cohabitation. This personal lens highlights how weaponized incompetence is not only an abstract idea but also a lived dynamic that requires active confrontation and self-reflection. By admitting to his own reliance on claims of incompetence in the past, the author shows how such behaviors sustain inequalities and contribute to emotional strain in relationships.

The findings suggest that weaponized incompetence is a way of performing ignorance that has real consequences for gender equality, fairness, and intimacy. Small acts of avoidance accumulate, creating patterns where one partner – usually the woman – carries both the practical and emotional weight of household management. These patterns are further reinforced by cultural expectations that normalize women's greater competence in domestic life.

Understanding weaponized incompetence in this way sheds light on why change is difficult, even for couples who value equality. It shows that domestic labor is not only about efficiency or preference but about power, recognition, and accountability. By naming and analyzing this phenomenon, the article encourages readers, especially men, to reflect on their own household practices, ask whether claims of incompetence are genuine or convenient, and imagine more equitable ways of sharing the work of everyday life.

"What we do is more important than what we say or believe."
—bell hooks

"Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one."
—Marcus Aurelius

INTRODUCTION

Defining Weaponized Incompetence

"Weaponized incompetence" is a term popularized through online discourse that describes the strategic, often gendered, act of feigning inability in order to avoid responsibility. It refers to situations where individuals, particularly men in heterosexual relationships, pretend not to know how to complete domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or laundry. The expression gained traction on social media platforms like Reddit, where users, primarily women, began describing patterns of domestic labor avoidance that hinge on gendered expectations and the unequal distribution of the "second shift", i.e. unpaid labor performed after formal work hours.

While weaponized incompetence has roots in romantic partnerships, its relevance is not limited to the private sphere. It can be understood more broadly as a performative, socially constructed strategy of ignorance, one that exploits gender norms and emotional labor asymmetries. Within households, such displays not only result in the deflection of responsibilities but often require the other partner, typically the woman, to manage both the

task and the accompanying frustration. This double burden reinforces the institutionalization of gender roles under the guise of individual inability.

This research aims to: (1) develop the concept of weaponized incompetence within gender-sensitive academic literature, (2) examine how heterosexual cohabiting couples negotiate domestic labor in the context of evolving gender norms, and (3) explore how everyday performances of incompetence produce and maintain inequalities in labor and power. Drawing on both Berger and Luckmann's social-constructionist theory and feminist critiques of emotional and domestic labor, the study employs a qualitative methodology: four semi-structured interviews with two heterosexual cohabiting couples, supplemented by an autoethnographic reflection.

Despite participants' differences in age, living arrangements, and socioeconomic background, the study expects to uncover recurring patterns in how domestic labor is divided, justified, and contested.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender and the Social Construction of Ignorance

Understanding the persistence of gendered divisions in domestic labor requires examining the cultural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions that underlie household work and the broader social processes through which these dynamics become institutionalized and normalized. Across historical, sociological, and theoretical analyses, research shows that household inequalities are not simply byproducts of individual preference or economic rationality but are actively sustained through cultural norms, invisible forms of labor, and the social construction of ignorance and incompetence.

Betty Friedan's (2001) exploration of the mid-20th century American housewife highlights the paradox of women's discontent despite material comfort and societal affirmation. Women were inundated with prescriptive advice on fulfilling traditional feminine roles, while their identities became tethered to the emotional and physical demands of domestic life. What a doctor at the time called the "housewife's syndrome" now exposes how these expectations trivialized women's dissatisfaction and obscured the structural constraints behind it, embedding a cultural script of self-sacrifice that discouraged questioning gendered arrangements.

Moreover, according to Hochschild and Machung (2003), research spanning the 1960s to 1980s shows that women's increasing participation in paid work did little to shift these dynamics. Instead, women consistently performed more total labor, both paid and unpaid, due to entrenched cultural expectations. Their own distinction among housework, childcare, and the invisible management of domestic life (planning, remembering, organizing) underscores how cognitive and emotional labor remain heavily gendered. These "second" (housework) and "third" (emotion work) shifts sustain women's mental and emotional responsibility for the household, even as men's contributions rise modestly.

Daminger (2019) deepens this focus on cognitive labor, revealing how its diffuse, abstract, and often invisible nature perpetuates inequality. Women disproportionately engage in anticipatory and monitoring work – tasks that tether them to household management even when absent. Because these contributions lack clear boundaries or visibility, they are rarely

acknowledged or reciprocated, privileging men who can "opt out" of mental burdens while benefiting from their partner's oversight.

Hartley (2018), on the other hand, examines emotional labor, where women manage not just tasks but the emotional comfort and stability of family members. Despite men's increasing involvement in childcare and housework, women often choose to complete taxing tasks themselves to avoid being perceived as "nagging," even when such choices exacerbate their own stress. This invisible emotional regulation, which benefits men's well-being and stability, further entrenches unequal power relations.

Sullivan (2021) situates these micro-level dynamics within broader structural and cultural contexts, showing how gender norms mediate household divisions beyond economic logic. Even when men lose economic dominance, many avoid undesirable chores to assert masculinity, while supportive norms and policies, such as paternity leave or egalitarian family backgrounds, are required to approach equitable arrangements. In the absence of such supports, women risk remaining disproportionately burdened with routine and undesirable tasks, restricting their economic mobility and perpetuating systemic inequality.

Thébaud et al. (2019) expose the social performance dimension of housework, finding that women face harsher moral and social judgment for domestic disorder. Even when men and women share similar standards privately, women's public accountability pressures them to invest more in cleanliness and domestic competence, framing housework as a site of gender performance and social control. This moral scrutiny reinforces household labor as a central arena where femininity, morality, and worth are evaluated.

Garcia and Tomlinson (2020) illustrate how these dynamics persist even amid economic disruption. Studying couples experiencing redundancy, they identify "strategic incompetence," where men resist rebalancing household labor by feigning inability or passivity, often supported by what she calls "silent bargains", which maintain traditional roles without explicit negotiation. Even when women become primary earners, they frequently shoulder emotional and organizational labor, while men seldom reciprocate when roles are reversed. These tacit behaviors reveal how gender norms and implicit power sustain inequality even when material circumstances change.

Grünberg's (2019) survey data underscores the cross-cultural endurance of these patterns in Romania. Women overwhelmingly perform time-intensive, routine chores, while men handle episodic or specialized tasks like repairs. This entrenched division institutionalizes expectations and conflict, reinforcing women's association with the household's daily upkeep regardless of broader societal changes.

Together, these studies reveal that domestic labor inequalities are sustained not only through explicit divisions of tasks but also through invisible cognitive and emotional work, social expectations, and strategic behaviors that normalize women's disproportionate burden. These processes are reinforced by mechanisms of ignorance and institutionalization that make these roles appear natural, inevitable, and resistant to change.

Berger and Luckmann (1991) provide a foundation for understanding how such norms become institutionalized. Through habitualization, repeated household behaviors become patterned and embedded in each partner's "stock of knowledge," reducing the perceived range of alternatives. Reciprocal typifications – partners' shared expectations that "actors of type X

perform tasks of type X" – solidify these routines into institutions that present themselves as external, objective realities. Over time, these institutions confront individuals with coercive force, shaping conduct while concealing their human origins and changeability.

Burke (2023), however, highlights how ignorance, like knowledge, is historically and socially produced, existing in forms that reinforce such institutionalization. Passive ignorance (unawareness), active ignorance (resisting unsettling information), and sanctioned ignorance (privileged avoidance of others' experiences) all function within households. When a partner's avoidance or lack of skill is framed as incapacity rather than choice, the other assumes compensatory responsibility, further embedding the division of labor as a naturalized arrangement.

Rayner (2012) expands this by framing ignorance as a deliberate social achievement. Domestic units, like organizations, can manage "uncomfortable knowledge" – threats to established roles – through denial (refusing engagement), dismissal (acknowledging only to reject), diversion (redirecting focus), or displacement (substituting symbolic acts for real change). Feigned incompetence, tolerated avoidance, or performative participation can operate as such strategies, preserving a stable but unequal domestic order while minimizing overt conflict.

Alasuutari (2018) situates these practices within struggles for epistemic capital, the accumulation of authority through recognition. Authority in households is relational and discursively constructed, as partners invoke cultural expectations, expertise, or ontological authority, i.e. claims about what is "realistic" or "necessary," to legitimize their roles and absolve themselves of certain responsibilities. These forms of authority shape whose perspective defines competence, whose labor is recognized, and whose ignorance is excused, embedding gendered power dynamics in the negotiation of domestic work.

These dynamics of gendered domestic labor and the ways they are institutionalized through culture, emotion, cognition, and ignorance demand methods capable of capturing both the deeply personal and the structurally embedded. Autoethnography offers one such approach, allowing researchers to interrogate how cultural scripts of labor, care, and avoidance are lived, internalized, and contested.

By positioning the researcher as both narrator and analyst, autoethnography bridges individual memory and broader social context (Chang, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 2009). It treats recollection not as objective fact but as meaning-making, chronicling the routines, crises, and relational negotiations through which household roles take shape (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). This inward-outward lens (Adams et al., 2015) makes it possible to trace how emotional burdens, cognitive labor, and even feigned incompetence are experienced and rationalized by those enacting them.

Through feminist perspectives, autoethnography also foregrounds vulnerability and precarity (Ettorre, 2017), revealing how emotions and embodied experience, often minimized in conventional scholarship, are central to understanding how domestic inequalities endure. Reflexive approaches informed by Pierre Bourdieu (Reed-Danahay, 2009) further expose the institutional and cultural fields that shape these micro-level negotiations, dismantling the false binary between subjective and objective accounts.

In this way, autoethnography becomes not only a methodological tool but a lens through which to analyze how ignorance and incompetence are constructed and mobilized in everyday domestic life, embedding gendered divisions within seemingly natural, unchangeable routines.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed qualitative approach, combining semi-structured interviews with an autoethnographic reflection, to explore how domestic labor is negotiated and experienced within cohabiting couples. This dual strategy enabled the analysis of both interpersonal dynamics and individual, reflexive accounts, capturing how social expectations intersect with lived experiences.

During the preliminary stages of the literature review, OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5, 2025) was used to assist in identifying potentially relevant academic sources and refining keyword searches. It should be noted, however, that the final list of sources was curated by the author, who independently reviewed and decided which materials to include or exclude.

1. Interview Process and Participants

Two cohabiting heterosexual couples (participants in their early to mid-20s) were recruited to represent diversity in occupational status, household arrangements, and relationship duration. To avoid partner influence on responses, interviews were conducted individually. Each participant was told the study examined the "division of domestic labor," without reference to weaponized incompetence, to avoid priming their accounts. All interviews were conducted in Romanian, recorded with participant consent, and manually transcribed. Relevant excerpts were later translated into English for analysis.

Interviews were semi-structured, allowing for comparability while leaving space for elaboration on personal routines, conflicts, and perceptions of fairness. Questions addressed the division of tasks, conflict resolution, gender norms, and strategies for negotiating responsibilities. Female participants, however, were initially more reticent in discussing frustrations. My positionality – a male researcher with personal experience in cohabitation – likely shaped these interactions, as some participants moderated their tone or emphasized rational explanations for conflicts rather than emotional responses. Recognizing this, I maintained a conversational style, validating responses without pressing for elaboration beyond their comfort level. Finally, to safeguard participant confidentiality, all names have been changed, and any identifying details have been removed or altered.

2. Coding and Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. First, descriptive codes (e.g., "expressed incompetence," "conflict triggers," "gender expectations") were applied to the transcripts. These were iteratively grouped into four overarching themes: (1) division of labor, (2) conflict and negotiation, (3) expressions of incompetence, and (4) gender norms – which structure the findings section. Quotations were selected to illustrate the diversity of perspectives and to ground the analysis in participants' own words.

3. Autoethnography and Collaborative Witnessing

To complement participant accounts, I incorporated an autoethnographic reflection on my own cohabitation experience, drawing from my relationship with a former partner of five years. With her consent and borrowing from Allen et al.'s (2019) concept of collaborative witnessing, she conducted a self-interview, recording her responses to the same questions the participants had answered. This approach allowed both perspectives to be integrated without my presence influencing her recollections, ensuring a fuller, more balanced narrative.

Combining interviews, autoethnography, and collaborative witnessing allows the study to capture both broader relational patterns and deeply personal textures of domestic life. This approach recognizes that the division of household labor is not merely a structural phenomenon, but also a lived negotiation embedded in individual histories and relational contexts.

FINDINGS

1. Relationship Dynamics and Division of Domestic Labor

This analysis compares two young, middle-class, Gen Z heterosexual couples, Mark and Mary, on one hand, and Sebastian and Sophia, on the other, who recently started cohabiting. Both couples moved out from their parents' homes or dormitories, marking a transition to shared domestic life with new routines and responsibilities.

Mark (25, doctoral student) and Mary (21, master's student) have lived together for four months, while Sebastian (22, master's student) and Sophia (24, undergraduate) have shared an apartment for two months. Both describe cohabitation positively but with different tones: Mark reflects a pragmatic acceptance of the move, while Sophia feels more relaxed than she did living at the dorm.

Relationship descriptions reveal subtle gendered dynamics. Mark calls their relationship "unconventional" due to rejecting marriage, but admits their domestic life is fairly typical. Mary emphasizes harmony and good communication. Conversely, Sebastian describes their bond as soulmate-like but notes traditional gender roles: he handles heavy or technical tasks, while she cooks and cleans more, explaining this as partly involuntary and influenced by his anxiety around cooking and struggles with depression. Sophia acknowledges a "modern" relationship with "traditional" elements and perceives a persistent, often unspoken double standard expecting women to perform certain chores, something she consciously rejects based on her mother's experience.

Daily routines reflect gendered distributions of cognitive (Daminger, 2019) and emotional labor (Hartley, 2018). Mary and Sophia take on the bulk of planning and household coordination, while Mark and Sebastian contribute more sporadically or in specific tasks like dishwashing or laundry. Sebastian openly cites mental health as limiting his energy for chores.

Domestic responsibilities are divided along gendered lines and institutionalized through habit rather than explicit negotiation, consistent with Berger & Luckmann's (1991) theory of habitualization. Mary and Sophia largely manage cooking, cleaning, laundry, and financial

tasks, while Mark and Sebastian handle trash, some dishwashing, and technical repairs. Both women describe taking leadership in the household due to greater competence or confidence, often correcting or "educating" their partners. Mary describes this as a "dictatorial" role, while Sophia expresses frustration mixed with accommodation for Sebastian's mental health.

Strategic incompetence (Garcia & Tomlinson, 2020) appears in both men's selective engagement with domestic tasks, maintaining traditional gender divisions through limited involvement or expressed anxiety. Meanwhile, women bear most of the invisible cognitive and emotional labor – organizing, monitoring, and managing household life – highlighting ongoing gendered inequalities in cohabiting relationships despite modern ideals.

2. Conflict, Negotiation, and Satisfaction

Both couples experience low levels of explicit conflict regarding the division of domestic labor, though subtle tensions and negotiations are evident beneath the surface. Mark states, *"Misunderstandings, no,"* emphasizing that while minor requests occur *("maybe you cook," "you wouldn't be hanging clothes if I didn't tell you"*), these rarely escalate into conflict. Similarly, Mary accepts the current arrangement, noting *"he does what I tell him to,"* highlighting a hierarchical dynamic where she directs much of the domestic work. The main friction lies in small tasks like watering plants, where assumptions about responsibility create minor conflicts, reflecting a gap in communication rather than fundamental disagreement.

The second couple reveals more emotional labor entwined with conflict. Sebastian admits, *"she has moments when she's upset and feels like I'm not doing enough,"* linking his limited contribution to anxiety and low energy. Sophia echoes this by describing unspoken expectations and relaxed standards: *"we didn't argue… we just talked, and it passed,"* illustrating conflict resolution through low-stakes negotiation rather than confrontation.

Regarding satisfaction, Mark expresses cognitive dissonance, aware that their domestic labor division is skewed but personally comfortable: *"I think this is where the cognitive dissonance comes into play."* He acknowledges that, were he an outsider observing, he might view the situation as unfair but accepts it due to relational context. Mary, however, foresees future frustration from the unequal load: *"it doesn't bother me at the moment… but I'll probably get sick of it."* This anticipates potential burnout, highlighting the gendered emotional labor embedded in domestic management (Hochschild & Machung, 2003).

Sebastian voices regret and desire for improvement: *"I should be doing more,"* signaling awareness of imbalance and motivation for change, while Sophia perceives their division as fair and functional but acknowledges that she takes more responsibility for errands and household tasks. This pragmatism reflects adaptive negotiation to lived constraints.

When asked what they would change, Mark desires proactive initiative and skill acquisition from himself, to reduce his partner's burden: *"it'd be nice to do stuff on my own initiative,"* reflecting a move toward more egalitarian labor distribution. Mary emphasizes the emotional and cognitive gap: *"I should change the man,"* critiquing his lack of attentiveness to subtle needs, underlining the often invisible work women perform. Sebastian wishes to cook more, wanting to overcome his fears and contribute better, while Sophia stresses mutual accountability, warning against shared procrastination: *"we both hesitate."*

Overall, the couples' negotiations show gendered patterns of labor division maintained through a mix of implicit expectations, emotional labor, and negotiation strategies that prioritize relational harmony over strict equity.

3. Expressions of Incompetence

Expressions of incompetence around domestic labor serve multiple social functions in both couples: they mark areas of genuine skill disparity, signal discomfort, and sometimes reinforce implicit gender roles. Participants use phrases like *"I can't do it"* or *"you do it better"* in both practical and emotional registers: sometimes as genuine admissions, sometimes as strategic deflections.

For Mark, incompetence is not necessarily claimed outright but is inferred through his partner's standards: *"she feels I wouldn't meet them"*, especially in tasks like vacuum-cleaning or hanging clothes. Mary observes that he does claim *"I'm not that good"*, but it's framed as a warning before acting: less refusal, more self-protection in the face of perceived scrutiny. This aligns with what Mark later describes as a "negative feedback loop," where his lack of knowledge creates hesitation: *"I'm still in housekeeping kindergarten in this house, while she's a graduate."*

These expressions aren't merely about skill. They reflect the relational positioning and cognitive load. Mark vividly describes the mental barrier of starting a task like cooking: locating the kitchen utensils, checking ingredients, navigating unfamiliarity. For him, even basic chores feel *"uncanny"*, because the process hasn't been internalized into routine. His incompetence is performative and structural, not innate – a gap between embodied familiarity and cognitive overload. Mary validates this gap only to a point: *"the first time is an acceptable reason, but after that you should already know how to do it."* This suggests a pedagogical dynamic where the labor of teaching also falls unequally.

In the second couple, Sebastian openly claims incompetence in tasks like cooking, though he frames them with good humor. When confronted with something unfamiliar, like changing a lightbulb, he imagines himself feigning confidence: *"'Yes, sure!'... but deep inside: 'Shit, how do I do that?'"* Sophia, on the other hand, rejects incompetence as an excuse altogether: *"Anyone who claims that is lying through their teeth!"* This reflects a strong norm of self-sufficiency and perhaps a defensive stance against gendered assumptions about domesticity.

Interestingly, both women, Mary and Sophia, at times suspect a pattern of learned helplessness. Sophia admits she may contribute to this dynamic: *"I have a history of 'This is not right'..."* undermining her partner's learning process. Sophia, though uncertain, suspects avoidance: *"he seemed to me to be avoiding it a bit."* Her anecdote about her boyfriend's scattered sneakers – *"it was rubbing me the wrong way"* – reveals how small gestures of neglect can feel symbolic of deeper resistance or entitlement.

These expressions of incompetence are not neutral: they become gendered scripts, often reinforcing asymmetry in emotional and cognitive labor. While men may voice incompetence with sincerity, women often bear the burden of instructing, correcting, and accommodating.

4. Gender Norms and Social Expectations

Gender norms and socialization patterns significantly shape how domestic labor is perceived and divided, though participants disagree on the extent to which these dynamics stem from personality versus societal expectation. For Mark and Mary, differences in household standards are largely attributed to upbringing and temperament rather than gender per se. Mark notes, *"it doesn't seem to me that it's because she's a woman… she has high standards that she holds herself to… but she doesn't impose it as much on me,"* attributing his partner's initiative to her early exposure to household chores rather than any inherent gendered disposition. Mary echoes this: *"it's not about gender, it's about upbringing… and how you grew up."* For them, disparities emerge less as ideology and more as inertia from past routines.

In contrast, Sebastian identifies a systemic, gendered expectation, particularly for women to perform "double duty": *"we don't just have the expectation that the woman has to sit at the saucepan – we have the expectation that she has to sit at the saucepan after she's been at work."* He frames this as a backlash phenomenon, fueled by both misogynistic attitudes and women reinforcing traditionalist narratives online, amplifying pressure on women to fulfill both professional and domestic roles. Sophia concurs that *"there is always the expectation that a woman can handle cooking better,"* though she situates it in cultural habit rather than conscious sexism: *"that's the way we're used to… but it doesn't mean that's the way I want to go about it."* Her observation about male celebrity chefs underscores a broader double standard: women are expected to cook at home, while men dominate the professional culinary sphere.

When reflecting on their own dynamics, both couples acknowledge that their divisions often "illustrate" traditional roles (as Mark and Mary concede) but with caveats. Mary attributes this to her *"meticulousness,"* describing her high standards and control over organization as a personal quirk rather than capitulation to gender norms. Conversely, Sebastian and Sophia argue their relationship actively resists broader gendered expectations, particularly financially: *"we share everything… it's all equal,"* with both partners transparent and collaborative in budgeting. For them, sharing costs equally and maintaining open communication about spending explicitly defies societal expectations where *"the man pays the rent wholly."*

In comparing themselves to peers, both couples recognize their arrangements as somewhat atypical, whether due to more deliberate financial transparency (Sebastian and Sophia), or a more functional task-based division (Mark and Mary). Yet, even as they rationalize disparities as rooted in personality, upbringing, or efficiency, traditional gender norms remain a persistent backdrop, shaping expectations, tensions, and the frameworks through which fairness is negotiated.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that domestic labor division is shaped by a mix of personal habits, negotiated dynamics, perceived competence, and lingering gendered expectations – sometimes challenged, sometimes reinforced – within each relationship. These patterns highlight not just how couples manage household work, but how broader social norms intersect with individual personalities and histories. Before we draw any broader conclusions, however, let us take a look at how these themes resonate with my own lived experience, through an autoethnographic reflection.

Cleaning, Cooking, and Confronting Myself: An Autoethnographic Account

Growing up, the division of domestic labor in my family was shaped by both circumstance and traditional gender roles, but it was never explicitly framed that way at home. My father worked abroad as a truck driver for much of my childhood, leaving my mother to manage the household alone. When he was home, he took on physical and outdoor tasks such as chopping wood, maintenance, and repairs – work culturally coded as masculine due to its physicality or association with traditionally male spaces like the backyard or the garage. My mother, on the other hand, handled cooking, cleaning, laundry, and caregiving duties. She also managed household logistics: writing shopping lists, planning meals, and generally keeping track of domestic life.

Because my father was often absent, many of the heavier, physical tasks fell to my mother, who sometimes struggled with health problems due to the strain. As I grew older, especially after my mother secured a full-time job as a social worker, I was expected to take on more chores, such as cleaning, doing dishes, and tending the wood-burning stove. This shift was difficult: I felt overwhelmed balancing school and home responsibilities, and at times lonely and neglected. Even as a child, witnessing my parents' frustrations and arguments over the division of labor left an impression that the arrangement was unfair and unsustainable.

Reflecting now, I see how deeply gendered these roles were, both reinforced by social norms and by practical necessity. I grew up observing a version of masculinity that involved physical strength and technical skills but avoided caregiving and domestic work. Cooking, for example, was something my father rarely did at home, despite managing for himself abroad. This shaped my own attitudes toward household tasks in ways I did not fully understand until later.

When I moved in with Julia during our university years, we initially tried to split chores equally, alternating tasks to keep things "fair." However, this arrangement was transactional rather than truly equitable, especially since I lacked cooking skills and confidence. Julia took on the bulk of cooking duties, while I focused on other chores like taking out the trash, doing dishes, and cleaning. I often justified my limited involvement by emphasizing the chores I did, but I now recognize that this was a form of what has come to be called "weaponized incompetence." I performed ignorance around cooking to avoid the discomfort and responsibility involved, while expecting Julia to compensate by handling emotional and cognitive labor, such as planning meals and managing food supplies.

Conflicts arose, especially around cooking and shopping, where my insecurities and communication difficulties played a large role. Arguments about what to buy, who should carry groceries, and when I would cook were frequent. I often reacted defensively when Julia pointed out my shortcomings, trying to shift focus to other contributions rather than addressing the underlying issue. I wanted to avoid tension but also struggled to admit fault or change ingrained habits. These conflicts left both of us frustrated and emotionally exhausted, sometimes erupting into tears and withdrawal.

After our breakup, I began living alone and taking full responsibility for all household tasks. This change forced me to confront my prior behaviors and assumptions directly. Over time, I have developed not only practical skills but also a greater awareness of the emotional and relational dimensions of domestic labor. Cooking, once a source of anxiety, has become

something I enjoy, especially when sharing meals with friends, including Julia. Our relationship has transformed into a friendship marked by mutual respect and openness, and I am grateful for the chance to grow through this connection.

Writing about these experiences now evokes a complex mixture of guilt, shame, hope, and gratitude. These emotions remind me of Rayner's (2012) four strategies of dealing with uncomfortable knowledge: denial, dismissal, diversion, and displacement. Early on, I denied the significance of my role in the inequitable division of labor, brushing aside the frustration Julia expressed as just "her being upset." Later on, I dismissed her concerns by emphasizing other chores I did, deflecting attention away from cooking because it was a domain where I felt incompetent. I also engaged in diversion by focusing on transactional fairness, counting tasks instead of addressing the emotional labor and underlying power dynamics. Finally, displacement occurred as I projected responsibility for the problem onto external factors such as my workload or stress from exams.

By confronting these strategies within myself, I have begun to dismantle the defenses that kept me from fully owning my part in the dynamic. This process of self-reflection reveals how uncomfortable knowledge about gender, power, and responsibility can be avoided, yet it is precisely by "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) that meaningful change becomes possible.

My story reflects broader social patterns where women disproportionately bear the unpaid "second shift" of domestic and emotional labor, even amid changing norms. It underscores the importance of accountability, communication, and continuous self-reflection in disrupting these patterns. By sharing my personal journey alongside academic inquiry, I hope to contribute to a richer understanding of gender and care, as well as encourage others – especially men – to examine their own roles in household dynamics. Ultimately, I want this reflection to be an invitation for greater honesty, empathy, and partnership in how we negotiate domestic life.

DISCUSSION

The personal narrative I shared in the autoethnographic reflection echoes many of the themes that emerged from the interviews with the cohabiting couples, particularly around the division of domestic labor and the performative nature of incompetence. Both the interviewees and my own experience reveal a persistent tension between evolving gender norms and entrenched expectations that continue to shape how chores are divided and negotiated.

Interview participants often noted that, while contemporary attitudes reflect a desire for equality – splitting chores or costs "fairly" –, traditional gendered patterns subtly persist. For instance, women frequently remain responsible for cooking and emotional labor, even when men take on more visible tasks like cleaning or paying bills. This mirrors my experience with Julia, where despite an initial attempt at transactional equality, I performed incompetence around cooking to avoid responsibility, reinforcing a double standard typical of weaponized incompetence. The interviews' acknowledgment of this dynamic as partly rooted in childhood socialization and habit echoes my reflection on family gender roles shaping attitudes and behaviors.

This comparison highlights the benefits and pitfalls of "gender mainstreaming" (Verloo, 2016; Walby, 2005) as the policy and cultural effort to embed gender equality across institutions and everyday life. On one hand, gender mainstreaming's push to raise awareness about inequality has empowered many couples to question traditional roles, fostering more egalitarian arrangements. Some, like Sebastian and Sophia, deliberately split financial responsibilities and challenge norms, reflecting increased consciousness and intentionality in domestic negotiations.

However, the pitfalls emerge when gender mainstreaming fails to account for the deeper, affective, and unconscious dimensions of gendered behavior. As my own story shows, even awareness of inequality does not automatically translate into behavioral change. Defensive reactions, emotional discomfort, and socialized insecurities can hinder the renegotiation of roles. In fact, weaponized incompetence thrives in the gap between awareness and action, where men may know they should contribute more but unconsciously or strategically avoid tasks tied to femininity or vulnerability.

The interviews and my reflection also underscore how self-awareness is a critical, though insufficient, catalyst for change. I became aware of my weaponized incompetence only through the painful process of reflection and post-breakup solitude, enabling me to develop skills and attitudes aligned with more equitable domestic labor. Similarly, some interview participants described ongoing negotiations, highlighting that change is incremental, relational, and often fraught with conflict.

This suggests that gender mainstreaming efforts need to extend beyond policy and discourse to address emotional literacy, communication skills, and cultural scripts that shape everyday interactions. Supporting individuals in recognizing their own complicity in reproducing gendered inequalities – and in managing the discomfort that arises – is essential. Otherwise, the performative aspect of incompetence can persist, maintaining structural imbalances under the surface.

Finally, the interplay between my autoethnographic reflection and the interview data illustrates the complexity of domestic labor negotiations within shifting gender norms. While gender mainstreaming has made valuable inroads in promoting equality, bridging the gap between consciousness and practice remains a challenge. A more nuanced understanding of the emotional and performative dimensions of gender roles can enhance both scholarly research and practical efforts to foster genuine, sustainable change in households.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how heterosexual cohabiting partners negotiate domestic labor within the context of evolving but persistent gender norms. The findings show that negotiation is a dynamic process shaped by individual personalities, childhood socialization, and broader societal expectations. While many couples strive for equitable division, traditional roles often subtly influence who performs which tasks, especially regarding cooking, cleaning, and emotional labor.

Housework norms play a crucial role in institutionalizing gender roles by embedding expectations about "appropriate" tasks for men and women. These norms are reinforced both

through socialization and through the tacit acceptance of double standards, such as the assumption that women should maintain higher standards of cleanliness or emotional care. Such norms create a framework within which domestic labor is divided and justified, even as couples attempt to challenge or adapt them.

The social construction of incompetence emerges as a strategic performance within households, where one partner – usually the man – feigns inability to avoid certain chores. This weaponized incompetence functions as a form of epistemic capital, shifting responsibility and emotional labor onto the other partner. This dynamic reinforces power imbalances by enabling some individuals to evade accountability while relying on their partner's compliance or reassurance.

These patterns have significant implications for power relations within the household. They perpetuate unequal labor burdens and emotional work, shaping not only the division of tasks but also the emotional climate of relationships.

For future research, longitudinal studies could illuminate how weaponized incompetence and domestic labor negotiations evolve over time, especially through different life stages or after significant relational transitions. Additionally, exploring how intersectional factors, such as social class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, influence these dynamics would deepen understanding of how domestic labor and gendered power relations are shaped across diverse contexts.

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Perceptions of Gender-Balanced Governance in Iceland: Insights on Health, Welfare, Equity and Gender Mainstreaming Policies and Outcomes

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Abstract

This case study examines the link between women's political representation in Iceland and public perceptions of governance outcomes across various demographic groups. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach that includes quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and secondary data analysis. The research investigates how gender-balanced governance affects social welfare, health, equity, and the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming policies through critical mass and critical actors theory. Findings indicate that an increase in female leadership is associated with the implementation of progressive policies, such as enhanced childcare support, extended parental leave, improved access to education, LGBTQ+ rights advocacy, and significant healthcare reforms. Key initiatives in government and local institutions have prioritized gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting, as the 2016 Public Finances Act, which facilitated meaningful changes in Reykjavik and the University of Iceland. These initiatives also played a vital role in protecting women's "care" jobs during the COVID-19 crisis. While younger and older generations acknowledge these advancements, skepticism is more pronounced among individuals aged 30 to 55. This group tends to view the impact of female leadership less favorably, reflecting a disconnect between gender equity narratives and their daily challenges. Concerns about the quality of care for older adults and the support for racial and ethnic minorities emerge as critical improvement areas. The study highlights that, despite significant progress toward gender equality, persistent barriers like wage disparities and underrepresentation in business leadership remain. It endorses a bidirectional relationship between women's leadership and social change, suggesting that increased female representation could drive advancements in health, welfare, and equity policies. It also underlines the role of critical actor's leadership such as women's advocacy groups and female governmental leaders. Future research should aim for a more representative sample to assess perceptions of policy outcomes beyond Reykjavik.

Keywords: women's political empowerment, Iceland, perceived benefits, Nordic equality, legislative versus structural changes

INTRODUCTION

Little is known about whether perceived societal benefits keep pace with Iceland's rapid advance in descriptive representation. With the world facing catastrophic climatic events,

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pandemic threats, risks of nuclear wars, and wealth inequality, it is crucial to investigate good governance and the effects of balanced gender representation.

While progress has been made since the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, which recommended measures to ensure women's equal access and representation in decision-making, it has been lagging. The Gender Gap Index, introduced by the World Economic Forum in 2006, indicates that political empowerment has not yet reached a satisfactory level, with a global average of under 25% (World Gender Gap Report, 2024). While descriptive representation is crucial, it does not always translate to substantive representation, as women may hold parliamentary seats without significant influence in decision-making roles (Childs & Krook, 2009). The extent of the impact of women in leadership will depend on the number of women in Parliament who are motivated beyond party lines to represent various issues (Karam & Lovenduski, 2010).

Despite extensive research on the mechanisms that hinder gender-balanced leadership, studies on the impact of such representation are limited (Karam & Lovenduski, 2005). A growing number of studies conducted at the local and regional levels on gender differences in policymaking rely on (quasi-)random variation in the number of female representatives; however, the coverage is not global. Evidence is limited to the US, a handful of European countries (Germany, Italy, Norway and Spain), and India (Hessami & Lopes da Fonseca, 2020). Additionally, while much research exists on women representation, little is known about how citizens perceive the outcomes of this shift in governance.

Context

Nordic countries, recognised for their commitment to gender equality, including Iceland, have engaged in gender-related nation-branding to promote this image globally. Iceland has notably improved its political empowerment, consistently ranking at the top of the Global Gender Gap Index, with the representation of women in Parliament rising from 25% in 1975 to 47.6% in 2023 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). The Varieties of Democracy Index also reflects this progress, with Iceland's score improving from 0.85 to 0.93 between 1985 and 2022, and the Political Participation Index reaching a maximum of 1.0 in 2009, which has been maintained since (World Bank, 2024).

Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was the world's first democratically elected female president and one of the most inspirational Icelandic women, serving as president of Iceland from 1980 to 1996. During those 16 years, she advocated for women's rights, girls' education, and language diversity. Around the same time, a strong advocacy group that evolved into a political party, the Women's List, advocated for women's rights and played a key role in the introduction of childcare reforms. In 2009, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir became the first woman in Icelandic history to serve as Prime Minister, and at the time, her cabinet had an equal number of women and men. Since then, Iceland has had two more prime ministers and one president. The current government, elected in 2024, has women holding the positions of prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, in addition to a cabinet with more than half of its ministers being women, including all leaders of the government coalition parties. The president, who holds a largely symbolic, non-executive role, is also a woman.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The representation of women in key roles is crucial for addressing women's needs and harnessing their contributions to society. The literature underscores the multifaceted impacts of female representation in leadership across sectors such as health, economic growth, climate action, and peacebuilding.

Studies highlight the positive influence of women in leadership on societal views regarding gender equity and policymaking outcomes (Powell, 2013; Helliwell et al., 2021). Women in political leadership are active in recruiting other women and creating legislation that benefits all genders (Dahlerup et al., 2005). Their presence enhances the representation of women's voices in policymaking, which contributes to a broader political understanding, while, if women are primarily represented by men, they often feel less represented (Wolak, 2020; Carroll, 1994).

Women have been found to be more effective in addressing critical issues, such as healthcare, poverty, and education, ultimately leading to improved public health outcomes. Research indicates that women's cabinet representation can lead to increased public health spending and improved life expectancies (Mavisakalyan, 2014). Additionally, Helliwell et al. (2021) noted that countries with higher levels of women's representation also experience lower income inequality and greater institutional trust, which in turn contributed to lower COVID-19 death rates.

Benefits to the economic landscape have been associated with female representation. Constituencies that elect women demonstrate superior GDP growth compared to those with male leadership (Baskaran et al., 2018). Iceland serves as a prime example, where parental leave reforms and public daycare access have bolstered women's career progress (Arnalds & Duvander, 2023). Research also indicates that women's involvement in Research and Development Teams is linked to breakthrough innovations (Díaz-Garcia, 2014).

The influence of women in leadership is particularly pronounced in climate policy. Female mayors in the Amazon biome have been shown to reduce by 23% the region's average annual greenhouse gas emissions (Berniell et al., 2025). Women's leadership is deemed vital for effectively addressing climate change (Miranda & Espinosa, 2022).

Gender-equal societies tend to foster peace and stability. Women's involvement in negotiations enhances the likelihood of peace agreements being reached and sustained (Paffenholz, 2015). Audette et al. (2019) note that such societies also promote greater happiness, longevity, and economic prosperity for everyone involved.

Iceland has become a known success story in gender equality. Nonetheless, Iceland still faces challenges that must be addressed to achieve true gender equality. Studies have shown persistent educational and employment segregation (Bericat & Sánchez Bermejo, 2016). The "aura of gender equality" suggests a common belief that equality has been achieved, despite evidence to the contrary (Pétursdottir, 2009). While gender quotas have successfully increased women's representation on corporate boards—from 4% in 2003 to nearly 50% in 2015 (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2016)—, obstacles such as the gender pay gap and underrepresentation in small companies remain critical issues. As Iceland demonstrates, reforms in policy and societal structures are essential, but they must be accompanied by ongoing efforts to dismantle deeply rooted inequalities and stereotypes.

This study employs the theoretical frameworks of critical mass and critical actors as outlined by Childs and Krook (2008). The critical mass theory suggests that a minimum level of female representation is essential for enacting change within political institutions. Conversely, the critical actors theory focuses on key individuals who can mobilise support and advocate for women's issues. This differentiation underscores the distinction between descriptive representation (the mere presence of women) and substantive representation (genuine stakeholding of decisional power and advocacy for women's interests). These frameworks facilitate a deeper examination of the interplay between numerical and substantive representation in Iceland, aiming to address the following research questions:

How do different demographic groups in Iceland perceive the impact of the increased presence of women in political leadership roles and governance?

What role do critical actors play in translating numerical representation into substantive influence on health/welfare, and gender mainstreaming in policies?

How do these perceptions align with or diverge from legislative changes or expert opinions?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This case study presents a preliminary analysis that contributes to the limited literature exploring the perceived benefits associated with increased women's presence in political leadership in Iceland. While much of the existing research emphasises factors that bolster women's political empowerment, this study shifts its focus to the societal benefits that may arise from such empowerment. Given the complexities involved in quantifying both perceived and actual benefits, a mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, secondary data, and a comprehensive review of relevant legislation and literature since 2006.

The quantitative component involved surveys designed in English to assess public perceptions of individuals over 18 regarding the health and equity benefits of closing the gender gap in political empowerment. This approach utilised a non-representative convenience sample. Though many individuals in Iceland are proficient in English, the exclusive use of this language may inadvertently exclude certain demographic groups, particularly elderly individuals or those residing in remote areas. The use of English only surveys may bias the results. To mitigate this limitation during in-person surveys, particularly with older respondents, the researcher provided clarifications for any ambiguous items and, in some cases, offered additional assistance with the translation of survey items by native speakers. Nonetheless, these limitations are acknowledged as influencing the study's results. The survey targeted a diverse segment of the general population, soliciting responses from individuals across all ages and genders, including those who identify as non-binary. Respondents were categorised into three age bands: under 30 years, between 30 and 55 years, and over 55 years. The author collected responses face-to-face through links or QR codes, distributed paper questionnaires during in-person invitations at public venues or political party offices—mainly

in Reykjavik and selected towns across Iceland—and via email outreach to city halls. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of their anonymity throughout the process, resulting in a total of 146 responses. Even if this sample size is modest and part of a preliminary study, it can provide enough data to reveal initial patterns and insights about how citizens perceive the outcomes of a more gender equitable political leadership, even without claiming broader representativeness or generalization.

The composition was predominantly female (64%), with a slight underrepresentation of individuals over 55 years (14%), paralleling Iceland's median age of 36.2 years (Worldometer, 2025). The educational backgrounds of participants were diverse, reflecting a balanced distribution among high school graduates (30%), bachelor's degree holders (35%), and those with graduate degrees (35%). The questionnaire comprised nine closed questions that inquired about the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and assessed the perceived benefits associated with closing the gender gap in political empowerment. Respondents rated statements using a Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 5 (very much), reflecting the extent to which various factors were perceived to be influenced by women's equal presence in political leadership. A Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted to assess the internal consistency or reliability of the survey questions, yielding a result of $\alpha = 0.723$. According to George & Mallery (2003), this value indicates an acceptable to good level of reliability for the items measuring the latent variable of perceived benefits in closing the gender gap in political leadership. Quantitative data were collected via SurveyMonkey, adhering to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) standards. An open-ended question was incorporated to gain deeper insights into the research query. Mean average analysis was utilised to assess societal aspects perceived as positively influenced by enhanced women's political leadership.

The qualitative aspect of the research involved semi-structured interviews designed to gather experiences and viewpoints from individuals directly involved in political empowerment or related research. This qualitative approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the social phenomena under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Six in-person interviews were conducted, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, with a diverse group of experts, including four women and two men. The participants consisted of two parliamentarians from opposing parties, a senior government administrator, and three university professors specialising in Gender Studies and Political Science from the University of Iceland. Interviews occurred in Reykjavik in June 2024, with an additional online interview conducted in February 2025 to examine legislation enacted in 2018. A semi-structured format guided interviews to explore various themes associated with the research questions (Rabionet, 2009; Evans & Lewis, 2018). Discussion points included how gender-balanced governance may influence social welfare, health, and equity, as well as pertinent legislation passed in this regard. All interviews were conducted in English, a language with which all participants were proficient. Informed consent was obtained through written forms, ensuring ethical compliance and transparency throughout the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity. This case study presents a preliminary analysis examining the perceived benefits of increased women's representation in political leadership, with a commitment to seek appropriate ethics approval for future broader initiatives. It presently qualifies for an ethics review exemption for several reasons: (1) It aims to gather initial insights rather than testing a hypothesis. (2) A mixed-

methods approach was used, ensuring informed consent and anonymity. (3) It involved secondary data from public sources, avoiding sensitive issues. (4) Ethical considerations are noted, supporting the exemption, with plans for future ethics approval. (5) Qualitative data included open-ended responses on the impact of women's leadership on wellbeing.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded for thematic analysis, relating to the perceived benefits of closing the gender gap in political empowerment. The qualitative data collected included responses to open-ended questions related to identifying parameters for defining new categories based on participants' perspectives, if new themes arose, and categories relevant to the research question and directly related to survey questions investigating the possible perceived benefits associated with closing the gender gap in political empowerment, as indicated in the table below.

Table 1. ***Codebook Themes***

Topic	**Description**
Childcare support	Availability and accessibility of childcare services and support for families.
Parental Leave	Policies regarding maternity, paternity, and shared parental leave.
Human Capital	The impact of investing in women's education and professional development.
Women's Movement	The evolution and impact of the feminist movement on political empowerment.
Women's Lists	The Impact of Women's Lists in Elections on Representation and Results.
Barriers	Challenges and Obstacles Faced by Women in Achieving Political Empowerment.
Equal Rights	Legislative and social frameworks supporting equal rights for all genders.
Older Adults	The impact of political decisions on the welfare of elderly individuals.
Impact of Gender Equality on the Icelandic Economy	How gender equality initiatives contribute to the broader economy.
LGBTQ+	Inclusion and representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in political discussions.
Minorities	Inclusion and representation of minorities in political discussions.
Gender Mainstreaming	A policy-making approach that incorporates both women's and men's interests to address gender inequalities and promote gender equality at all levels.

The secondary data included the Infant Mortality Index and the Gini coefficient to assess the societal benefits associated with female political empowerment. The Infant Mortality Index, as

reported by the United Nations, is a measure of healthcare access and support for women and children. Additionally, the Gini coefficient serves as a measure of income inequality. Relevant laws and articles were examined to identify potential advantages of gender-balanced leadership in politics.

RESULTS

A. Health/Welfare

The table below presents the mean scores of survey respondents categorised by demographic characteristics (scale 0 to 5, with scores above 3 indicating essential or frequently mentioned factors) regarding perceptions of elements contributing to the overall health of the Icelandic population.

Table 2. ***Preliminary Data of Iceland survey Factors of Well-Being perceived as influenced by a more gender balanced Political Empowerment***

	Better Healthcare	**Access to childcare**	**Older adults' quality of care**
Female	3.6	4.0	3.2
Male	3.5	3.9	2.8
Non Binary	3.0	4.3	2.8
>30 years old	3.7	4.1	3.0
30-55 years old	3.3	3.7	2.9
>55 years old	3.6	4.3	3.4
High School	3.5	3.8	2.9
Bachelors degree	3.6	4.0	3.4
Graduate Degree	3.5	4.1	2.8
Overall Average	3.6	4.0	3.0

The survey reveals that access to childcare is perceived as positively influenced by the presence of women in political leadership across all demographics. Other factors, such as improved healthcare and the quality of care for older adults, were noted to a lesser degree. Notably, all demographics responded more positively to “better healthcare" than non-binary respondents.

Responses about older adults’ care varied widely, with males, non-binary individuals, and the 30-55 age group notably less positive about elder care compared to the other groups.

In contrast, respondents over 55, who benefit from these services, rated the quality of elderly care more positively.

Equity/Gender Mainstreaming

The table below displays the mean average scores of survey respondents regarding their perceptions of Equal Access to Work and Wages, Policies benefiting LGBTQ+ individuals, and Policies for racial and ethnic minorities. Scores are on a scale of 0 to 5, with scores above 3 indicating importance or frequent mention.

Table 3. ***Preliminary Data from Iceland Survey on Well-Being Factors Perceived as Influenced by Gender-Balanced Political Empowerment***

	Equal Access to Work and Wages	**Policies to Benefit the LGBTQ+ Community**	**Policies to benefit racial and ethnic minorities**
Female	3.7	3.7	3.3
Male	3.1	3.1	2.9
Non Binary	3.8	3.5	2.8
>30 years old	3.7	3.5	3.0
30-55 years old	3.2	3.4	2.8
>55 years old	3.7	3.6	3.7
High School	3.3	3.3	2.8
Bachelor's degree	3.7	3.6	3.3
Graduate Degree	3.5	3.6	3.2
Overall Average	3.5	3.5	3.1

According to the findings, the following factors were frequently perceived as positively influenced by an increased presence of women in political leadership positions: access to work and wages, as well as policies that benefit LGBTQ+ individuals.

DISCUSSION

This research examines the connection between numerical and substantive representation in Iceland, with a specific focus on demographic perceptions of how increased female political leadership affects governance outcomes in health, welfare, and equity policies. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, secondary data, and a review of relevant legislation and literature since 2006. Limitations include the use of a convenience sample, which may introduce biases (Etikan et al., 2016), potential language bias affecting older demographics, and a small sample size that restricts statistical analysis. The underrepresentation of groups such as individuals over 55 and males may further constrain the study's conclusions.

Health/Welfare

The results indicate that access to childcare is frequently perceived as improved due to women's leadership across demographics, while other areas, such as healthcare and the quality of care for older adults, received less emphasis.

The interview findings corroborated the emphasis on improved healthcare. Anonymous 4 highlighted a clear connection between women's leadership and welfare improvements: "Increased attention to welfare. We just passed a bill that increases payment for disability benefits and extends habilitation and sick leave", suggesting that women's numerical representation correlates with substantive policy changes, reflecting a greater commitment to social welfare.

Iceland boasts a low United Nations infant mortality rate of 1.1959 per 1,000 live births (UNdata, 2025), illustrating effective governance linked to economic prosperity and a robust healthcare system, both of which align with the welfare focus of enhanced women's political empowerment and the results of the study conducted by Bhalotra and Clots-Figueras (2014), which showed that female politicians are more likely to invest in public health infrastructure, including prenatal and childhood health services, leading to a significant reduction in infant mortality.

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the effectiveness of these policies, as Iceland reported fewer than seven deaths per 100,000 people, compared to higher rates in the United States and the United Kingdom (Scudellari, 2020).

Perceptions of elder care varied widely. While men, non-binary individuals, and those aged 30-55 rated care quality below 3.0, respondents aged 55 and above rated it positively at 3.5. These discrepancies underscore the impact of diverse demographic experiences on perceptions of governance and health policies, emphasising the importance of inclusive representation in decision-making roles. The 30-55 age group is also most likely the group that has the most working adults, who have to deal with day-to-day challenges due to economic pressures, caretaking responsibility for the care of both children and elderly, or systemic gendered labor expectations and inequalities, and therefore may hold a more realistic view of the achievements and limits of female political leadership.

The strengthening of Iceland's pension system, driven by advocacy from women's groups, further illustrates this point. Anonymous 5 noted: "The Woman's List pushed for social

improvements for the elderly". The alignment between the presence of women in leadership roles and the pressure from women's advocacy groups, as well as substantial legislative improvements, underscores the framework of descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation, first introduced by Pitkin's in 1967, distinguishing between descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. These dimensions can represent gender equality in the following way: descriptive representation can be intended as inclusive policy processes, substantive representation can be the act of looking at policy content, and symbolic representation can be analyzed through the process of achieving gender equality through the advocacy of political actors. As seen in Iceland, a good balance between descriptive and substantive representation, represented by female political representatives that are not only present in large numbers but also occupy positions that hold influence in decision making, when intersected with critical actors—in this case, the Women's Lists—, can lead to tangible changes in policies benefiting marginalised populations.

The third factor, "access to childcare", had scores between 3.7 and 4.1 across demographics. The evolution of child care and parental leave policies underscores the role of critical actors in transforming policy. Anonymous 2 pointed to the Women's Lists as instrumental in establishing public, affordable daycare. Additionally, the ongoing improvement of parental leave, which now offers longer and better-compensated options, illustrates how critical voices can convert numerical representation into substantive influence.

The initial resistance to paternity leave in 2001 reflects the cultural challenges faced in promoting shared parental responsibilities, as described by Anonymous 3: "When I took two months of paternity leave, everybody went crazy among the directors." This resistance highlights differing perceptions among demographics, particularly men, compared to legislative changes promoting equity.

In 2021, revisions to parental leave were implemented to enhance economic incentives for men. Anonymous four noted, "In 2021, we extended the leave from 10 to 12 months," demonstrating ongoing efforts to adapt policies based on diverse experiences and perceptions.

In fact, fathers in Iceland have been increasingly embracing their paid parental leave, with approximately 90 per cent of all fathers taking advantage of their non-transferable rights to paid parental leave (Arnalds et al., 2022). Anonymous 4 emphasised that improved parental leave supports gender equality, encourages fathers to take leave and reduces the burden on mothers. This change aims to balance parenting responsibilities and strengthen women's status in the workforce.

On the other hand, in reality, men continue to take less time for paternity leave and taking care of the children after that period, as parenthood continues to be primarily associated with motherhood. There is a push toward intensive mothering, based on the construct that women possess an innate character that leads them toward a role as primary nurturers (Simonardóttir, 2016). Additionally, the perception of children as a social capital that society should invest in has disproportionately rested upon the services of women, who are often from racially and economically challenged groups (Vandenbeld, 2014).

Anonymous 2 reported, "When women became more numerous in the Parliament and local governments, they also affected men. Women's participation in leadership positions has

led to a more inclusive approach to policy-making, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered in addressing societal issues."

Overall, the findings suggest that the increased presence of women in governance has had a positive influence on policies related to childcare, healthcare, and elder care. Respondents reported improvements in affordable childcare and parental leave, encouraging equitable family responsibilities. This correlation between women in politics and supportive family policies suggests a shift toward more effective governance, even though some perceived and substantive issues still need to be addressed, such as some concerns about elderly care and structural inequalities in the proportion of childcare responsibilities taken on by women, especially those belonging to racially and economically challenged groups.

Equity/Gender Mainstreaming

Iceland's success in social programs is often attributed to the Nordic model, which emphasises public responsibility for "citizen welfare within a market economy" (Kautto, 2010, p. 587). This model promotes gender equality and social policies, such as childcare and parental leave, enhancing women's employment opportunities. The Gini coefficient in Iceland has consistently ranged from 22 to 26 between 2006 and 2025, indicating low income inequality and suggesting that social assistance—encompassing financial aid, child benefits, housing assistance, unemployment benefits, and disability benefits—plays a significant role in reducing disparities. The stability of the Gini coefficient may reflect the Nordic value of equality rather than the specific influence of female leadership.

Perceptions of the benefits brought by women in political leadership roles in policies toward those identifying as non-binary were generally positive among most demographic groups; however, men's perceptions scored closer to neutrality, at around 3.0. Reykjavik has extended the concept of equality to encompass LGBTQ+ individuals, immigrants, and people with disabilities, as exemplified by the adoption of the "City of Reykjavik's Human Rights Policy" in 2006 (Einarsdóttir & Thorvaldsdóttir, 2007). As noted by Anonymous 4, several members of parliament identify as LGBTQ+, and notable figures include the first openly gay prime minister in 2009 and the recent Minister of Social Affairs, both of whom have contributed to significant legislative advancements, including a recent law on gender autonomy that paved the way for the inclusive Gender Equality Law—underscoring, again, the role of critical actors. Gender mainstreaming, which entails considering gender in all aspects of policy and decision-making, is a vital component of this progression. The finding that women officeholders are often viewed as more compassionate and better equipped to engage with constituents than their male counterparts aligns with the increased representation of women in office (Dolan, 2014).

Iceland's immigrant population reached 18.2% in 2024, with Poles as the largest group, according to Statistics Iceland (2024). The Suðurnes region recorded the highest immigrant density at 31.5%. To combat discrimination, the Icelandic government enacted Act No. 85 on Equal Treatment irrespective of Race and Ethnic Origin on June 25, 2018, and the Act on Equal Treatment in the Labour Market, No. 86/2018, prohibits discrimination based on various factors. Reykjavik's city council has also developed policies in alignment with national and international human rights standards to bolster equality initiatives.

However, perceptions regarding policies brought about by a gender-balanced political leadership benefiting racial and ethnic minorities varied; several demographics, including males and individuals aged 30-55, reported scepticism, scoring below 3.0 concerning the effectiveness of such policies. Regarding minority representation, Anonymous 5 noted the low presence of immigrants in Parliament, observing that fewer than 8% of representatives belong to this group. Anonymous 4 called for improvement in the representation of various ethnic backgrounds, citing the underrepresentation of these groups in positions of power. Additionally, strong female union leaders advocating for wage increases, particularly among low-paid sectors that often employ immigrant women, highlight efforts and, at the same time, an unmet need to address these disparities. Nordic countries, including Iceland, exhibit significant employment rate gaps between native and foreign-born women, reaching up to 15 percentage points (OECD/European Union, 2019).

On the other hand, survey respondents reported the emergence of new female leaders both in the political sphere and in the Unions, such as Sanna Magdalena Mörtudóttir and Sólveig Anna Jónsdóttir, who add awareness of the multiple obstacles that most women face in their journey, as well as elements of increased representation of diversity, richness, and connections with the population that are not found in other political leaders, thus echoing the transformational change in the feminist movement given by the framework of intersectionality (Zakaria, 2022).

Anonymous 4 drew attention to the limited presence of individuals with disabilities in power, but acknowledged the growing influence of critical actors, such as disability activists, who are increasingly using social media. Legislative progress includes increased disability benefits and extended sick leave, reflecting a broader societal focus on welfare. However, concerns remain about the challenges faced by disadvantaged populations. Some survey respondents also expressed concerns about the need to uplift the most underprivileged populations, including single mothers in poverty and underpaid immigrants. These intersectional challenges might further complicate Iceland's image of gender equality. The implementation of policies that focus primarily on gender equality, while under-addressing race, disability or class, can bring limitations impacting the image and the actual achievement of full equality.

Perceptions regarding the influence of women's increasing presence in political leadership roles on access to work and wages reveal nuanced demographic perspectives on governance outcomes. Overall, respondents generally rated the positive influences on access to work and wages as 3.5 or above. However, certain demographic groups, including men aged 30-55 and high schoolers, provided scores between 3.0 and 3.5, suggesting a more cautious outlook on the effectiveness of current policies.

With ongoing legislative efforts, such as the Equal Pay Certification Act enacted since 2017, aimed at addressing the gender pay gap (reported at 9.3% unadjusted in 2023), the disparity between perception and reality remains apparent. Anonymous 6 mentioned Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdóttir's commitment to equality, yet protests, such as the 2023 women's strike, underscore that legislative changes have not fully translated into equitable outcomes.

Responses from survey participants reveal concerns about vulnerable populations, stressing that while improved representation is inspiring, it must also translate into broader

policy measures that support marginalised groups, including single mothers, immigrants, and refugees. This highlights the role of critical actors: while women in leadership positions can advocate for inclusive policies, accurate substantive representation requires systemic changes that ensure equitable outcomes for all demographic groups.

Anonymous 3 describes equal access to jobs and emphasises the positive effects on the economy of a diverse decision-making body: "Gender equality has positively influenced Iceland's economy by ensuring that the entire working population, including women, contributes equally. A well-educated population has supported the transition from a fishing-dependent economy to a diversified one, into tourism, green energy, and technology."

Some contradictions about equal access to jobs are illustrated by Anonymous 2: "A general problem in the Nordic countries is that women are getting more educated than men, but the payoff is not the same. They get their way into good jobs and good salaries without the same education." As noted by Anonymous 2, a contradiction arises: despite women becoming more educated than men, they are not receiving proportional returns on their educational investments, reflecting systemic barriers, which is why women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles, suggesting that mere numerical representation does not guarantee substantive influence, particularly in pushing for health and welfare policies.

This is in line with past research findings indicating that women get a lower "return" than men from their investment in education (Dow, 2009). "In terms of women on boards, companies, women as CEOs, we have a lot to do", as Anonymous 3 underlined: "In business, we are not there yet, for example, in the stock exchange, the companies that are there have very few women who are directors or CEOs of the company. At the top level of the biggest companies, there are 20-30% women. That is not good," and adds, "It is going to change inevitably", and points out another reason for the disparity: "Probably the men's salaries are a little higher as they work more hours, so probably the women work more at home".

Prime Minister Katrin Jacobsdóttir emphasised the economic risk of not addressing women's salaries. Since 2017, it has been illegal to pay women less than men for the same job in Iceland, with the Act on Equal Rights of Women and Men (Act No. 10/2008) amended to enforce the Gender Pay Standard for companies with 25 or more employees. Notably, the unadjusted gender pay gap was 9.3% in 2023 actually trending upwards and increasing from the previous year, which was reported as 8.6% (Statistics Iceland, 2023), with a notable larger gap among older employees.

The gender-segregated labour market in Iceland, where 43% of women work in the public sector compared to 15% of men (Callan, 2021), raises questions about the assertion by Mandel & Semyonov (2006) that Iceland is moving away from such segregation. In 2023, the gender pay gap in the private sector stood at 13.9%, signalling ongoing disparities. Despite women attaining more university degrees than men, men often secure higher wages in overrepresented sectors, such as nursing and teaching, partly due to working more overtime and holding positions with better benefits. Findings from Anonymous 4 reveal that men with less education can still earn more, particularly in industries dominated by women, such as nursing and teaching, supporting the findings of Dow (2009). Furthermore, only two out of 25 CEO positions in the trade market are held by women (Anonymous 1), emphasising the need for critical actors to address this imbalance.

Recent legislative measures, such as the Gender Equality Law, aim to promote gender mainstreaming, ensuring that government policies and budgets consider gender implications (Anonymous 2). This framework seeks to promote substantive representation, ensuring that women's contributions and needs are recognised in economic planning. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the Government Coalition Platform, led by the newly appointed female Minister of Finance, introduced the concept of gender budgeting, inspired by practices from Australia and New Zealand. It was enacted and became legally binding in Iceland in 2016 under the Public Finances Act. The city of Reykjavik and the University of Iceland followed suit, implementing their gender budgeting programmes, showcasing a commitment to ongoing evaluation and adaptation of policies affecting women's roles and welfare (Steinþórsdóttir & Guðmundsdóttir, 2018).

Gender budgeting policies were recommended during the COVID-19 crisis. To ensure gender equality in COVID-19 recovery funding, the European Parliament lobbied to make sure that half of the European Union's Resilience and Recovery Instrument was set aside for policies and measures to benefit women and advance gender equality in the COVID-19 response, calling for investment in the care economy, developing resilient childcare services and schools that allow all parents to maintain paid jobs and a healthy life balance (UN Women, 2021). As Anonymous 6 reports, during the COVID-19 crisis in Iceland, gender budgeting helped safeguard care jobs, while most government sectors faced budget cuts. The government implemented a 2% flat rate cut, except for the care economy, which includes the healthcare system and education. The new government coalition, led by women taking power in February 2025, has expressed continued intentions to re-evaluate women's traditionally held jobs and take active measures.

Analysing this through the lens of the critical actors framework reveals that while legislation exists to promote gender equality, systemic barriers persist. The reality that women are more educated yet receive less financial return highlights a contradiction in access and representation. Anonymous 3 noted that gender equality positively influences Iceland's economy by facilitating equal contributions from all workforce segments. However, the lack of women in top company positions indicates the need for continued advocacy for both descriptive (the presence of women) and substantive representation (actual impact on policies).

At the same time, as Anonymous 6 reports, "In Iceland, we have a huge gender income gap that is 21%, and it reflects the society we live in. It reflects the undervaluation of women's care-related jobs compared to male-dominated jobs in terms of salary income. Still, it also reflects that one third of the women are in part-time positions because of family responsibilities beyond paid care".

Survey respondents noted that increased female leadership has led to better access to education and more equitable policies. Although one survey respondent noted that while Iceland's reputation as a "paradise for women" has had a positive impact, it can also lead to complacency and overlook persistent issues, like poverty among single mothers and poorly paid immigrant jobs, underscoring that tangible support for marginalized groups is still needed.

From the lens of descriptive and substantive representation, the increased presence of women does not automatically lead to improved welfare and equity outcomes. Axelsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (2017, p. 17) pointed out that the childcare system "is equal on paper, but not in

practice", as mothers generally take the more extended parental leave and end up bridging the gap between parental leave and the beginning of preschool, which is in line with Símonardóttir (2021), who emphasises the general cultural belief in Iceland of mothers as primary nurturers.

Critical actors in Icelandic governance must bridge the gap between numerical representation and substantive influence to address longstanding inequalities, particularly in health and welfare policies. Although respondents recognise the positive impact of women's leadership, their perspectives often diverge from expert opinions and legislative changes, revealing a need for continued efforts to translate representation into meaningful outcomes for all demographic groups.

In summary, the perceptions of different demographic groups reflect a complex interplay between numerical representation and substantive influence, revealing gaps in translating increased female leadership into tangible policy improvements. While Iceland's government has implemented measures to combat the gender pay gap and promote equality, entrenched societal norms and labour market inequalities continue to pose significant challenges. The ongoing legislative efforts signal positive intent, but critical actors must work to address the underlying disparities to achieve genuine change.

CONCLUSIONS

This research elucidates the intricate relationship between women's political representation in Iceland and the varied perceptions of governance outcomes among differing demographic cohorts. Employing both descriptive and substantive representation frameworks, the findings reveal that although a higher presence of female leadership correlates with the advancement of social welfare policies, the reception of this influence is not uniform across age groups. Specifically, both younger and older respondents exhibit a greater alignment with the advantages associated with women's leadership, while individuals aged 30-55 demonstrate a more sceptical perspective, possibly due to economic pressures, caretaking responsibilities, gendered labor expectations and inequalities contributing to a more realistic view of the achievements and limits of female political leadership.

This scepticism suggests that narratives surrounding 'gender equity aura' and 'nation branding' may fail to resonate with those grappling with tangible structural challenges in their daily lives (Pétursdottir, 2009). Intersectional challenges might further complicate Iceland's image of gender equality. The implementation of policies that focus primarily on gender equality, while under-addressing or -representing race, disability or class can bring about limitations impacting the image and the actual achievement of full gender equality.

All respondents overall showed lower scores for older adults' quality of care and policies benefiting racial and ethnic minorities, indicating that there is additional work needed to address these areas that still need improvement.

The study supports Ford's (2010) concept of a bidirectional process wherein the rise of women in leadership positions fosters social change, simultaneously promoting a more gender-balanced leadership landscape and highlighting the resilience of socioeconomic policies that receive bipartisan support (Fjaestad et al., 2021). Both qualitative and quantitative data from interviewees and survey respondents underscore the significant positive impact of enhanced

social welfare initiatives on critical areas, including childcare support, parental leave, educational access, LGBTQ+ rights, and healthcare improvements. Governmental, local and institutional initiatives have aimed at applying gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting initiatives, culminating in the passing of the 2016 Public Finances Act, which was followed by the city of Reykjavik and the University of Iceland. These initiatives lead to significant impact in initiatives to protect and save heavily women's lead "care" jobs during the COVID-19 crisis.

Despite Iceland's progress towards a gender-balanced workforce, persistent barriers and discrimination continue to impede the full realisation of OECD gender budgeting recommendations (Bericat & Sánchez Bermejo, 2016). As articulated by Mustosmäki et al. (2021), the advancement of structural and cultural changes is not always synchronous. Additionally, increased female leadership should be paired with intersectional inclusion strategies to ensure equity for minorities. Continued pressure by critical actors like women's advocacy groups and engagement in cultural diplomacy may catalyse structural transformations towards achieving gender pay equity (Isar & Triandafyllidou, 2020).

Future policies should address structural wage gaps in both the public and the private sectors. As women advance into higher leadership roles, the potential for substantive enhancements in health, welfare, and equity policies appears increasingly promising. Future research endeavours should encompass a larger and more representative sample, incorporating surveys in both Icelandic and English languages, alongside an examination of the perceived outcomes of policies beyond the urban context of Reykjavik.

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Citizenship in the Feminine

Essay

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Author's note:

The title refers both to the grammatical gender of the word "citizenship" in Romanian
— a feminine noun —
and to the feminist perspective from which this essay is written.

Abstract

This essay explores the concept of citizenship through a gendered lens, reflecting on how being a woman intersects with structures of power, identity, and participation in public life. Through autobiographical storytelling, the author traces her path from unawareness to political consciousness, confronting moments of privilege, exclusion, and resistance. The essay also critiques liberal feminism's assumption of a universal sisterhood by pointing out the structural inequalities among women based on race, class, sexuality, and bodily autonomy. Ultimately, Citizenship in the Feminine is both a personal-political reflection and a critique of a patriarchal social order that tolerates women's presence in civic life only under conditions of silence, gratitude, and non-disruption. It advocates for a redefinition of citizenship as a lived, negotiated, and often contested experience — especially for those whose identities are marked by gender and other intersecting vulnerabilities.

Keywords: citizenship, gender, feminism, privilege, liberalism

For a long time, I thought citizenship was something you have, not something you do. Like a bracelet you wear but never look at too closely. It was there, in the file, on my ID, somewhere in the drawers of the state. But I wouldn't have known how to say exactly what that meant, apart from the fact that I could vote, if I woke up in time on a Sunday. It was much later that I started learning and understanding that I was born with full rights guaranteed by my citizenship — but my grandmother wasn't.

Historically, women had to fight to be citizens in the truest sense of the word, having been long absent from this story. In Romania, even though women were granted the right to vote on paper in 1938, the reality was far more nuanced. In practice, that right was more like a favor reserved for a very small elite of educated and high-status women. It wasn't until 1946, with the onset of the communist regime, that women were actually called to vote — but the choices were pre-decided. So, Romanian women only really voted freely for the first time after

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the fall of communism, in 1990, when the first democratic elections were held after nearly half a century of totalitarianism.

My first encounter with the concept of citizenship happened when I left for university abroad and lost my ID during a layover. Almost symbolically, and yes, a bit of a cliché, the main character of my novel lost their only proof of identity, of citizenship, at the border between home and the unknown. By then, my luck was at the hands of Schengen area. Both the country of my layover and my final destination were part of Schengen. My family still tells this story like it was some funny adventure. My dad even posted the song *"Lost ID"* by the romanian singer Smiley on Facebook. But behind all the circus, I had my first major realizations — which I only managed to articulate much later.

In the current context of growing tensions around immigrants in Western Europe and even in Romania, I think that was the first time I questioned my white privilege. I remember that during my flight, I was among a few other Romanians, including some visibly Roma women. They were dressed in their traditional attire, carefully styled — and of course, they drew the usual reactions of curiosity from white Western Europeans who were most likely leaning fascist. No one looked at them with admiration. I honestly felt sorry for them, because I knew what kind of humiliation they were about to face just to board the flight. Once we landed at the final destination, the rest of us white Romanians passed easily through the former passport gates, where only a few border guards were posted. But those Roma women were not granted the same anonymity. Without any clear reason, they were stopped and questioned. I swallowed hard and walked away quickly. Out of the four of us, I was the one closest to being in the country illegally — yet my appearance promised a European citizen with rights.

Later, of course, I got my own share of suspicion from citizens who felt threatened by my Balkan accent. My physical appearance helped me go unnoticed, I could even pass as local, but as soon as I opened my mouth, the airport interrogation I had escaped began in a different form.

> *Where are you from? Why did you come here? Don't you have schools back there? Is Romania in the European Union? When are you going to learn our language?*

Over time, the feeling of not belonging became a kind of personal discourse, helping me connect with other Balkan wanderers lost in the Western order of that country. While I lived there for my studies, my gender was overshadowed by my national identity. Only when I returned home for good did I begin to see the gendered differences that I once saw as personal failures.

At a family barbecue, an old friend of my dad's told me to stop with the nonsense — patriarchy doesn't exist anymore. He went on to explain that we live in a modern Romania, that I have everything I could ever want, that I've done whatever I wanted, and that I should be grateful I was *allowed*. Oh, and that I should stop with this feminist crap because I'll never find a man that way. I'm still not sure what's more ridiculous: the fact that a sexist, misogynistic man who had previously given me "life lessons" was now explaining patriarchy to me like it was this imaginary thing as my Dutch colleagues thought of Transylvania, or the fact that he did so while eating grilled sausages and barking orders at his wife not to forget the mustard. For him, patriarchy is imaginary — a feminist ghost made up by frustrated women who

"couldn't land a man." Jokes aside, I would've liked to ask if lower wages for the same jobs are also made up. Or if being "allowed" to have a career is the same as equality. But there was no point. I smiled and nodded, like I've learned to do when I know a conversation is closed before it even begins. But inside, I was boiling. How deeply ingrained is this idea that we, as women, should be *grateful* for carving out space in places where we always should have been? That having equal rights isn't something natural, but a privilege that can be revoked if we "go too far with feminism." That's how you realize that despite modern appearances, the collective mindset is still deeply rooted in patriarchal logic. No one's denying that women work, vote, or attend university — but it's expected that all this won't come with too much voice, too much independence, or, heaven forbid, too much political opinion.

That man isn't an isolated case in how I experience citizenship. In traditional spaces, like Romania, women exercise their citizenship accompanied by the background noise of men's unsolicited advice and opinions. They're always there to correct you, to police your tone, to say when you're "too loud," when you're "exaggerating about your rights," when you "shouldn't get involved because it's politics." Our citizenship — as women — is often lived as a continuous exam, with uninvited proctors. To me, citizenship isn't just about rights and obligations written in a Constitution. It's about who gets interrupted in a debate. It's about who has "authority" in the eyes of others, and who always needs to show proof. In spaces dominated by traditional norms, gender isn't just an identity detail; it's an access filter. And for women — especially those from vulnerable communities, young, queer, Roma — citizenship is negotiated daily. With the state. With the community. With the job market. With the family. With men who still see themselves, one way or another, as the gatekeepers of our personal democracies.

I've loved politics since I was a child. At my dad's house, all conversations were political — they were all supporters of Băsescu. During my visits, I didn't watch cartoons; I listened to news and political talk shows. I liked the debates even if I didn't understand them. Later, I fought to have my voice heard during family discussions. In my dad's family, authority is earned in two ways: either if you have a penis, or if you go to a lot of school. It took me longer to earn my place at the table than it took my younger brothers — who are still in middle school.

After I went abroad for university, my dad started bragging about me more than before. "My daughter's in the Netherlands. She's studying arts, but at a good university — she'll come to her senses." When I graduated, I had a minor in cultural diversity, so now I was taken seriously at barbecues when we talked about imperialism, globalism, and the colonizing history of Western European countries.

When I applied to a Master's programme, no one in my family knew. The results shocked them. Suddenly, I was "the smart kid in the family," though always with a tone of surprise as if I'd been chosen by fate, not as if I had studied, worked, applied by myself. My dad, though visibly proud, still introduced my story with, "Anyway, she's not the type to be tied to the kitchen." My citizenship became a kind of family performance not necessarily in terms of recognition, more like "look, it can be done and maybe, with luck, she won't end up alone." That's when I started to realize that civic and political participation isn't just about voting or posting about a protest. It's also about how you carve out space despite the

background noise. How you say "no" to a tradition that excludes you. How you choose your community — you don't just inherit it. My citizenship was no longer about how my dad introduced me to his friends, but about how I built my own relationship with the state, with civil society, with the world.

Still, no matter how frustrated I get sometimes, I know and admit that I carry privileges. My sexual orientation doesn't disrupt the dominant model; I can easily pass as straight. I don't fit society's beauty standards, but I'm able-bodied — so I don't have to fight daily against infrastructures that ignore people with disabilities. I grew up in a working-class family that, though modest, offered just enough stability for me to build on, with a few sacrifices, who I am today.

Citizenship is also lived through the lens of race, class, bodies that are accepted, and bodies that are merely "tolerated." Even political participation is a luxury for some women. For me, going to a protest means I *can*. That I have time, resources, a relatively stable income, and a space where I'm not afraid to speak. But there are women for whom the "obligations" of being a mother, a daughter, a caregiver, mean there's no energy left for "active citizenship." And that's not a lack of will. It's structural inequality.

I've learned that classical liberalism sees me as an autonomous unit, capable of rational, equal decisions. But the reality is: we're not all starting from the same line. It took me a while to realize that sisterhood, the kind you see in Instagram quotes, is often more aspirational than lived. Not because it's not a beautiful idea — solidarity among women can be a form of survival and power. But the truth is, not all women face the same struggles, have the same chances, or the same room to speak. Some of us work in air-conditioned offices. Others clean them. Some write essays about representation. Others aren't represented anywhere.

Maybe I didn't learn what citizenship means from textbooks or civics class. I learned it from awkward dinner conversations, from disapproving looks when I said what I thought, from my girl friends who weren't believed, from the women who spoke up first. I learned it from my privileges too — the ones I only understood once I saw how absent they were for others. Being a citizen isn't just about obeying the law and paying taxes. It's about being present, aware, critical. It's about understanding that rights aren't always guaranteed equally. That between me and a refugee woman, a visibly queer woman, or a single mother in a rural area, stand structural differences — not just personal choices.

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