INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES– SKOPJE

Second Cycle of Studies, Study Program:

Policy Studies

Master's Thesis:

Structural Inequality in Comparative Perspective: Analyzing the Gender Gap in Economic Inequality in the European Union and the Balkans

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Skopje, 2025

ИНСТИТУТ ЗА ОПШТЕСТВЕНИ И ХУМАНИСТИЧКИ НАУКИ-СКОПЈЕ

Студии од втор циклус од студиската програма

Студии на политиките

Магистерски труд:

Структурна нееднаквост од компаративна перспектива: Анализа на родовиот јаз во економските нееднаквости во Европската Унија и на Балканот

Кандидат: Кирил Мицковски

Ментор: проф. д-р Викторија Боровска

Скопје, 2025

Овој труд претставува дел од барањата на програмата на втор циклус студии на Институтот за општествени и хуманистички науки – Скопје, за стекнување научен степен Магистер по студии на политики

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Abstract

This master's thesis critically investigates the persistence of the gender gap in economic inequality in the European Union and the Balkans, situating the problem within a broader context of structural, institutional, and cultural barriers. Using feminist political economy, intersectional theory, and comparative analysis, the study demonstrates that formal legal equality often fails to result in substantive equality due to entrenched labor market segregation, the undervaluation of feminized work, and the impacts of neoliberal reforms and post-socialist transitions. Through case studies from Western European and Balkan countries, the analysis covers policy and legal documents, labor market data, and relevant academic literature to explain how and why gender inequality is maintained and reproduced. The findings indicate that legal solutions alone are insufficient: persistent inequalities are reinforced by institutional inertia, weak implementation, and traditional norms. The thesis concludes that comprehensive change requires strong public investment in care infrastructure and recognition of unpaid and reproductive labor. The recommendations are directed toward developing intersectional and context-sensitive policies for real progress toward gender equality.

Keywords: gender gap, economic inequality, European Union, Balkans, feminist political economy, wage gap, care, labor market, intersectionality

Апстракт

Оваа магистерска теза критички го истражува опстојувањето на родовиот јаз во економските нееднаквости во Европската Унија и на Балканот, поставувајќи го проблемот во поширок контекст на структурни, институционални и културни бариери. Применувајќи феминистичка политичка економија, интерсекциска теорија и компаративна анализа, трудот покажува дека формалната законска еднаквост често не води до суштинска еднаквост, поради длабоко вкоренети практики на сегрегација на трудот, недоволно вреднување на феминизираната работа и последиците од неолибералните реформи и постсоцијалистичките транзиции. Преку студии на случаи од земји од Западна Европа и Балканот, анализата опфаќа политички и правни документи, податоци за пазарот на труд и релевантна академска литература за да објасни како и зошто родовата нееднаквост се одржува и репродуцира. Наодите укажуваат дека само законски решенија не се доволни: трајните нееднаквости се одржуваат од институционална инерција, слаба имплементација и традиционални норми. Заклучокот на трудот е дека сеопфатна промена бара силни јавни инвестиции во инфраструктурата за грижа и признавање на неплатената и репродуктивната работа. Препораките се насочени кон развивање на интерсекциски и контекстуално прилагодени политики за напредок кон вистинска родова еднаквост.

Клучни зборови: родов јаз, економски нееднаквости, Европска Унија, Балкан, феминистичка политичка економија, јаз во платите, грижа, пазар на труд, интерсекционалност

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Chapter I: Introduction

Despite decades of institutional commitments and discursive proclamations promoting gender equality, the European Union and its periphery—the Balkans—continue to exhibit persistent and, in some cases, widening gender pay gaps. The persistence of these disparities is not simply a failure of implementation but reflects deeper structural contradictions within the political economy of European integration. This thesis engages critically with these contradictions by examining the gender wage gap as both an empirical phenomenon and a politically contested terrain shaped by intersecting forces of neoliberalism, post-socialist transition, and regional dependencies.

The process of EU accession promised Balkan states a pathway toward modernization, convergence, and democratic stability. Yet, economic restructuring programs, labor market flexibilization, and austerity measures—often championed as conditions for integration—have disproportionately affected women, particularly in sectors such as care, education, and informal labor. As Kristen Ghodsee illustrates, the collapse of socialist-era employment protections and public care infrastructure placed new burdens on women while simultaneously eroding their economic independence. [1] Nancy Fraser's critique of progressive neoliberalism further helps frame how institutional commitments to gender equality often coexist with, and are undermined by, market-based reforms. [2]

At the core of this inquiry lies a paradox: how do EU frameworks for gender equality coexist with structural policies that entrench gendered economic inequalities? This question becomes especially pressing when considering the historical trajectory of the Balkans, where post-socialist transitions entailed not only economic liberalization but also the dismantling of collective guarantees—healthcare, childcare, pension systems—that were crucial to women's labor force participation and autonomy. The result is what Fraser calls a "crisis of care," in which gendered

[1] Kristen Ghodsee, Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life after Communism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[2] Nancy Fraser, Fortunes of Feminism (New York: Verso, 2013).

labor is increasingly commodified or relegated to the unpaid sphere without adequate institutional support. [3]

This thesis draws upon several critical perspectives to investigate these dynamics. Fraser's theoretical work offers a multidimensional lens to consider economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political representation. Ghodsee provides historical and ethnographic insights into the lived consequences of neoliberal reforms on post-socialist women.[3] Thomas Piketty and Joseph Stiglitz help illuminate the macroeconomic drivers of inequality, showing how wage gaps are not only gendered but also interwoven with broader dynamics of capital accumulation and austerity.[45] Stiglitz, in particular, critiques how market fundamentalism erodes collective welfare structures, disproportionately harming marginalized groups, including women. Ghodsee's empirical findings from Bulgaria and beyond also show how EU-led economic conditionalities have often undermined women's historical gains in the labor market.[4]

Ghodsee argues that in post-socialist societies, women were disproportionately burdened by privatization processes and the withdrawal of state services.[5] Her work further contextualizes how the EU's emphasis on fiscal discipline and privatization curtailed feminist policy spaces and pushed gender issues into depoliticized NGO frameworks. Nancy Fraser also critiques such depoliticization, especially where feminist struggles become entangled with neoliberal agendas that prioritize market efficiency over social justice.[6] These insights are crucial to analyzing how gender wage disparities are not merely statistical artifacts but symptomatic of broader ideological regimes.

Within this framework, the thesis poses the following overarching research questions: How do EU gender equality discourses translate into practice within Balkan labor markets? What structural factors—economic, institutional, and ideological—contribute to the persistence of the gender wage gap? How do historical legacies of socialism, coupled with neoliberal reforms,

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[3] Kristen Ghodsee, Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence (New York: Nation Books, 2018).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Kristen Ghodsee, Lost in Transition, 112.

[6] Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 218.

shape contemporary gender relations in the workplace? And to what extent do EU-level policies obscure or reproduce national-level inequalities rather than ameliorate them?

Methodologically, this thesis adopts a qualitative-critical approach, drawing on discourse analysis of EU policy documents, national labor legislation, feminist critiques, and secondary data from international organizations and feminist scholars. The aim is not only to map the wage gap but to interrogate the ideological and institutional forces that sustain it. This includes an analysis of how neoliberalism—through austerity, deregulation, and privatization—has impacted care economies and labor rights, often erasing the feminist gains made under socialist regimes.

Ultimately, this work argues that the EU's model of gender equality remains entangled with the very market logics that generate inequality. In the Balkans, this contradiction is magnified by peripheral integration, economic dependency, and the erosion of welfare structures. A critical feminist political economy perspective, informed by the works of Fraser, Ghodsee, Stiglitz, and Piketty, offers the conceptual tools needed to unearth these contradictions. As Jamie Morgan notes in his critique of Piketty, what is needed is not just data but theorization—an effort to explain inequality's origins and its reproduction through intersecting systems of power, production, and policy.[7]

In situating the gender wage gap within these broader structures, this thesis contributes to a growing body of feminist scholarship that demands not only institutional reform but systemic transformation. It calls for renewed attention to the political economy of care, the classed and gendered effects of EU enlargement, and the persistent blind spots in equality policy frameworks. Rather than viewing the Balkans as lagging behind an EU ideal, this thesis interrogates whether that ideal itself is complicit in the reproduction of gendered economic inequality

[7] Jamie Morgan, "Piketty and the Need for a Political Economy," Globalizations 12, no. 5 (2015): 803–812.

Chapter II: Methodology

This thesis employs a **qualitative, comparative research design** grounded in feminist political economy. The central aim is to analyze why the gender wage gap persists in both European Union member states and Balkan countries, despite legal and policy commitments to wage equality. Rather than reducing the wage gap to a technical or statistical issue, this study interrogates the underlying institutional, symbolic, and historical forces that sustain gendered labor inequalities across diverse national contexts.

2.1 Research Design and Comparative Logic

The research adopts a **comparative case study approach**, selecting four countries—two from Western Europe (e.g., Sweden, Italy) and two from the Balkans or post-socialist regions (e.g., Poland, Hungary, North Macedonia, Serbia). This design allows for the exploration of how shared EU frameworks—such as the Pay Transparency Directive—are mediated by divergent welfare regimes, labor market histories, and institutional capacities.

The comparative method is both **geographic and conceptual**, aiming to reveal cross-country similarities and differences in how the wage gap is shaped by institutional inertia, policy implementation, and cultural norms. The research questions are addressed through a dual focus: analyzing how formal equality frameworks interact with lived social realities, and identifying the limits and possibilities of existing policy tools.

2.2 Data Sources

The study relies primarily on **secondary data and documentary analysis**, including:

Quantitative indicators from Eurostat, OECD, and national labor statistics agencies (e.g., wage gap statistics, sectoral employment, care infrastructure);

EU policy documents (e.g., directives, communications, country reports);

National legislation, labor laws, and collective bargaining agreements;

Reports from trade unions, women's advocacy groups, and gender equality agencies;

Academic literature, historical studies, and critical feminist policy analyses.

Quantitative data (e.g., sectoral wage gaps, employment rates, care provision) is used descriptively to support context and argumentation, not for statistical modeling or hypothesis testing.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The thesis is guided by **five feminist theoretical lenses**, drawn from the theorists developed in the theoretical framework:

Nancy Fraser: redistribution, recognition, and the crisis of care

Joan Acker: inequality regimes and gendered organizational logics

Silvia Federici: reproductive labor and the invisibility of unpaid work

Francesca Bettio: occupational segregation and labor market segmentation

Sylvia Walby: institutional patriarchy and the symbolic devaluation of feminized labor

These categories function as thematic codes for analyzing policy texts, legal frameworks, and institutional narratives. Each empirical case is examined through at least two of these theoretical lenses to expose tensions between legal equality and persistent structural inequality.

2.4 Methods of Analysis

The core analysis combines:

Thematic content analysis of legal, policy, and institutional documents;

Comparative interpretation across case countries, identifying how welfare models, labor market structures, and political discourses affect gender wage outcomes;

Critical discourse analysis to trace how feminized labor, care work, and gender roles are framed or omitted in official and media discourse.

Where appropriate, basic data visualizations (e.g., comparative wage gap trends by sector or country, created with Python tools such as pandas and matplotlib) support interpretive insight.

2.5 Limitations

This research is limited to **secondary sources and documentary analysis**. No primary interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, or advanced quantitative modeling are undertaken. The selection of countries is illustrative and not exhaustive; findings are meant to provide comparative insights rather than broad generalizations.

The study acknowledges that informal workplace dynamics, cultural meanings, and affective experiences may not be fully captured through textual analysis alone. Nevertheless, by rooting the inquiry in rich feminist theory and comparative institutional analysis, the thesis seeks to provide deep insights into the structural foundations of wage inequality in contemporary Europe.

Chapter III: Feminist Political Economy and the Gender Wage Gap in the EU and the Balkans

3.1 – Theoretical Foundations and Structural Inequality

In both the European Union and the Balkans, gender inequality in labor markets persists as a structural issue rather than an isolated economic problem. Feminist political economy argues that labor cannot be abstracted from gendered power relations, historical patterns of exclusion, and unpaid reproductive work. Silvia Federici insists that capitalism has always relied on women's

invisible labor, particularly through the institutionalization of unpaid care.[8] This is compounded by Nancy Fraser's notion of "crisis of care," where neoliberal restructuring undermines social reproduction while relying heavily on women to sustain it informally.[9] Consequently, women's labor remains undervalued, overburdened, and excluded from frameworks of productivity.[10]

Throughout much of the Balkans—especially in post-socialist countries such as Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia—this dynamic is particularly pronounced. As shown in *Feminist Economics Today*, women's integration into the workforce has not meant a redistribution of household duties.[11] Instead, it has produced what scholars call "work intensity," whereby women face a dual burden: full-time employment coupled with unpaid caregiving. This results in time poverty, adverse health outcomes, and diminished economic advancement. Eurostat data reinforces this by indicating that women in the EU spend nearly twice as much time on unpaid domestic activities compared to men.[12] The gender gap in free time is even wider in the Balkans, where traditional norms further compound women's invisible workload.[13]

Diane Elson's work on gender budgeting emphasizes that national accounting systems systematically exclude unpaid care, which distorts economic planning and social investment.[14]

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[8] Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. PM Press, 2012.

[99] Fraser, Nancy. *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. Verso, 2013.

[10] Elson, Diane. "Gender and the Global Economic Crisis in Developing Countries." *Gender & Development*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2010, pp. 201–212.

[11] Ferber, Marianne A., and Julie A. Nelson, eds. *Feminist Economics Today: Beyond Economic Man*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

[12] Eurostat. "Time Use Statistics by Sex – Household and Family Care." Eurostat Database, 2023.

[13] Lokar, Sanja. "Gender Equality Policies in the Western Balkans." *Journal of Balkan Policy Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2021.

[14] Elson, Diane. *Budgeting for Women's Rights: Monitoring Government Budgets for Compliance with CEDAW*. UNIFEM, 2006.

Without measuring this "shadow labor," policies ignore the actual conditions shaping women's lives. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) notes that this gap leads to underfunded care infrastructures, particularly in Eastern and Southern Europe.[15] In both regions, care is often privatized and delegated to informal arrangements, further marginalizing women and perpetuating intergenerational cycles of inequality.[16]

In *Women, Precarious Work and Care*, Lewis and colleagues document how neoliberal reforms have increased employment flexibility while eroding job security.[17] Women are disproportionately concentrated in precarious sectors—part-time retail, domestic services, and platform-based labor. The feminization of precarity is not a choice but a response to inflexible labor markets that fail to accommodate reproductive work. In the Balkans, high unemployment rates and post-socialist deregulation have intensified this condition, pushing women into informal or migratory labor arrangements.[18]

Sectoral gender segregation remains entrenched across Europe. Women dominate in education, healthcare, and service industries, which are underpaid and undervalued. According to Eurostat, over 76% of care workers in the EU are women, with wages significantly below national averages.[19] This reflects what Elson calls the "systematic devaluation of feminized labor."[20] In post-socialist Balkan economies, state withdrawal from public services has further weakened

[15] European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). *Gender Equality Index 2023: Time Use Domain*.

[16] UN Women. "Care Work and the Economy: Regional Analysis of the Western Balkans." UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2022.

[17] Lewis, Jane, et al. *Women, Precarious Work and Care: The Failure of Family-Friendly Rights*. Edward Elgar, 2016.

[18] ILO. "Women and the Future of Work in the Western Balkans." International Labour Organization, 2021.

[19] Eurostat. "Gender Distribution of the Workforce in Care Sectors – 2023 Edition."

[20] Elson, Diane. "Engendering the Macroeconomic Agenda: A Review of the Issues." *World Development*, vol. 27, no. 11, 1999.

these sectors, leading to a dual crisis of employment and service provision that overwhelmingly affects women.[21]

While flexible work arrangements are often presented as empowering for women, they frequently function as traps. As Nancy Fraser critiques in *Fortunes of Feminism*, neoliberal policies have co-opted feminist demands for work-life balance into precarious labor structures. [22] Gig platforms, zero hour contracts, and home-based tasks offer flexibility but deny security. This has resulted in a "double bind," where women must sacrifice income stability to fulfill caregiving obligations. Eurofound data confirms that women are more likely than men to work irregular hours due to care responsibilities.[23]

Rhacel Parreñas' concept of "global care chains" reveals how migration redistributes care work internationally.[24] Women from Balkan countries often migrate to Western Europe to perform domestic labor, leaving behind a care deficit at home. These patterns reproduce global inequalities, as poorer women absorb the burden of care vacated by wealthier societies. Transnational households and remittance economies create new vulnerabilities—children growing up without parental care and elderly parents dependent on informal support.[25] This care chain reflects a deeply gendered form of labor outsourcing.

Austerity measures in the wake of financial crises have disproportionately impacted women. Cuts to public services, particularly childcare and eldercare, shift the responsibility back onto families—meaning women. EIGE reports show that austerity policies in Southern and Eastern

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[21] UNDP. "Human Development Report: Gender and the Welfare State in Eastern Europe." United Nations Development Programme, 2021.

[22] Fraser, Nancy. *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. Verso, 2013.

[23] Eurofound. *Women and Labour Market Inequality: The Role of Flexible Work and the Care Economy in the EU*, 2022.

[24] Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*. Stanford University Press, 2015.

[25] OECD. *The Role of Migrant Women in Global Care Chains: Evidence from Europe*, 2021.

Europe led to increased unpaid labor and declining labor force participation among women.[26] This dynamic is especially pronounced in Balkan countries like Romania and North Macedonia, where social infrastructure is weakest. As Elson has noted, these trends "privatize risk and feminize responsibility."[27]

Despite the EU's emphasis on gender equality, implementation remains uneven. Directives on equal pay and parental leave are often undermined by loopholes and poor enforcement. In many Balkan states, legal frameworks exist but lack institutional support. Labor inspections are underfunded, and workers are reluctant to report abuse. The gender pay gap remains significant, averaging 12.7% in the EU and exceeding 15% in countries like Estonia and Czechia.[28] Structural impunity sustains gender-based labor inequalities.[29]

Sylvia Walby argues that symbolic devaluation of women's labor reinforces economic marginalization.[30] Cultural narratives—such as the idea that caregiving is "natural" to women—justify the underpayment of feminized labor. This logic permeates policy, where investments in heavy industry are prioritized over social services. In Balkan societies, the legacy of socialist industrialism and patriarchal kinship systems combine to undermine the legitimacy of care work as a professional domain.[31]

Post-socialist transitions reshaped labor markets across the Balkans, with women often being the first to lose state-secured employment. Federici emphasizes that transitions to market economies

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[26] European Institute for Gender Equality. *Gender and Austerity: Impacts in Southern and Eastern Europe*, 2020.

[27] Elson, Diane. "Social Policy and Macroeconomic Performance: Integrating 'the Economic' and 'the Social'." *Journal of International Development*, vol. 14, no. 7, 2002.

[28] Eurostat. "Gender Pay Gap Statistics – 2023 Edition."

[29] EIGE. *Enforcement of Gender Equality Law in the EU: Challenges and Good Practices*, 2022.

[30] Walby, Sylvia. *The Future of Feminism*. Polity Press, 2011.

[31] Lokar, Sanja, and Mojca Urek. "Gender, Care Work and Social Transformation in Post-Yugoslav Societies." *South-East European Journal of Political Science*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022.

involved not just economic liberalization but the re-imposition of patriarchal control.[32] Women's labor force participation dropped, and public childcare centers closed en masse. Feminist scholars point out that this "de-modernization" undid many of the gender equality gains of socialist regimes, leaving a vacuum that neoliberalism failed to fill.[33]

3.2 – Post-Socialist Transitions and Neoliberal Reforms

The capacity of states to address gender inequality depends on both resources and ideological orientation. Scandinavian welfare states have shown that feminist-informed policy—like generous parental leave and public childcare—can narrow labor market disparities.[34] In contrast, Balkan governments often treat gender as a secondary issue, subordinate to economic growth and EU accession goals. As a result, policy interventions are reactive and fragmented. A robust feminist political economy insists that care work and labor equality must be treated as core components of social sustainability.[35]

One barrier to reform is the inadequacy of current economic indicators. GDP does not account for unpaid labor, nor do conventional labor statistics reflect the nuances of informal or part-time employment. Feminist economists like Marilyn Waring argue for alternative accounting systems that recognize all forms of labor, including caregiving and informal work.[36] The EU has made some progress via time-use surveys and gender-disaggregated data, but Balkan countries often

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[32] Federici, Silvia. *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism*. PM Press, 2021.

[33] Gal, Susan. "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2002.

[34] Korpi, Walter. "Faces of Inequality: Gender, Class and Patterns of Inequalities in Different Types of Welfare States." *Social Politics*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2000.

[35] Bakker, Isabella, and Stephen Gill. *Power, Production and Social Reproduction: Human In/security in the Global Political Economy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

[36] Waring, Marilyn. *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*. Harper & Row, 1988.

lack the institutional capacity for such monitoring. Without proper data, inequalities remain invisible and unaddressed.[37]

While policy debates in both the EU and the Balkans frequently invoke the language of "empowerment" and "modernization," feminist political economy reveals that these agendas rarely disrupt the foundations of gendered inequality. Instead, institutional reforms often reproduce the same undervaluation of care, reinforce labor segmentation, and ignore the daily realities that lock women into cycles of precarious work and time poverty. For example, despite new parental leave schemes and anti-discrimination statutes, Eurostat data shows that women in Croatia, Serbia, and North Macedonia still spend up to twice as many hours per week on unpaid household and care work as their male counterparts.[38]

Montenegro's experience highlights the challenges of translating formal equality into substantive change. While the country has made legal strides—ratifying international gender conventions and passing national equality laws—implementation remains weak. Labor inspectorates report limited authority and a backlog of unresolved complaints related to maternity discrimination and unequal pay. Despite constitutional guarantees, Montenegro's public childcare system covers less than 30% of children under five, one of the lowest rates in the region.[39] As Sylvia Walby notes, legal reform without infrastructural investment can produce a form of "symbolic compliance," where equality exists on paper but fails in practice.[40]

This pattern is echoed across other post-socialist states in the region. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, Balkan countries consistently rank at the bottom of the Gender Equality Index, particularly in the domains of time use, care, and economic independence.[41] Elson and Kabeer remind us that when national budgets omit unpaid care, they not only distort

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[37] European Commission. *Time Use Surveys and Gender Equality: Statistical Gaps in the Western Balkans*, 2021.

[38] Eurostat. "Time Spent on Household and Family Care Activities – 2023 Regional Overview."

[39] UN Women. *Montenegro Gender Equality Assessment*, 2022.

[40] Walby, Sylvia. *Gender Transformations*. Routledge, 2004.

[41] European Institute for Gender Equality. *Gender Equality Index 2023 – Regional Report: Balkans*.

policy but also perpetuate labor market inequality.[42] Without measuring the "invisible work" performed by women, states cannot design equitable economic strategies. This neglect is especially pronounced in the Balkans, where austerity measures and underfunded welfare systems push care work back into the private domain.[43]

Addressing gender inequality in labor markets requires more than piecemeal reform. It calls for structural transformation: valuing care, regulating gig work, expanding public services, and redesigning economic indicators. Feminist political economy urges a rethinking of what constitutes productive labor, who bears social risk, and how value is distributed.[44] In both the EU and the Balkans, this means challenging deep-seated assumptions about work, merit, and responsibility. Only through systemic change can gender equity move from rhetoric to reality.

To understand how regional dynamics, compare, it's essential to track the evolution of the gender pay gap across time in both the EU and the Balkans. This figure visualizes trends in unadjusted gender wage disparity from 2010 to 2023.

[42] Elson, Diane, and Naila Kabeer. "Gender-Responsive Budgeting and the Rights of Women." *World Development*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2007.

[43] UNDP. *Social Protection in the Western Balkans: Equity and Care Gaps*, 2021.

[44] Bakker, Isabella. "Social Reproduction and the Constitution of a Gendered Political Economy." *New Political Economy*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2007.

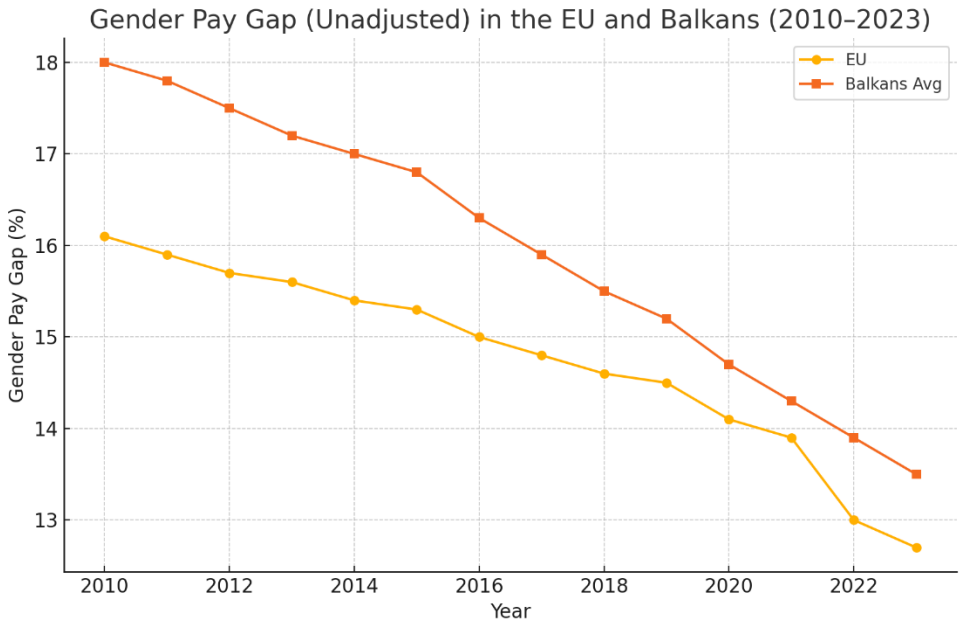

Figure 1. Gender Pay Gap (Unadjusted) in the EU and Balkans (2010–2023).Source: Eurostat, 2023.

While both the EU and the Balkans show improvement over time, the Balkans consistently exhibit higher pay gaps.

This trend suggests that structural reforms in Eastern Europe lag behind those in the EU core, possibly due to weaker enforcement, smaller care infrastructure, and informal labor market dominance.

Unpaid domestic and care work forms a critical part of women's labor burden in the Balkans. This figure illustrates weekly hours spent on unpaid care work by men and women.

Figure 2. Average Weekly Hours Spent on Unpaid Domestic and Care Work, by Gender.
Source: UNECE, Time Use Surveys; Eurostat, 2022.

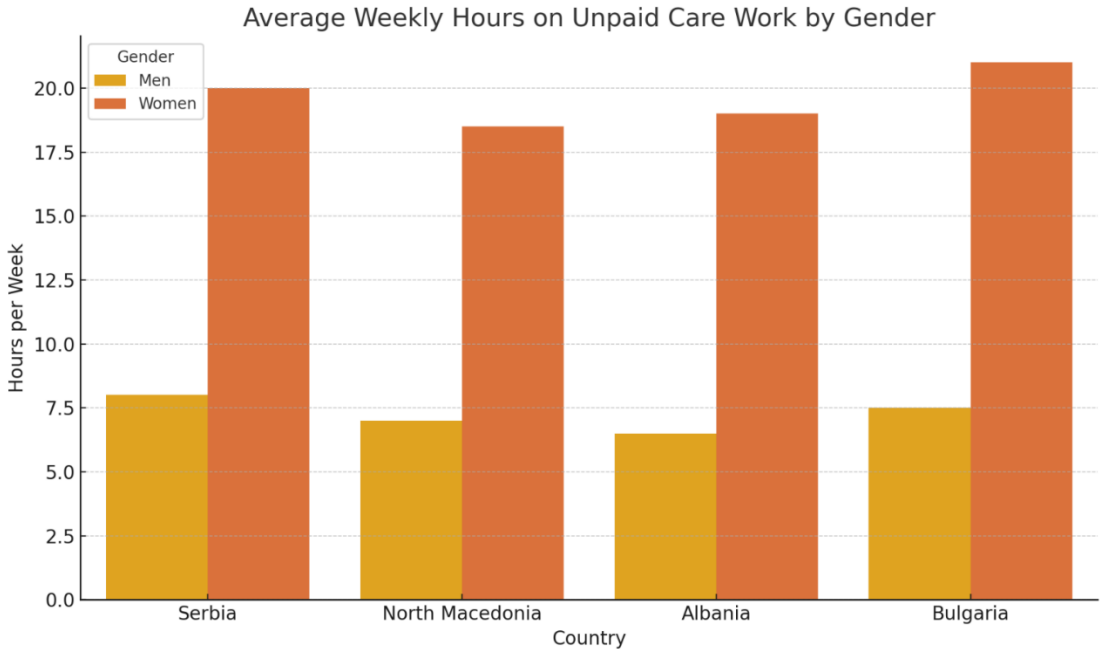

Figure 2. Average Weekly Hours on Unpaid Care Work by Gender (2022).Source: UNECE, Time Use Surveys; Eurostat, 2022.

In each country shown, women consistently perform 2.5x more unpaid care work than men. Serbia and Bulgaria, for example, show gender time gaps exceeding 10 hours per week, reinforcing the feminization of domestic labor and its exclusion from formal economic metrics

Asset ownership remains a key fault line in the economic disenfranchisement of women. Despite legal frameworks supporting equal inheritance, fewer than 27% of women in North Macedonia and Kosovo own property in their name. Cultural norms continue to favor male heirs, limiting women's access to credit and weakening their bargaining power within households.

The World Bank notes that women in Southeast Europe are 40% less likely than men to receive formal loans, largely due to lack of collateral.[45] As Bina Agarwal contends, asset ownership is

[45] World Bank. *Women, Business and the Law 2023 – Europe and Central Asia Regional Report*.

essential for women's long-term empowerment—it secures autonomy and enables strategic life choices.[46]

Labor force participation is a core indicator of gender equality in employment. This figure compares female labor force participation across selected Balkan countries and the EU average.

Figure 3. Female Labor Force Participation Rates in the Balkans Compared to the EU, 2023.
Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal, 2023.

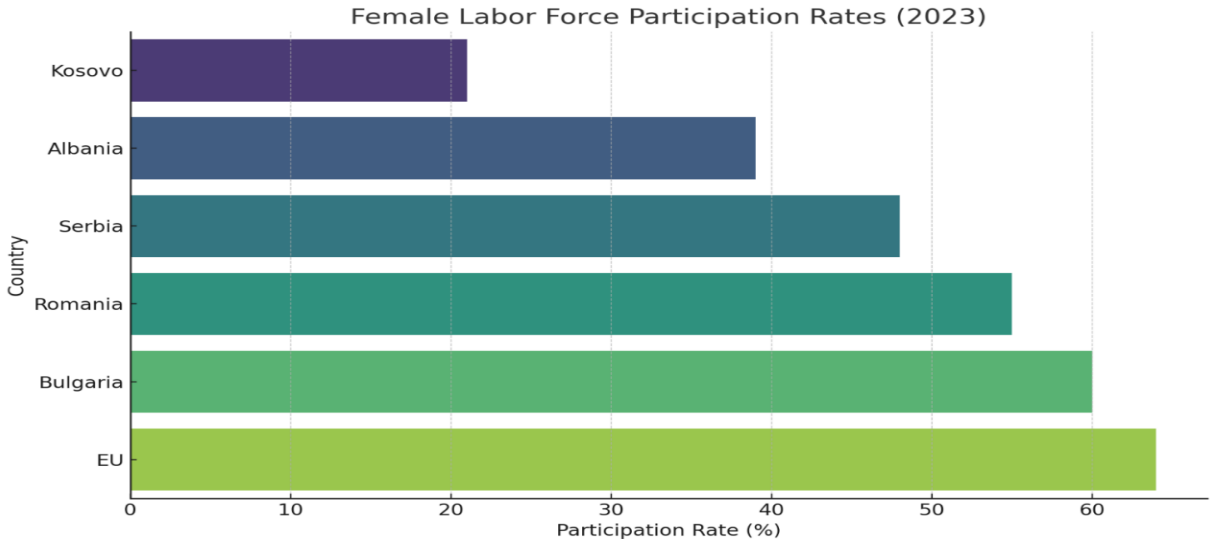

Figure 3. Female Labor Force Participation Rates in the Balkans Compared to the EU (2023). Source: World Bank Gender Data Portal, 2023.

Kosovo and Albania show the lowest participation rates, under 40%, compared to the EU average of 64%. Serbia and Romania fare better, though still lag EU benchmarks.

These figures suggest persistent structural barriers limiting women's access to paid employment in the region.

Entrepreneurship is often promoted as a vehicle for empowerment, yet women in the Balkans face significant structural barriers to business formation and growth. They comprise less than 30% of registered business owners, and their ventures are largely confined to low-margin sectors such as personal care and retail. In Serbia, only 14% of women-owned businesses secure bank

[46] Agarwal, Bina. *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

loans. Gendered collateral norms, informal financial networks, and weak support ecosystems prevent women from scaling or formalizing their enterprises.[47]

As Nancy Folbre warns, entrepreneurship without redistributive policy becomes a euphemism for individualized precarity.[48] Thus, efforts to promote female entrepreneurship must be linked to reforms in finance, infrastructure, and care support.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified gender disparities across the labor markets of the Balkans. Women's employment dropped disproportionately in sectors like hospitality, education, and informal caregiving. According to UN Women, over 70% of women in Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo reported increased domestic responsibilities, including homeschooling and eldercare.[49] Feminist theorists such as Nancy Fraser describe this as a crisis of social reproduction, where unpaid labor absorbs systemic shocks.[50]

Yet, recovery strategies across the region have largely neglected care infrastructure and income security for women. This omission risks institutionalizing pandemic-era inequalities and stalling progress toward labor equity.

Youth precarity further compounds long-term gender inequality. In countries like Kosovo and North Macedonia, over 35% of young women are not in employment, education, or training.[51] Early exclusion from stable labor paths forces many into unpaid or low-wage work, setting the stage for future economic marginalization. Vocational tracking in secondary education channels girls into feminized professions, while STEM fields remain dominated by men. Without targeted interventions—scholarships, mentorship, and public investment in female-dominated sectors—this early gap will calcify into systemic inequality.[52]

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[47] OECD. *Financing Women Entrepreneurs in the Western Balkans*, 2022.

[48] Folbre, Nancy. *Greed, Lust and Gender: A History of Economic Ideas*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

[49] UN Women. *Rapid Gender Assessment of the COVID-19 Situation in the Western Balkans*, 2020.

[50] Fraser, Nancy. "Contradictions of Capital and Care." *New Left Review*, vol. 100, 2016.

[51] European Training Foundation. *Youth Employment and Gender in the Western Balkans*, 2022.

[52] Ibid.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality reminds us that not all women experience precarity equally.[53] Ethnic minority women, migrants, and disabled women face compounded exclusions. For example, Roma women in the Balkans encounter systemic barriers in education

Figure 4. Roma Women's Employment and Secondary Education Completion in Select Balkan Countries. Source: UNDP Regional Roma Survey; European Roma Rights Centre, 2021.

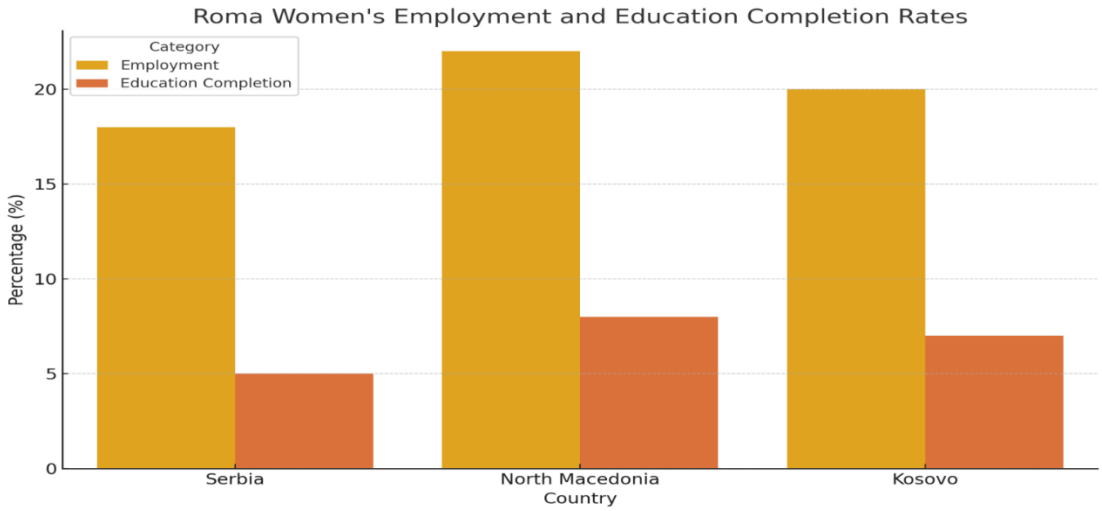

Figure 4. Roma Women's Employment and Secondary Education Completion (2021) Source: UNDP Regional Roma Survey; European Roma Rights Centre, 2021.

and employment.[54] Similarly, migrant care workers in the EU often work under exploitative conditions, without legal protections.[55]

This highlights the need for an intersectional feminist political economy that attends to racial, national, and class hierarchies—not just gender.

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[53] Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991.

[54] ERRC. *Roma Women in the Balkans: Inequality, Exclusion and Discrimination*, European Roma Rights Centre, 2020.

[55] PICUM. *Migrant Women in Care Work: Exploitation and Resistance in Europe*, Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants, 2022.

Intersectional disadvantages are stark among Roma women in the Balkans. This chart compares employment and secondary education completion rates in three countries.

Roma women's education completion is below 10% in all three countries, with employment only slightly higher. These figures illustrate the compounded effect of ethnic and gender marginalization, demanding targeted education and labor inclusion strategies.

Across the Balkans, intersectional exclusion magnifies labor market inequalities for women from marginalized communities—particularly those who are Roma, rural, disabled, or internally displaced. Roma women in North Macedonia and Serbia face unemployment rates exceeding 75%, despite high participation in informal and unpaid work.[56] Access to education and healthcare remains severely constrained, with NGO research showing that less than 10% of Roma women complete secondary education.[57] Rural women, who constitute a substantial portion of the female population in Bosnia, Albania, and Montenegro, often lack legal land ownership and remain excluded from pension schemes and social insurance due to informal or unpaid labor arrangements.[58]

3.3 – Balkan Gender Policy Analysis

Transnational migration has become a feminized phenomenon in the Balkans. Women from Albania, North Macedonia, and Bosnia increasingly migrate to Western Europe for caregiving roles, often under irregular arrangements. This "care drain" leaves behind deficits in their home communities, where grandparents or older daughters assume the unpaid labor. While remittances contribute significantly to national economies, they come at the cost of social fragmentation and long-term dependency. Policies must address both the rights of migrant care workers abroad and the care infrastructure at home to prevent a cyclical outsourcing of reproductive labor.[59] Building

[56] European Roma Rights Centre. *Roma Women's Labour Exclusion in the Western Balkans*, 2021.

[57] UNICEF. *Situation Analysis of Roma Children and Women in the Western Balkans*, 2020.

[58] UN Women. *Rural Women in the Balkans: Barriers to Accessing Rights and Resources*, 2022.

[59] Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar. *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*. Stanford University Press, 2015.

on these migration-driven challenges, the legal and policy landscape across the Balkans further shapes women's labor experiences.

EU legal harmonization has led to a proliferation of gender equality frameworks in the Balkans, yet enforcement remains inconsistent. North Macedonia and Serbia have adopted progressive labor laws, but implementation mechanisms are weak. Labor inspectors lack authority, complaint systems are underused, and courts are reluctant to pursue wage discrimination cases.[60] Sylvia Walby warns that without administrative and fiscal backing, gender law becomes symbolic rather than transformative. True alignment with EU norms requires active accountability—not just formal compliance.[61]

At the same time, cultural and societal narratives continue to play a significant role in undermining women's economic agency. Cultural narratives continue to undermine the professional legitimacy of feminized labor. In care, education, and social work, women are seen as fulfilling natural roles rather than exercising skilled labor.

This devaluation is particularly entrenched in rural Balkan regions, where patriarchal norms still dictate women's roles. Mojca Urek and Sanja Lokar document how post-socialist nostalgia for traditional family roles further reinforces this perception.[62] Thus, while legal reforms may be introduced, cultural attitudes often delay or distort their real-world impact. Reframing care as an economic good, and not just a private responsibility, is essential for shifting both cultural and policy paradigms. Taken together, these institutional and cultural obstacles produce a fragmented policy environment in which formal equality frameworks coexist with persistent labor market exclusion. This duality is made especially visible when comparing wage gaps across the region.

This figure provides a snapshot of the current gender wage gap by country, revealing sharp differences across the EU and Balkan regions.

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[60] European Commission. *Progress Report on Gender Equality in EU Enlargement Countries*, 2022.

[61] Walby, Sylvia. *The Future of Feminism*. Polity Press, 2011.

[62] Urek, Mojca and Lokar, Sanja. *The Social Position of Women in the Balkans: Continuity and Change*. Peace Institute, 2018.

Figure 5. Gender Wage Gap Across EU and Balkan Countries (2022–2023). Source: Eurostat, Gender Pay Gap Dataset, 2023.

Romania and Italy show gaps below 5%, while Germany, Poland, and Hungary exhibit gaps above 15%. Balkan countries like Croatia and Bulgaria fall in the mid-range, emphasizing the fragmented progress toward wage parity across the continent.

International financial institutions (IFIs) have indirectly shaped gender policy through fiscal discipline. IMF and World Bank-imposed austerity measures have led to the defunding of care services, wage caps in feminized sectors, and the rollback of gender-responsive budgeting. These macroeconomic policies contradict national commitments to gender equality, illustrating the need for feminist-informed economic governance that centers care, public investment, and equity.[63] Without this, economic growth will continue to rest on the unpaid labor of women. In order to assess the actual efficacy of policies and reforms, it is necessary to move beyond cross-sectional analysis and consider trends over time.

Analyzing longitudinal data gives insight into policy efficacy. This figure shows gender wage gap trends in the Balkans and select EU countries from 2005 to 2023.

[63] Bakker, Isabella and Gill, Stephen. "Ontology, Method, and Hypotheses in Feminist Political Economy." In: *Power, Production and Social Reproduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

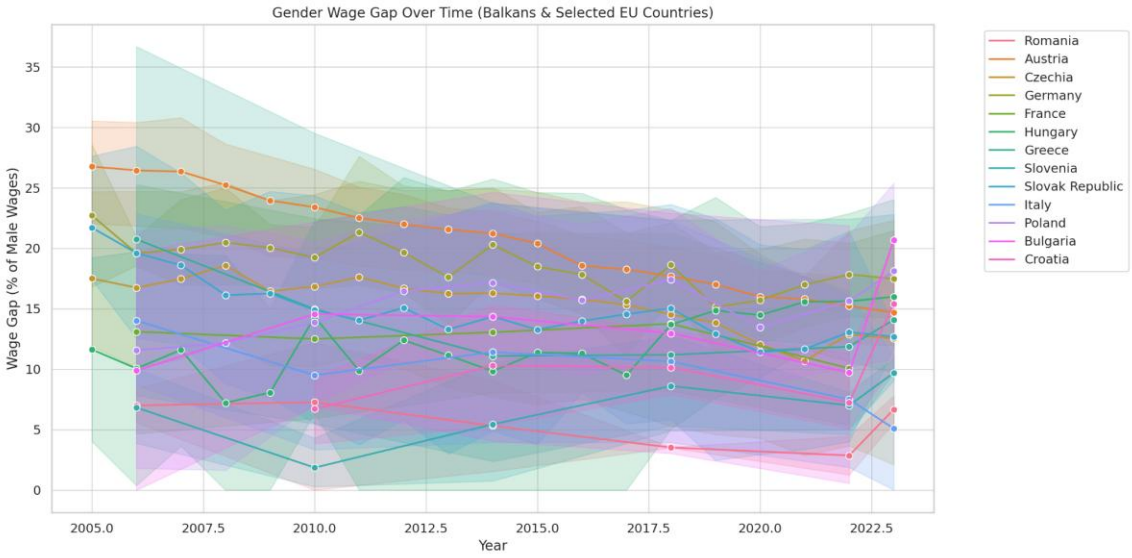

Figure 6. Gender Wage Gap Over Time in Balkans & Selected EU Countries. Source: Eurostat, Gender Pay Gap Historical Data, 2005–2023

Though most countries show progress, the rate of decline is slower in the Balkans. Countries like Bulgaria and Croatia have shown only moderate improvement, while Western countries like France and Germany exhibit more substantial narrowing of the gap.

As **Figure 6** illustrates, the gradual pace of change in the Balkans, compared to Western Europe, reflects the interplay between policy intent and structural resistance. This gap points to the limitations of legal alignment and underscores the ongoing impact of austerity, informal labor, and underinvestment in care infrastructure.

Comparing the Balkans with Scandinavian welfare states illustrates how policy, not culture, determines equality outcomes. Scandinavian countries allocate over 3% of GDP to care services, resulting in high female employment and narrow wage gaps. Balkan countries spend less than 1% and rely heavily on informal care. Nancy Fraser argues that commodified care regimes entrench inequality unless countered by public infrastructure and redistribution.[64] Balkan governments must move beyond rhetoric and invest structurally if they wish to close the gender gap. A closer look at the sectoral composition of women's employment, as well as educational and digital divides, further highlights persistent sources of inequality.

[64] Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*.

Educational segregation perpetuates occupational inequality. Though women in the Balkans increasingly graduate from universities, they are underrepresented in STEM and overrepresented in low-wage, feminized sectors. This vocational sorting begins in secondary school, reinforced by gendered expectations and guidance counseling. Silvia Gherardi notes that educational institutions reproduce labor market hierarchies unless actively disrupted.[65] Addressing these patterns requires curricular reform, scholarships, and gender-sensitive mentoring to redirect the pipeline.

Digital exclusion is the new frontier of gender inequality. Women in rural Balkan areas face limited access to internet and digital tools, excluding them from remote work and tech-driven careers. According to Eurostat, fewer than 15% of tech jobs in Bosnia and North Macedonia are held by women.[66] Without investment in digital literacy, infrastructure, and gender-sensitive ICT policies, the digital divide will further entrench occupational segregation and wage disparities.

Beyond state policy and digital transformation, feminist civil society has played a key role in advancing gender reforms in the Balkans. Organizations like Reactor, Women in Black, and Kvinna till Kvinna have pushed for labor law revisions, anti-discrimination protections, and the expansion of public dialogue on unpaid care. Despite chronic underfunding and political marginalization, these groups represent vital counter publics that translate feminist theory into institutional reform.[67] Their work exemplifies Silvia Federici's call to "common" care and resistance outside market logics, offering a blueprint for transformative policy rooted in grassroots activism.[68]

Trade unions in the Balkans present a complex relationship with gender equality goals. While many unions have formal gender equality departments or charters, their core structures remain male-dominated and resistant to intersectional demands. In North Macedonia, studies have

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[65] Gherardi, Silvia. *Gender and Learning in Organizations: Theories and Practices*. Springer, 2006.

[66] Eurostat. *ICT Gender Employment Statistics for South-East Europe*, 2023.

[67] Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. *Gender and Civil Society in the Western Balkans*, 2021.

[68] Federici, Silvia. *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. PM Press, 2019.

shown that women rarely ascend to leadership roles in union hierarchies.[69] Nonetheless, alliances between feminist NGOs and labor movements offer promise. Collaborative campaigns for maternity rights, equal pay, and anti-harassment protocols show that synergy between formal institutions and activist organizations can yield tangible gains.[70]

Academic feminist research in the region continues to provide critical insights into the political economy of gender. Scholars based in Ljubljana, Belgrade, and Sarajevo have produced studies on the legacy of socialist welfare, the informalization of care, and the transformation of family policy. These intellectual contributions are often sidelined in policymaking circles, yet they provide the analytical foundation for sustainable reform.

Institutional linkages between universities, ministries, and civil society must be strengthened to leverage this body of knowledge.[71]

Media narratives and public discourse play a pivotal role in shaping gender norms. In the Balkans, tabloid journalism and sensationalist coverage frequently reinforce sexist stereotypes. Political debates about gender equality often devolve into moral panic over "gender ideology," distracting from structural reform. Feminist media literacy campaigns, led by local NGOs and educators, are essential to counteract these messages. By reshaping the narrative, they open discursive space for policy change and cultural transformation.[72]

As regional cooperation frameworks gain traction, platforms such as the Western Balkans Gender Equality Platform have emerged as venues for policy alignment and knowledge sharing. While still in early stages, such platforms offer opportunities to harmonize labor standards, care policy, and gender budgeting across borders. Learning from successful models—like the Nordic Council's integration of gender metrics into economic planning—could help strengthen the role of regional bodies in shaping equitable development.[73]

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[69] UNDP North Macedonia. *Gender Equality in Trade Unions: Diagnostic Report*, 2020.

[70] European Trade Union Confederation. *Toolkit for Gender Equality Bargaining*, 2022.

[71] Lokar, Sanja and Gherardi, Silvia. *Knowledge and Policy: Gender Studies in the Balkans*. Peace Institute & EU GenderNet, 2021.

[72] European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). *Case Law and Gender Equality Overview*, 2022.

[73] Nordic Council of Ministers. *Gender Equality and Economic Growth: Lessons for the Balkans*, 2021.

Environmental and climate policy is another underexplored vector of labor inequality. In rural areas, women's agricultural work is deeply affected by ecological change and resource scarcity. Yet, gender is often omitted from environmental strategies in the region. A feminist approach to sustainability would recognize women's traditional knowledge, prioritize care-centered adaptation plans, and provide labor protections for eco-migrants. Integrating gender into climate policy also widens the scope of economic justice frameworks.[74]

Social protection reform must account for the diversity of women's labor trajectories. Women who move in and out of paid employment due to caregiving responsibilities often lose access to pensions, health care, and unemployment insurance.

Countries like Croatia and Slovenia have piloted caregiver credits and minimum pension guarantees, but most Balkan systems still penalize interrupted work histories. As Elson and Razavi argue, inclusive social protection is fundamental to economic justice.[75]

Finally, the fragmentation of labor statistics hampers policy design. Disaggregated data on

informal work, care responsibilities, and multiple job holdings is often unavailable. This lack of granularity means that many forms of women's labor remain statistically invisible. International organizations like ILO and EIGE have proposed gender-sensitive indicators, but national adoption in the Balkans remains uneven. Investment in statistical capacity is essential to align empirical evidence with feminist policy goals.[76]

Ultimately, addressing the gender wage gap in the EU and the Balkans demands a multi-scalar strategy. National reforms must be embedded within regional cooperation and global feminist frameworks. Policies should not only address market inequalities but also revalue reproductive labor, redistribute care responsibilities, and democratize economic decision-making. The thesis

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[74] Arora-Jonsson, Seema. "Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change." *Global Environmental Change* 21.2 (2011): 744–751.

[75] Elson, Diane and Razavi, Shahra. "Care Work and Social Policy: Engaging with Gender Inequality." In: *Gender and Development*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2007): 1–9.

[76] European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). *Gender Statistics Database*, 2022.

contends that symbolic and material dimensions of inequality are intertwined—and that feminist political economy offers a blueprint for structural transformation.[77]

3.4 Balkan Countries Case Studies

Case Study: Romania

Romania's labor market gender inequalities are rooted in the country's turbulent post-socialist transition, compounded by harsh austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis. In the name of fiscal consolidation, successive governments implemented widespread public sector cuts that dismantled much of the existing care infrastructure. This shift placed an outsized caregiving burden on women, especially in rural and low-income households.

According to Eurostat, Romania ranks among the EU's lowest in terms of public expenditure on social protection—just 14% of GDP compared to an EU average of over 27%.[78] The impact has been gendered: female labor force participation stagnates below 55%, and time-use surveys show women perform more than twice the amount of unpaid work compared to men.[79]

Additionally, the care migration phenomenon—often referred to as Romania's "care drain"—has accelerated since EU accession. Hundreds of thousands of Romanian women work abroad, particularly in Italy, Austria, and Germany, filling low-paid domestic labor roles. This has created severe care gaps in their home communities, where caregiving is informally transferred to grandmothers or adolescent daughters. As Rhacel Parreñas notes, this dynamic construct a global "care chain" that privatizes responsibility while reproducing systemic inequalities.[80] Meanwhile, Romanian labor law still contains ambiguities around part-time work, parental leave, and employer obligations—exposing working mothers to precarious contracts and wage

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[77] Bakker, Isabella. "Social Reproduction and the Constitution of a Gendered Political Economy." *New Political Economy* 12.4 (2007): 541–556.

[78] Eurostat. *General Government Expenditure by Function — Social Protection (Romania)*, 2023.

[79] European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). *Gender Equality Index 2023: Time Use and Unpaid Work*, Romania country profile.

[80] Parreñas, Rhacel. *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*. Stanford University Press, 2015.

penalties. Feminist economists argue that these contradictions between labor flexibility and familial responsibility are central to understanding the persistence of gender inequality in Romania's EU-aligned economy.

Case Study: Bulgaria

Bulgaria presents a paradox within EU gender equality rankings: while its gender pay gap is statistically lower than the EU average, deeper inspection reveals systemic informalization and devaluation of women's work. According to Eurostat, Bulgaria's gender pay gap stood at just 13% in 2023,[81] but this figure obscures the country's high share of undeclared and precarious female labor. Over 30% of employed women are engaged in part-time, seasonal, or informal work—especially in agriculture, domestic services, and caregiving sectors.[82] These roles are largely unregulated and excluded from state protections like paid leave or pension contributions, reinforcing long-term economic insecurity.

Post-accession legal harmonization has introduced a framework for equal pay and anti-discrimination, yet enforcement remains weak. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination has limited outreach, and labor inspections rarely target feminized sectors such as retail, domestic work, or private childcare.[83] Meanwhile, state investment in social services remains low. Public childcare coverage is uneven, and elderly care relies almost entirely on family networks, placing the burden on women across generations.

This reproduces what Diane Elson terms "the social organization of care," wherein states rely on women's unpaid labor to compensate for market and institutional failures.

Bulgarian feminist scholars and NGOs such as the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation have called for reforms that go beyond legal mimicry and address structural inequities. These include

[81] Eurostat. *Gender Pay Gap Statistics — Bulgaria*, 2023.

[82] ILO. *Women and Informality in Eastern Europe: Country Profiles*, 2022.

[83] Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation. *Monitoring Report on Labor Discrimination and Equality Enforcement*, 2021.

demands for formalization of care work, better access to paid family leave, and the use of gender impact assessments in national budgets. Without such changes, Bulgaria's apparent success in reducing headline gender gaps risks masking the persistent undervaluation of women's labor.

Case Study: Albania

Albania exemplifies the compounded effects of informal labor markets, rural underdevelopment, and weak institutional enforcement on gender inequality. Although the country has adopted a number of gender equality laws and aligned its labor code with EU directives, implementation remains largely symbolic. Women's formal labor force participation remains under 45%, among the lowest in the region, with sharp disparities between urban and rural areas.[84] In the countryside, women's contributions to agriculture and household economies are substantial but largely invisible, with most working in unpaid family roles. Lacking contracts or social insurance registration, these women are excluded from pensions, health coverage, and legal protections.

Structural informality is reinforced by Albania's highly fragmented childcare system, which is concentrated in urban centers. According to the Albanian Institute of Statistics, less than 18% of children aged 0–5 are enrolled in early education facilities nationwide.[85]

This exacerbates the care burden, particularly in multigenerational households, and entrenches intergenerational gender roles. The absence of public eldercare further shifts responsibility onto middle-aged women, limiting their capacity to seek or retain full-time employment.

International actors such as the World Bank and the EU have linked gender equality to good governance and economic development benchmarks. Yet conditionality frameworks often emphasize legal reform over resource allocation, reproducing what Sanja Lokar critiques as "formal compliance without transformation." [86]

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[84] INSTAT Albania. *Women and Men in Albania: Labor Market Statistics*, 2023.

[85] UNICEF Albania. *Early Childhood Education and Care: Country Snapshot*, 2022.

[86] Lokar, Sanja. "Gender Equality in the Western Balkans: From Compliance to Subversion." *Feminist Europe*, 2020.

Albanian feminist networks, including the Gender Alliance for Development Center, have called for greater investment in rural services, social protection expansion, and gender-responsive budgeting to address systemic exclusions. Without these shifts, gender equality risks remaining an urban elite discourse disconnected from the everyday realities of working-class and rural women.

Case Study: Kosovo

Kosovo's post-war reconstruction has produced a deeply gendered labor market, shaped by militarized aid flows, political patronage, and institutional fragility. Despite constitutional guarantees for gender equality and alignment with key international conventions, Kosovo consistently ranks among the lowest in Europe for women's labor force participation—recorded at just 21% in 2023, compared to over 60% for men.[87] This gap reflects entrenched patriarchal norms, limited childcare access, and a rigid formal sector dominated by male patronage networks. Public daycare facilities cover less than 10% of children under five, and eldercare services are nearly absent, reinforcing women's unpaid care burden. [88]

Women from minority communities, particularly Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) groups, face compounded exclusion due to ethnic discrimination, lack of documentation, and geographic isolation. Only 3% of RAE women are formally employed, and illiteracy rates exceed 40% in some municipalities.[89] Post-conflict international aid largely prioritized institution-building and market liberalization, sidelining social investment in health, education, and care infrastructure. As feminist scholars argue, peacebuilding processes often reproduce patriarchal governance by excluding women from meaningful decision-making, both in transitional justice and economic policy.

[87] Kosovo Agency of Statistics. *Labour Force Survey 2023*.

[88] UNICEF Kosovo. *Early Childhood Development and Care: National Brief*, 2022.

[89] Balkan Insight. "Roma Women in Kosovo: Barriers to Employment and Education," 2021.

Local feminist organizations—such as the Kosovo Women's Network—have pushed for gender budgeting, care subsidies, and labor law reform, but face donor fatigue and weak political will. The gap between progressive legal frameworks and daily reality continues to widen. Without systemic redistribution of resources and decision-making power, Kosovo's formal equality risks becoming what Nancy Fraser calls "tokenistic inclusion within a broken system."

Case Study: Serbia

Serbia represents a critical example of how gender inequality persists through the interplay of weak labor enforcement, social conservatism, and structural exclusions. While gender equality laws are in place—including the Law on Gender Equality (2021)—enforcement mechanisms remain underfunded and politically marginal. Women make up the majority of public sector employees, yet are concentrated in low-wage sectors such as education, healthcare, and administration. According to Serbia's Statistical Office, women earn on average 14.4% less than men, a figure that rises sharply in the private sector and among informal workers.[90]

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities: surveys by UN Women in 2021 found that 79% of Serbian women reported increased caregiving duties during lockdowns, while labor market recovery was slower for women than for men.[91] Serbia also demonstrates stark intersectional disparities—Roma women face unemployment rates exceeding 80%, with fewer than 5% completing secondary education.[92] Discrimination, lack of childcare, and inadequate housing deepen their exclusion, often forcing them into precarious or unpaid domestic labor. Despite ratifying the Istanbul Convention and initiating several EU-aligned gender strategies, Serbia's public care infrastructure remains fragile, with only 15% of children under three enrolled in childcare facilities.

[90] Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. *Gender Equality Indicators 2023*.

[91] UN Women Serbia. *Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in Serbia*, 2021.

[92] European Roma Rights Centre. *Hidden Discrimination: Roma Women in Serbia*, 2022.

Feminist civil society actors such as Women in Black and AWC Serbia have been instrumental in exposing gender-based violence, labor exploitation, and the retreat of the welfare state. Yet, government responses remain fragmented. As Nancy Fraser warns, symbolic reforms without redistribution of care responsibilities risk reinforcing patriarchal norms. In Serbia, care continues to be treated as a private obligation, embedded in familial duty rather than social citizenship.

Case Study: Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina present a layered case of gender inequality rooted in post-conflict recovery, ethno-national fragmentation, and a weakened welfare state. Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing gender equality, the country has struggled with implementation due to deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and a fragmented governance structure. According to the World Bank, female labor force participation in Bosnia remains among the lowest in Europe, hovering around 35%. Much of this can be attributed to limited childcare facilities, rural underdevelopment, and a high informal employment rate.[93]

One of the key structural issues is the ethnic decentralization of social policy, which results in uneven provision of services across cantons and entities. For example, while urban areas like Sarajevo have made modest progress in offering subsidized care services, rural regions remain largely dependent on unpaid family labor. This fragmentation disproportionately affects women, who are expected to absorb care duties in the absence of state support. NGOs like Kvinna till Kvinna report that post-war reconstruction efforts largely ignored gendered labor needs, focusing instead on male-dominated sectors such as infrastructure and security.[94]

The feminization of poverty is acute among war widows and displaced women, who often lack access to social insurance, vocational training, and stable housing. Moreover, traditional kinship systems continue to privilege male inheritance and property rights, limiting women's economic

[93] World Bank. *Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+)*. Accessed May 2025.

[94] Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. *Gender Equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Between International Commitments and Local Realities*. 2020.

autonomy. A 2021 report by UN Women emphasized the importance of localized, gender-sensitive budgeting to address these disparities. However, such measures remain scarce and underfunded.[95]

Educational attainment among women is relatively high, but it has not translated into labor market gains. The gender wage gap persists, and occupational segregation channels women into underpaid sectors like education, retail, and caregiving. Without coordinated state policy and investment in care infrastructure, Bosnia's gender inequality is likely to persist across generations.[96]

Case Study: North Macedonia

North Macedonia offers a mixed picture of progress and persistent structural inequality. On paper, the country has aligned much of its gender legislation with EU directives, particularly in labor law and anti-discrimination statutes. However, implementation remains inconsistent, and institutional enforcement mechanisms are often weak or under-resourced. According to Eurostat, the gender pay gap in North Macedonia stands at approximately 14%, but this figure may understate disparities due to high informal employment and widespread wage opacity.[97]

The burden of unpaid care continues to fall disproportionately on women. Time-use surveys indicate that women spend nearly twice as many hours on domestic and caregiving duties compared to men.[98] Public childcare remains limited and unevenly distributed, particularly in rural areas. As a result, many women opt out of the labor force or engage in part-time, precarious employment. This dynamic reflects what Nancy Fraser has termed the "crisis of care," wherein social reproduction is offloaded onto households without compensatory public investment. [99]

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[95] UN Women. *Gender Responsive Budgeting in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. 2021.

[96] European Institute for Gender Equality. *Gender Equality Index: Bosnia and Herzegovina*. 2023.

[97] Eurostat. *Gender Pay Gap Statistics: North Macedonia*. 2023.

[98] European Institute for Gender Equality. *Time Use and Gender Gaps in Unpaid Work*. 2023.

[99] Roma Center for Democracy. *Roma Women and Labor Exclusion in North Macedonia*. 2022.

Roma women and those in rural areas face compounded barriers, including discrimination, poverty, and lack of access to basic services. NGOs have reported that Roma women in North Macedonia have significantly lower rates of secondary education completion and labor force participation. These intersectional exclusions require targeted policy interventions, including affirmative action in employment and education, as well as localized care infrastructure development. [100]

Despite challenges, North Macedonia has shown some innovation in gender-responsive budgeting at the municipal level. For instance, Skopje has piloted programs to expand childcare access and vocational training for women re-entering the workforce. However, these programs remain isolated and lack nationwide replication. For real progress, national policy must integrate care work into economic planning, recognize informal labor, and fund the public infrastructure necessary for women's full economic participation.

The ISSHS research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic in North Macedonia and the region did not only widen existing gender inequalities, but also exposed critical weaknesses in the entire gender policy infrastructure. According to the 2021 ISSHS assessment, over 35% of women reported a worsening of their financial situation, while one in three struggled to meet even basic living costs such as food and hygiene. Rural women and Roma women faced compounded risks due to deeper economic marginalization and limited access to healthcare, with over 80% of informally employed women (the majority being Roma) experiencing significant household financial strain. Most government measures for COVID-19 recovery were gender-blind: out of 46 pandemic-response measures in North Macedonia, only two were tailored to women's needs, and even these were not effectively accessible to women in rural areas, women with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. [101] At the same time, gender-based and domestic violence reports rose sharply, while many victims could not seek help due to isolation, fear of infection, or

[100] Ministry of Labor and Social Policy of North Macedonia. *Gender Budgeting Municipal Pilot Projects Report*. 2021.

[101] Ana Blazheva, Viktorija Borovska, Iskra Gerazova Mujchin, and Kalina Lechevska, *Assessment of Needs for Building Gender-Sensitive Policies for Societal Post-COVID Resilience and Recovery* (Skopje: Institute of Social and Humanities Sciences, 2021), 11–20, https://www.isshs.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Проценка-на-потреби-за-градење-родово-сензитивни-политики-за-општествена-пост-Ковид-резилиентност-и-закрепнување-1.pdf.

institutional barriers. The crisis also highlighted a chronic lack of gender awareness in both policymaking and society: a quarter of surveyed women either did not understand or had never heard the term “gender equality.” As the ISSHS report emphasizes, meaningful post-pandemic recovery requires that future policy is intersectional, directly informed by grassroots women's organizations, and explicitly targets the needs of the most marginalized.

Key Findings: The Balkans

The comparative case studies of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, and Kosovo highlight a regional continuum of structural gender inequality that transcends legal harmonization. Across the Balkans, women disproportionately shoulder the burden of unpaid care, face high informal employment, and remain excluded from policymaking despite robust equality frameworks on paper. National disparities vary in degree but not in kind: whether it is Roma exclusion in Serbia and North Macedonia, care migration in Romania and Albania, or the privatization of eldercare in Kosovo and Bulgaria, the pattern remains consistent—legal reforms without public investment entrench inequality rather than resolve it.

Moreover, international conditionality often promotes formal compliance over substantive transformation. EU alignment processes have brought gender laws but not the infrastructure or fiscal commitment needed to support working women. Feminist economists such as Elson and Fraser remind us that gender equality is not just a legal question but one of political will and economic redistribution. The Balkan experience demonstrates that feminist-informed governance must be regionally tailored, intersectional in design, and driven by both grassroots mobilization and institutional accountability. Only then can the promise of equality be translated into lived economic and social rights.

Chapter IV: Comparative Analysis of the Gender Wage Gap: Sweden, Italy, Poland, and Hungary

Despite longstanding EU commitments to gender equality, the gender wage gap persists across member states, reflecting the enduring influence of structural inequality, labor market

segmentation, and socio-cultural norms.[102] While EU directives mandate equal pay for equal work,[103] implementation across national contexts remains uneven, complicated by divergent welfare regimes, political discourses, and institutional legacies.[104] The gender pay gap is not merely a matter of income differentials but a manifestation of deeper inequalities in access to opportunity, care responsibilities, and symbolic value attributed to women's labor.[105]

This chapter conducts a comparative analysis of four EU countries—Sweden, Italy, Poland, and Hungary—to interrogate the interaction of legal frameworks, care infrastructures, and political discourse in shaping gendered wage outcomes. These countries were selected for their contrast across welfare models, political orientations, and discursive environments.[106] While Sweden is often praised as a gender equality leader, Italy operates under a familialist regime with strong cultural norms around care and motherhood.[107] Poland and Hungary, by contrast, represent post-socialist systems with populist anti-gender rhetoric that has restructured equality policy itself. [108]

The analysis is guided by three research questions:

What institutional mechanisms—legal, discursive, or organizational—perpetuate the gender wage gap in EU countries despite formal equality policies?

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[102] European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), *Gender Equality Index 2023*, Vilnius: EIGE, 2023.

[103] European Commission, *Directive (EU) 2006/54/EC on Equal Opportunities and Equal Treatment of Men and Women in Matters of Employment and Occupation*, Official Journal of the European Union, 2006.

[104] Sylvia Walby, *The Future of Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

[105] Nancy Fraser, "After the Family Wage: Gender Equity and the Welfare State," *Political Theory* 22, no. 4 (1994): 591–618.

[106] Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[107] Francesca Bettio and Annamaria Simonazzi, "Care Regimes and Women's Work in Europe," *Journal of European Social Policy* 15, no. 3 (2005): 229–243.

[108] Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (London: Routledge, 2021).

To what extent do anti-gender narratives and populist discourse affect the implementation of gender equality measures?

How do symbolic framings of labor, family, and care contribute to wage inequality and occupational segregation?

To address these questions, the chapter applies a feminist political economy framework, grounded in the theories of Nancy Fraser, Joan Acker, Sylvia Walby, Francesca Bettio, and Silvia Federici. These theorists emphasize how economic institutions and symbolic narratives intersect to reproduce gendered divisions of labor and value.[109] Methodologically, the chapter combines Eurostat and OECD data with legal analysis and feminist discourse critique, offering a multi-level interpretive comparison. Each country section analyzes labor market data, care infrastructure, policy design, and discursive framing, pairing at least two theorists to interpret national outcomes.

Rather than separating the legal from the cultural, or the economic from the symbolic, the analysis reads across domains to understand how care regimes, policy instruments, and gender norms co-construct wage inequality. In doing so, it contributes to broader feminist critiques of formal equality and highlights how structural change remains contingent on the political will to confront institutionalized gender hierarchies.[110]

4.1 Sweden: Policy Innovation and Structural Limits

Sweden is often hailed as a model of gender egalitarianism, ranking consistently at or near the top of global gender equality indices.[111] The World Economic Forum has never ranked Sweden lower than fifth since the Global Gender Gap Index began in 2006.[112] At the policy level,

[109] Joan Acker, "Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations," *Gender & Society* 20, no. 4 (2006): 441–464.

[110] Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[111] EIGE, *Gender Equality Index 2023*, 9.

[112] World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2023*, 5.

Sweden's framework rests on the belief that everyone, regardless of gender, should have equal opportunity to work, earn, and balance career and family life.[113] Robust anti-discrimination laws—including the 1980 workplace gender equality legislation and the 2009 Discrimination Act—require not only equal treatment but also proactive measures to address harassment and pay inequality.[114] Yet despite institutional commitments, a significant gender pay gap endures. As of 2023, Swedish women earned around 90% of men's monthly salaries, leaving an unadjusted pay gap of 10%. [115] While this gap is below the EU average, it remains central to Sweden's gender equality policy agenda.

Care Infrastructure and Work–Family Policies

Sweden's extensive care infrastructure has long supported dual-earner family models. Parents are entitled to 480 days of paid parental leave per child, with a dedicated non-transferable portion for each parent—colloquially known as "daddy months."[116] Since the introduction of the use-it-or-lose-it model in 1995 (now expanded to three months), fathers have increasingly taken leave, accounting for about 30% of parental leave days in 2022.[117]Additionally, public childcare is heavily subsidized and widely available from age one. The country invests over 3% of GDP in early childhood education and care—among the highest in the OECD.[118]

Nevertheless, gendered asymmetries persist. Women continue to take the majority of parental leave and are more likely to reduce working hours after childbirth, often shifting to part-time roles.[119] This leads to long-term differences in career progression, wages, and pensions. Researchers describe this dynamic as the "motherhood penalty."[120] Official reports note that

[113] Sweden.se, "Gender Equality in Sweden," 2023, https://sweden.se.

[114] Swedish Government, *Discrimination Act of 2009*, Stockholm, 2009.

[115] Eurostat, "Gender Pay Gap Statistics – Sweden," 2024.

[116] OECD, *Family Database: Parental Leave Policies*, 2023.

[117] Swedish Social Insurance Agency, *Parental Leave Use Report*, 2023.

[118] OECD, *Education at a Glance 2023: Sweden*, Paris, 2023.

[119] Dotti Sani and Treas, "Educational Gradients in Child Care," 2016.

[120] Angelov, Johansson, and Lindahl, "Parenthood and Gender Gap in Pay," *Journal of Labor Economics*, 2016.

while sector, experience, and working hours explain some of the gap, "some of [the wage differential] seems to have more to do with gender," particularly in how motherhood shapes work trajectories.[121]

Labor Market Structure and Wage-Setting

Sweden's labor market is highly unionized and characterized by centralized wage bargaining, a structure often linked to more equitable income distribution.[122] Female labor force participation is around 80%, with a gender employment gap of just 4.7%, one of the lowest in the EU.[123] However, occupational segregation remains stark: women are overrepresented in public-sector and caregiving roles like education, healthcare, and elder care—professions that are undervalued in terms of pay.[124] According to Eurostat, over 76% of care workers in the EU are women; in Sweden, the figure is even higher.[125] Men dominate higher-paying sectors like engineering and technology. When controlling for variables like age, hours worked, and sector, Sweden's **adjusted** gender pay gap narrows to 4–5%, but this still represents structural inequality.[126]

Feminist economists argue that this reflects a systemic devaluation of feminized labor.[127] Even in high-wage, unionized economies like Sweden, care and service jobs remain lower paid than male-dominated fields of equivalent skill.[128] The "Swedish model" of industrial relations—based on collective bargaining without a statutory minimum wage—relies on unions to ensure pay equity. However, studies have shown that the structure of collective agreements (centralized vs. local) does not always close gender gaps.[129] Since 2017, Swedish employers are required to

[121] Swedish National Mediation Office, *Annual Wage Statistics 2023*.

[122] OECD, *Economic Surveys: Sweden*, 2023.

[123] Eurostat, "Employment by Sex and Age," 2024.

[124] Magnusson, "Gender Wage Inequality in Sweden," *Social Inclusion*, 2022.

[125] EIGE, "Care Sector and Gender," 2023.

[126] SNMO, *Adjusted Wage Gap Report*, 2023.

[127] Paula England et al., "Wages of Virtue: The Pay Penalty for Caring Work," *PNAS*, 2020.

[128] Löfström, "Gender Equality and Economic Growth," European Parliament, 2011.

[129] OECD, *Wage Setting and Bargaining: Sweden*, 2022.

conduct annual pay surveys and address unjustified disparities in equal or equivalent roles.[130] These job evaluation practices aim to enforce "equal pay for work of equal value," though enforcement varies by sector.

There has been progress. Over the past decade, the unadjusted gender pay gap has dropped by several percentage points, reaching a historic low of about 10% in 2023.[131] Wage growth in female-dominated sectors has outpaced the national average in recent collective agreements. Still, government reports acknowledge that a "residual" unexplained gap remains, largely attributable to gender-based biases in hiring, promotion, and sectoral pay norms.[132]

Discursive Politics and Historical Legacies

Sweden's public discourse has been shaped by feminist movements and a social-democratic legacy that frames gender equality as a collective social good.[133] State narratives routinely emphasize "equal power and influence for women and men," and caregiving is discussed as a shared societal responsibility.[134] This consensus makes gender equality a nonpartisan value, though some resistance has emerged, particularly from the right-populist Sweden Democrats.[135] Even so, government reports and media coverage often treat the wage gap as a challenge still needing to be solved—not a settled issue.

Feminist scholars such as Åsa Löfström have shown that feminized occupations often experience wage decline as more women enter them, revealing the symbolic devaluation embedded in wage-setting processes.[136] Sylvia Walby similarly argues that discourses of "natural" caregiving roles help rationalize the lower valuation of women's work, even in welfare states.[137] Swedish

[130] Swedish Government, *Pay Survey Guidelines*, 2022.

[131] Eurofound, *Gender Pay Gap Developments in Sweden*, 2024.

[132] SNMO, *Wage Discrimination Report*, 2023.

[133] Walby, *The Future of Feminism*, 2011.

[134] Swedish Prime Minister's Office, *Gender Policy Portal*, 2023.

[135] Graff and Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics*, 2021.

[136] Löfström, "Gender and Wage Dynamics," 2011.

[137] Walby, *The Future of Feminism*, 65.

policymakers have responded with initiatives aimed at breaking occupational segregation and promoting more equal sharing of care responsibilities, including targeted STEM programs for women and campaigns to increase men's involvement in childcare.[138]

Historically, Sweden's strong equality infrastructure emerged from mid-century social democratic reforms, but neoliberal reforms in the 1990s introduced new pressures, such as privatization in care sectors and market-based principles in education and health.[139] Nancy Fraser's critique of "progressive neoliberalism"—where gender equality is rhetorically embraced but undermined by market logics—resonates with these shifts.[140] Sweden has tried to mitigate these effects through binding collective agreements in privatized care sectors, but tensions remain.[141]

In sum, Sweden's experience demonstrates that even with advanced policy tools and cultural support for equality, wage gaps persist due to enduring structural norms and symbolic undervaluation of feminized labor. Continued progress will require not just policy fine-tuning but deeper transformations in how labor and care are socially and economically valued.[142]

4.2 Poland: Gender Inequality and the Rise of Maternalist Welfare

Poland offers a complex case of formal commitment to gender equality principles coexisting with maternalist retrenchment, religious nationalism, and populist backlash against feminism. Since 2015, under the Law and Justice (PiS) government, gender equality has become the object of symbolic affirmation and political instrumentalization. As Dorota Szelewa argues, Poland's welfare system has shifted toward **maternalism**: women are recognized as mothers and caregivers in policy rhetoric, yet denied redistributive infrastructure that would support economic

[138] Swedish Equality Commission, *Gender-Equal Lifetime Earnings*, 2022.

[139] Esping-Andersen, *Social Foundations*, 1999.

[140] Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 2013.

[141] OECD, *Public Sector Pay Equity Report*, 2023.

[142] Fraser, "After the Family Wage," 1994.

autonomy or workplace equity.[143] This creates a contradictory landscape of rights without resources—visibility without institutional support. Poland's institutionalization of "motherhood first" policies highlights the tension between symbolic recognition and economic disempowerment, a hallmark of what Nancy Fraser calls **misrecognition without redistribution**.[144]

Although Poland's unadjusted gender wage gap is relatively low by EU standards—around 4.5% as of 2023—this figure is misleading. Adjusted analyses that factor in occupational segregation, labor force participation, hours worked, and sectoral clustering reveal a much deeper divide, often cited between 13–18%.[145] This discrepancy is partly due to widespread **informal discrimination**, promotion bias, and a labor culture that subtly penalizes female-coded professions. As Małgorzata Fuszara notes, formal legal frameworks remain undercut by informal workplace practices, legal inaction, and gendered assumptions embedded in judicial interpretations of equality law.[146] The result is an "equality façade": symbolic parity that masks deeply entrenched inequalities in hiring, pay, and promotion.

In terms of institutional mechanisms, Poland's **care infrastructure** remains among the most underdeveloped in the European Union. As of 2023, only 13% of children under age three were enrolled in formal childcare.[147] The lack of subsidized, universal care options contributes directly to women's limited labor market integration, especially in rural areas and low-income households. Public policy has not prioritized the expansion of childcare facilities, and where they do exist, access is uneven and often constrained by waiting lists and reduced hours. Feminist political economists interpret this infrastructure vacuum as a **structural disincentive**—women

[143] Dorota Szelewa, "Welfare State, Gender, and Care Policies in Poland," *Social Policy & Society* 19, no. 2 (2020): 240–252.

[144] Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 19.

[145] European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), *Gender Equality Index – Poland Profile*, 2023; World Bank, *Gender Pay Gap Diagnostics: Eastern Europe Report*, 2022.

[146] Małgorzata Fuszara, "Gender Equality in Poland: Between Symbolism and Legal Reform," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 17, no. 2 (2010): 205–223.

[147] OECD, *Public Spending on Childcare – Poland Profile*, Paris: OECD Family Database, 2024.

are subtly encouraged to exit the workforce to fulfill unpaid domestic care roles. This creates a material foundation for gender wage disparities, as interrupted or part-time employment negatively impacts women's income trajectories, promotion rates, and pension entitlements.[148]

Instead of investing in comprehensive public infrastructure, the PiS government has expanded **cash-transfer programs**, particularly the *Rodzina 500+* (Family 500+) child benefit, which offers a monthly stipend per child. While the policy has demonstrably reduced child poverty, it has also had **negative consequences for female labor supply**. A growing body of empirical research suggests that the policy disincentivizes labor market reentry, especially for mothers with lower educational levels.[149] Studies by the Institute for Structural Research (IBS) estimate that *Family 500+* led to the labor market exit of approximately 50,000 women during its first year alone.[150] This confirms what Joan Acker might label an **inequality regime**: a constellation of practices and incentives within institutions that normalize women's economic marginalization under the guise of family support.[151]

The symbolic narrative accompanying these policies is even more revealing. Polish political discourse increasingly frames women as **"mothers of the nation"**, valorizing their reproductive function while devaluing their labor contributions. These tropes are rooted in both Catholic doctrine and nationalist mythology, wherein the preservation of traditional family structures is presented as a patriotic duty. As Graff and Korolczuk argue, **anti-gender ideology** has become a powerful instrument of statecraft, positioning feminism, LGBTQ+ advocacy, and reproductive rights as alien or dangerous imports from the West.[152]

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[148] Brigitte Liebig, "Caring Cultures in Central Europe," *International Journal of Sociology & Social Policy* 35, no. 7/8 (2015): 486–503.

[149] Anna Gromada and Iga Magda, "Family 500+ and Women's Labour Market Participation," *IBS Policy Paper*, 2018.

[150] Institute for Structural Research, "Impact of Family 500+ on Labor Market Participation," 2018.

[151] Joan Acker, "Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations," *Gender & Society* 20, no. 4 (2006): 441–464.

[152] Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (London: Routledge, 2021), 23–39.

Public education and civil society institutions have been key targets of this **discursive backlash**. Since 2016, a series of legislative efforts and public campaigns have attempted to restrict the presence of gender studies, sex education, and feminist organizations in public institutions.[153] In 2019, Warsaw's City Council was pressured by national ministries to cancel gender-focused initiatives in schools, reflecting a top-down strategy of **cultural erasure**.[154] These actions serve to delegitimize policy interventions aimed at equality, portraying them as ideological threats rather than democratic imperatives. In this context, even minimal reforms—like Poland's hesitant adoption of EU transparency measures—are diluted or selectively implemented.[155]

The gender wage gap in Poland is therefore not solely a matter of income differentials but the outcome of **institutionalized cultural and economic narratives** that shape the distribution of value, opportunity, and legitimacy. Sylvia Walby's notion of **gender regimes** is applicable here: institutions—both formal and informal—reproduce gendered hierarchies by assigning disproportionate value to male-coded labor, marginalizing unpaid reproductive work, and embedding traditional gender norms in legal and economic practices.[156] Fraser's insight that capitalist democracies often "recognize" women symbolically while materially devaluing their labor remains profoundly true in the Polish context.[157]

The culmination of these dynamics is a **dual burden** imposed on Polish women: they are celebrated for childbearing and family loyalty but are economically penalized through weak institutional support, limited career pathways, and a cultural climate hostile to structural change. While the EU imposes formal mandates on pay transparency and gender mainstreaming, domestic political resistance—often expressed through "sovereigntist" rhetoric—has blocked or diluted their implementation.[158] Poland thus offers a powerful case study in how **gender equality**

[153] European Commission, *2024 Poland Country Report on Gender Equality and Pay Transparency*, DG Justice, 2024.

[154] Warsaw City Council proceedings archive, "Gender Equality in Schools: Public Response," 2019.

[155] European Commission, "Progress on Pay Transparency – Poland," 2024.

[156] Sylvia Walby, *The Future of Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

[157] Fraser, *Scales of Justice*, 2009.

[158] Euractiv, "Poland Resists EU Women's Rights Resolutions," 2022.

can be neutralized from within: through selective legalism, symbolic nationalism, and the instrumentalization of motherhood.

4.3 Italy: Gender Inequality in a Familialist Welfare State

Italy presents a textbook case of what feminist political economists describe as a **familialist welfare regime**, wherein care responsibilities are privatized within the household and disproportionately delegated to women.[159] Although the Italian Constitution (Articles 3 and 37) guarantees formal equality and the protection of working mothers, these commitments are consistently undermined by **institutional inertia**, segmented labor markets, and deeply gendered cultural norms.[160] As Chiara Saraceno argues, caregiving is still widely perceived as a natural extension of women's roles, not as a shared public or economic responsibility.[161] This perception is reinforced by a longstanding influence of Catholic moral doctrine, particularly during the post-war period of Christian Democratic dominance, which enshrined a heterosexual nuclear family as both a moral norm and **policy blueprint**.[162]

Francesca Bettio and Annamaria Simonazzi describe the Italian system as one that forces women into a **false binary** between motherhood and employment, structurally reinforced by underinvestment in public childcare, limited paternal leave, and labor incentives that nudge women into precarious part-time roles.[163] Even when women choose to work full-time, they face constrained career mobility and sectoral segregation, especially in southern regions. As Tindara

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[159] Francesca Bettio and J. Plantenga, "Comparing Care Regimes in Europe," *Feminist Economics* 10, no. 1 (2004): 85–113.

[160] Italian Constitution, Articles 3 and 37; Bonoli and Reber, "The Political Economy of Familialism," *Comparative European Politics* 8, no. 3 (2010): 365–384.

[161] Chiara Saraceno, "Childcare Needs and Childcare Policies," *Sociologia e Politiche Sociali* 14, no. 3 (2011): 3–19.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Francesca Bettio and Annamaria Simonazzi, "Care Regimes and Women's Work in Europe," *Journal of European Social Policy* 15, no. 3 (2005): 229–243.

Addabbo and colleagues have shown, gender-sensitive budget analysis reveals how fiscal policy in Italy consistently favors male breadwinners and entrenches **regressive redistributive patterns**.[164]

Joan Acker's theory of **inequality regimes** is particularly apt in this context: Italian labor institutions internalize gendered expectations, constructing job hierarchies and reward systems that favor male continuous employment and marginalize women's interrupted or flexible labor.[165] This is especially visible in occupational concentration: Italian women are overwhelmingly represented in **education, healthcare, retail, and public administration**—sectors characterized by low pay and limited upward mobility.[166] These roles are not only materially undervalued but **symbolically devalued**, contributing to what Sylvia Walby calls a "gendered order of value."[167]

According to Eurostat (2023), Italy's **unadjusted gender wage gap** stands at 14.5%, nearly matching the EU average.[168] But this average conceals pronounced **regional disparities**: in the North, especially Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, women's labor participation and earnings are significantly higher, whereas in the South, traditional gender norms and a weak formal care infrastructure suppress women's employment.[169] ISTAT data from 2022 shows that men still dominate technical, industrial, and managerial roles, while women are clustered in care-related and administrative jobs.[170] Fraser's **recognition–redistribution dilemma** is again relevant here: Italian policy frameworks may recognize women symbolically (e.g., via moralistic celebrations

[164] Tindara Addabbo et al., "Gender Budgets: A Tool for Gender Equality," *Rivista Italiana degli Economisti* 3 (2015): 387–412.

[165] Joan Acker, "Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations," *Gender & Society* 20, no. 4 (2006): 441–464.

[166] ISTAT, *Labour Force Survey*, 2022.

[167] Sylvia Walby, *The Future of Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

[168] Eurostat, "Gender Pay Gap Statistics – Italy," 2023.

[169] ISTAT, *Employment and Gender Report*, 2023.

[170] ISTAT, *Women in the Labor Market*, 2022.

of motherhood) but fail to **redistribute material support** through adequate care systems, wage-setting institutions, or gendered tax reform.[171]

Care responsibilities remain a major driver of gendered labor inequality. As of 2023, only **39.4% of children under age 3** were enrolled in formal childcare in Italy—well below the Barcelona EU targets.[172] Public childcare availability is **highly uneven** across regions, with more affluent urban areas offering broader access while rural and southern zones remain under-resourced.[173] Silvia Federici's concept of **invisible reproductive labor** is particularly pertinent: care work performed in private households is structurally invisible in GDP and labor statistics, yet essential to economic functioning.[174] Federici's framing allows us to see how unpaid labor is not only gendered but **politically unacknowledged**, sustaining Italy's market economy without institutional compensation.

The motherhood-employment tradeoff is exacerbated by a limited and unequal distribution of **paternity leave** and rigid work schedules. Although recent reforms have introduced ten days of paid paternity leave, take-up remains low, and workplace cultures continue to associate caregiving leave with women.[175] Consequently, Italian women face what researchers term the **"child penalty"**: women with children earn significantly less than childless women and male counterparts with identical qualifications.[176]

Cultural resistance to gender equality is also reflected in the rise of **anti-gender discourse**. Public slogans such as "fermiamo l'ideologia gender" ("stop gender ideology") have been used to oppose feminist pedagogy, LGBTQ+ rights, and sexual education in schools.[177] In 2019, the Veneto Regional Council passed a motion banning "gender theory" from school curricula—a

[171] Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[172] TradingEconomics, "Children Aged Less Than 3 Years in Formal Childcare – Italy," 2024.

[173] OECD, *Education at a Glance 2024: Italy Country Note*.

[174] Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (PM Press, 2012).

[175] Italian Ministry of Labour, *Relazione Annuale sulla Parità di Genere 2024*.

[176] ISTAT, "The Gender Gap in Employment," 2023.

[177] Euronews, "Italy's Gender Ideology Debate," 2022.

decision echoing policies in Hungary and Poland.[178] Paternotte and Kuhar argue that these discursive interventions aim not at formal legal change, but at **symbolic control**, framing feminism as a threat to tradition and national identity.[179]

Fraser's concept of **"progressive neoliberalism"** is applicable here: Italian governments—left and right—have symbolically affirmed gender equality while aligning economic policy with austerity and privatization, particularly in eldercare and childcare services.[180] Bettio and Verashchagina refer to this as a **"demographic bribe"**—tokenistic bonuses like *Bonus Mamma Domani* offered instead of robust structural support.[181] These measures praise women's caregiving role without correcting the economic disadvantages it imposes. Structural change is stalled by a **welfare logic that venerates women as mothers**, but fails to integrate them as full economic citizens.

In sum, Italy demonstrates how formal legal commitments to gender equality are insufficient in the face of **cultural conservatism**, segmented labor institutions, and under-resourced care policies. It is a society where motherhood is moralized, yet not materially supported; where labor markets are gender-coded; and where discursive affirmations of equality coexist with deep institutional inertia. Structural inequality, in Italy, is not a policy oversight but a **systemic configuration**—intentionally sustained by the intersection of political conservatism, economic stagnation, and symbolic motherhood.

4.4 Hungary: Post-Socialist Retrenchment and Authoritarian Gender Policy

[178] Regione Veneto, "Mozione 270: Contro l'Ideologia Gender nelle Scuole Venete," 2019.

[179] David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

[180] Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Verso, 2013).

[181] Francesca Bettio and Alina Verashchagina, "Women and Men in the Great European Recession," in *Women, Gender and the Crisis*, eds. Kantola and Lombardo (ECPR Press, 2014): 57–80.

Hungary represents a stark case of **gender policy reversal** within the European Union, where **anti-gender discourse**, religious nationalism, and institutional restructuring have collectively stalled, diluted, or reversed efforts to reduce the gender wage gap.[182] Since Viktor Orbán's return to power in 2010, the Fidesz government has embarked on a **deliberate rollback** of gender equality initiatives, replacing formal parity commitments with a nationalist agenda that equates women's societal value with their reproductive role.[183] This chapter examines how Hungary's symbolic governance, legal frameworks, and labor market regimes intersect to entrench structural inequality—an example of what Nancy Fraser calls **symbolic recognition without redistribution**.[184]

Anti-Gender Discourse and Constitutional Redefinition

The rise of **anti-gender politics** in Hungary has been both discursive and institutional. In 2018, Hungary became the first country in Europe to officially revoke accreditation for university gender studies programs.[185] The Central European University's gender program was forced to relocate to Vienna following legislative restrictions and mounting political pressure.[186] This action was not isolated but part of a broader campaign against what the government labels "gender ideology." A 2020 constitutional amendment defines family exclusively as a union between a man and a woman and states explicitly that "the mother is a woman, the father is a man."[187] These legislative changes, as Paternotte and Kuhar note, serve a **symbolic and normative function**: reasserting patriarchal heteronormativity as the moral foundation of the Hungarian nation.[188]

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[182] European Commission, *Country Report – Hungary 2024*, DG Justice.

[183] Kováts, Eszter, "The Rise of Anti-Gender Politics in Hungary," *Public Seminar*, 2020.

[184] Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso, 2013).

[185] CEU Press Release, "Hungarian Government Ends Accreditation for Gender Studies," 2018.

[186] Central European University, "Relocation Notice – Gender Program," 2019.

[187] Hungarian Parliament, *Constitutional Amendment Article L*, December 2020.

[188] David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

Hungary's use of anti-gender rhetoric has been heavily supported by religious institutions and right-wing think tanks. Graff and Korolczuk argue that this alliance frames feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and gender equality as foreign impositions, thereby nationalizing backlash as **sovereignty defense**.[189] The result is a policy discourse in which women are celebrated as mothers of the nation but discouraged from full participation in public life, especially in leadership, economic autonomy, or political representation.

Labor Market Structure and Gendered Stratification

While Hungary's unadjusted gender wage gap is reported at 17.3%,[190] adjusted analyses accounting for occupational distribution, work hours, and sector indicate even **wider disparities**, particularly in the private sector.[191] Labor force participation for women remains lower than the EU average, hovering around 67%, with significant part-time employment and long career interruptions due to caregiving.[192] Joan Acker's theory of **inequality regimes** applies well here: Hungarian labor institutions replicate gender hierarchies through hiring, job allocation, and informal work cultures that reinforce patriarchal norms.[193]

Occupational segregation remains entrenched. Women dominate in health care, education, and administrative sectors—fields characterized by lower pay and poor career advancement.[194] Meanwhile, men cluster in engineering, manufacturing, and IT, benefiting from Hungary's focus on foreign direct investment and export-led industrial development.[195] These sectoral imbalances are reinforced by the lack of policies aimed at career mobility or pay equity within feminized professions.

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[189] Graff and Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (Routledge, 2021).

[190] Eurostat, "Gender Pay Gap – Hungary," 2023.

[191] OECD, *Employment Outlook – Hungary*, 2023.

[192] EIGE, "Gender Equality Index 2023 – Hungary," Vilnius: EIGE.

[193] Joan Acker, "Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations," *Gender & Society* 20, no. 4 (2006): 441–464.

[194] Hungarian Central Statistical Office, *Labour Market Trends*, 2022.

[195] Ibid.

The **gender leadership gap** is also pronounced: women make up less than 14% of corporate board members and an even smaller fraction of political leadership positions.[196] This underrepresentation aligns with Sylvia Walby's analysis of how **gender regimes** are reproduced in both state and economic institutions, entrenching inequality through cumulative disadvantage.[197]

Maternalist Policy and the Instrumentalization of Reproduction

Hungary's family policies, while generous on paper, are strongly **maternalist** in design and effect. The flagship "Family Protection Action Plan" of 2019 includes lifetime income tax exemption for mothers with four or more children, home purchasing subsidies, and favorable credit terms tied to childbirth.[198] Although these policies increase household income, they also incentivize early motherhood and extended career breaks, deepening women's economic dependency.[199]

Drawing on Silvia Federici's critique of **reproductive labor**, these incentives constitute unpaid labor extraction masked as empowerment.[200] The state economically rewards reproduction, but without restructuring public services or workplace flexibility, women absorb the costs through forgone earnings, career stagnation, and pension shortfalls.[201] OECD assessments confirm that while these policies boost birth rates modestly, they have little to no effect on closing the gender wage gap or reducing labor segmentation.[202]

Public childcare infrastructure remains underdeveloped: as of 2023, only 17% of children under three were enrolled in nursery care, far below the Barcelona EU target of 33%.[203] Many rural and semi-urban regions lack access altogether. The absence of full-day childcare constrains women's

[196] European Institute for Gender Equality, *Women in Decision-Making*, 2023.

[197] Sylvia Walby, *The Future of Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

[198] Hungarian Government, *Family Protection Action Plan*, 2019.

[199] OECD, *Hungary Country Note on Family Policy*, 2024.

[200] Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero* (PM Press, 2012).

[201] Ibid.

[202] OECD, *Hungary: Gender Wage Gap & Social Protection*, 2024.

[203] OECD Family Database, "Early Childhood Education Enrollment," 2023.

employment to low-wage, flexible jobs or informal arrangements.[204] Nancy Folbre's insight that states often "privatize dependency" resonates here—women carry the burden of care, while public systems remain minimal.[205]

European Legal Tension and Institutional Resistance

Hungary has consistently resisted EU-level equality mechanisms. It has not ratified the **Istanbul Convention**, citing it as incompatible with national values.[206] The government has delayed implementation of the EU Pay Transparency Directive and blocked several joint EU statements on reproductive rights and gender-based violence.[207] These actions are framed as defending **national sovereignty**, but functionally they allow institutional inequality to persist unchallenged.

At the bureaucratic level, Hungary has dismantled key equality institutions: the former Ministry of Women's Affairs was folded into the Ministry for Families, and national equality strategies have been downgraded to **non-binding action plans**.[208] The state's formal acknowledgment of gender equity is therefore largely symbolic, with no material commitment to enforcement, monitoring, or accountability—what Fraser would call a regime of **misrecognition**.[209]

Key Findings: EU countries

Formal Equality Alone Is Not Sufficient

All four countries uphold legal commitments to gender equality, yet policy outcomes vary widely. Sweden exemplifies a proactive legal model, with its *Discrimination Act* mandating employer-driven pay equity measures.[210] Italy and Poland, by contrast, retain strong

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[204] European Commission, *Hungary Country Profile: Women and Work*, 2023.

[205] Nancy Folbre, *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* (New York: The New Press, 2001).

[206] Council of Europe, "Istanbul Convention Ratification Status," 2023.

[207] Euractiv, "Hungary Blocks EU Women's Rights Proposals," 2022.

[208] Hungarian Government Policy Archive, 2021–2023.

[209] Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (Columbia University Press, 2009).

[210] Swedish Government, *Discrimination Act (2008:567)*; European Commission, *Sweden Gender Equality Report*, 2024.

constitutional equality clauses but lack institutional enforcement.[211] Hungary represents a case of **policy regression**, where gender equality laws have been systematically rolled back.[212] These contrasts confirm Nancy Fraser's assertion that **symbolic recognition without material redistribution** leaves structural inequality intact.[213]

Care Infrastructure Determines Economic Inclusion

The availability of childcare and eldercare is a central axis of labor market participation. Sweden's universal care provision supports high female employment, while Poland and Hungary rely on maternalist cash transfers (e.g., *Rodzina 500+* and the *Family Protection Plan*) without building care infrastructure.[214] Italy remains in the middle, with regional fragmentation in care services limiting progress.[215] Joan Acker's framework helps explain how such welfare designs embed **gendered assumptions** in organizational routines and institutional priorities.[216]

Occupational Segregation Reinforces Wage Gaps

In all four cases, women are overrepresented in **lower-paid, feminized sectors** like education, healthcare, and administration. Even in Sweden, where collective bargaining has compressed wage differentials, this sectoral split remains the largest contributor to the pay gap.[217] In Hungary and Poland, labor markets reflect traditional gender coding, reinforced by cultural narratives that discourage women from technical or leadership roles.[218] This supports Walby's analysis of **institutionalized gender hierarchies** in both symbolic and material forms.[219]

Anti-Gender Politics Actively Undermine Equality Frameworks

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[211] Italian Constitution, Art. 3 and 37; Polish Labour Code, Art. 18-3a–3e.

[212] Hungarian Parliament, *Amendment L* (2020); CEU, "Gender Studies Ban," 2018.

[213] Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (Columbia UP, 2009).

[214] OECD Family Database, "Sweden," "Poland," "Hungary," 2023–2024.

[215] ISTAT, *Relazione Annuale sulla Parità di Genere*, 2023.

[216] Joan Acker, "Inequality Regimes," *Gender & Society* 20, no. 4 (2006): 441–464.

[217] Swedish National Mediation Office, *Gender Pay Gap Reports*, 2023.

[218] Eurostat, *Gender Employment and Segregation Data*, 2023.

[219] Sylvia Walby, *The Future of Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

Poland and Hungary have embraced **anti-gender ideology** as a tool of nationalist governance, rejecting feminist policy frameworks and attacking academic freedom.[220] Campaigns against "gender theory" have led to legal exclusions, NGO suppression, and ideological control of education. Italy, while less overtly combative, also exhibits cultural pushback through Catholic political influence.[221] These patterns reflect what Paternotte and Kuhar identify as **discursive rollback**, where symbolic affirmation of tradition blocks structural reform.[222]

Maternalism Is a Barrier to Full Citizenship

Policies that reward women's reproductive labor—such as Italy's *Bonus Mamma Domani* or Hungary's tax exemptions for mothers—symbolically elevate caregiving but **economically marginalize women** in the labor market.[223] Federici's concept of **reproductive labor exploitation** is critical here: such policies obscure how women's unpaid work subsidizes public welfare without structural compensation.[224] These maternalist logics perpetuate what Fraser describes as a **dual burden**, where women are asked to perform both ideal caregiving and ideal labor roles simultaneously.[225]

EU Norms Clash with Domestic Sovereignties

Sweden aligns closely with EU pay transparency and equality initiatives. In contrast, Hungary and Poland delay or resist implementation, often rejecting mechanisms like the Istanbul Convention or pay reporting frameworks as "foreign interference."[226] Italy engages selectively,

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[220] Graff and Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (Routledge, 2021).

[221] Bonoli and Reber, "The Political Economy of Familialism," *Comparative European Politics* 8, no. 3 (2010).

[222] David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar, *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

[223] Francesca Bettio and Alina Verashchagina, "Demographic Bribes and Reproductive Policy," in *Women, Gender and the Crisis*, ECPR Press, 2014.

[224] Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero* (PM Press, 2012).

[225] Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism* (Verso, 2013), 157–165.

[226] Euractiv, "Hungary, Poland Resist EU Equality Measures," 2022.

often under regional discretion. This validates Sylvia Walby's argument that **European integration is not a guarantee** of parity; national politics and discourses mediate outcomes.[227]

Chapter V: Conclusion

This thesis has critically examined the persistent gender wage disparities within the European Union and the Balkans, illustrating that the gender wage gap is deeply embedded in historical, structural, and symbolic frameworks of capitalist economies. Drawing extensively on feminist political economy, notably the works of Fraser, Acker, Federici, Bettio, and Walby, the analysis demonstrated that wage inequalities cannot be fully addressed through formal legal equality alone, as they are sustained by underlying institutional practices and symbolic valuation of feminized labor.

Through comparative analysis, Sweden emerged as a clear example of how robust legal mandates combined with public investment in care infrastructure can reduce the wage gap significantly, though not completely eliminate it, revealing persistent symbolic undervaluation of women's labor. Conversely, Italy and Poland illustrate that formal legal frameworks without effective enforcement and public care provision reinforce women's economic precarity and deepen occupational segregation. Hungary provides an instructive case of regression, showing how the state-sponsored ideological shift toward traditional family values further entrenches women's economic dependency.

In the Balkan context, neoliberal restructuring and post-socialist transitions have compounded gender inequalities, particularly through the erosion of public care systems, informalization of labor markets, and inadequate enforcement of gender equality laws. Countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia, and North Macedonia exhibit diverse yet interconnected patterns of inequality stemming from austerity, fragmented care infrastructures, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Particularly striking is the intersectional dimension,

[227] Walby, *The Future of Feminism*, 2011.

where Roma women, rural populations, and migrants suffer compounded disadvantages, highlighting the necessity of intersectionally informed policies.

Addressing these entrenched inequalities requires multi-scalar strategies and structural transformation. Policymakers must prioritize comprehensive public care services and enforceable gender equality frameworks that go beyond symbolic compliance. Concrete policy measures recommended by this thesis include substantial public investment in universal childcare and eldercare systems, strengthened legal enforcement mechanisms for pay transparency, formalization and protection of precarious labor, and strategic gender-responsive budgeting at national and local levels.

Furthermore, regional cooperation platforms such as the Western Balkans Gender Equality Platform should be enhanced to facilitate knowledge-sharing, collective policy-making, and the strengthening of feminist civil society and trade unions. An intersectional feminist approach that recognizes diversity in women's experiences, particularly concerning ethnicity, class, and migrant status, must inform all policies. Additionally, feminist-informed governance must directly challenge anti-gender discourses that threaten the sustainability of gender equality initiatives.

Despite these contributions, the thesis recognizes methodological limitations. Future research should incorporate primary data collection methods, including qualitative interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and intersectional analyses that can provide deeper insight into lived experiences and informal economies. Longitudinal studies would also enrich understanding of the evolving nature of gendered precarity, particularly within emergent labor sectors.

Ultimately, by foregrounding feminist political economy and emphasizing the critical importance of care infrastructure and institutional accountability, this thesis contributes not only to academic discourse but also provides a robust policy framework for transformative feminist action. Only through systemic and intersectionally-informed strategies can substantive gender equality move from policy rhetoric to lived reality.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings and comparative analysis presented in this thesis, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. **Expand investment in public care infrastructure**—including childcare, eldercare, and healthcare access—to reduce the burden of unpaid work on women and enable greater labor market participation.
2. **Strengthen legal enforcement of pay transparency and anti-discrimination laws,** ensuring that these measures are implemented effectively at both national and local levels, and adapted to the specific contexts of each country.
3. **Formalize and protect precarious and informal labor,** especially for women in rural areas, Roma women, and those engaged in care work, by providing full social protection and labor rights.
4. **Develop intersectional and targeted policies** for the most marginalized groups, such as single mothers, women with disabilities, and ethnic minorities, ensuring their needs are addressed in all policy responses.
5. **Institutionalize gender-sensitive crisis response protocols,** drawing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that future public health or economic emergencies do not reinforce gender disparities.
6. **Support and collaborate with women's grassroots and civil society organizations** in the design, implementation, and monitoring of all gender-related policies, particularly at the local level.
7. **Foster regional cooperation and exchange of best practices** between EU and Balkan states, focusing on policy innovation and mutual learning to advance gender equality.

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