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RESEARCH 04

Gender Equality

Work, Power, Care and Opportunity

17 January 2024

Published by activism group e.U.

Abstract

Gender equality is often measured through gaps between women and men in education, employment, pay, leadership and political representation. These measures are indispensable, but they describe outcomes more readily than the system that produces them. This study develops a structural account of gender equality centred on the interaction of rights, social institutions, unpaid care, labour-market design, economic power, personal security and agency. It asks not only whether women and men have formally equal access to institutions, but whether they possess comparable practical ability to convert rights and qualifications into economic independence, leadership, time, safety and voice.

The evidence reveals substantial progress alongside persistent asymmetry. Legal rights have expanded dramatically over the past half-century, educational gaps have narrowed in many regions and women have entered paid employment and public life at historically unprecedented rates. Yet in 2023 the World Economic Forum estimated that only 68.4 per cent of the measured global gender gap had been closed; the economic participation and opportunity gap was only 60.1 per cent closed and the political empowerment gap 22.1 per cent. The World Bank reported that women, on average, enjoyed only 77.1 per cent of the economic legal rights measured for men across 190 economies.¹²

The paper argues that care is the central transmission mechanism connecting private life to public inequality. Women continue to perform a disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work. Parenthood then interacts with working-time expectations, occupational structures and employer behaviour, generating differences in labour-force attachment, earnings and advancement. These mechanisms help explain why educational convergence has not automatically produced economic convergence. Gender inequality is consequently neither reducible to discrimination nor explainable solely by individual preferences. It is produced through the interaction of law, norms, households, markets and institutions.

The paper proposes a Gender Equality System built around six connected domains - Rights, Time and Care, Economic Opportunity, Safety and Autonomy, Voice and Power, and Outcomes - with social norms and institutional design operating across all six. Equality requires progress across the system rather than parity in any single indicator. The framework extends the wider Equality at Large research programme by showing how apparently private allocations of time and responsibility become public distributions of opportunity and power.

Keywords: gender equality; women; labour markets; unpaid care; motherhood penalty; gender pay gap; political representation; leadership; social norms; economic opportunity; capabilities

1. Introduction

Gender equality is simultaneously a principle of equal human status and a question about the organisation of everyday life. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women defines discrimination broadly in terms of distinctions, exclusions or restrictions that impair women's enjoyment of human rights and

¹ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2023 (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2023), key findings: overall parity 68.4%; economic participation and opportunity 60.1%; political empowerment 22.1%.

² World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2023 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023); see also World Bank, "Pace of Reform Toward Equal Rights for Women Falls to 20-Year Low," 2 March 2023.

fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals translate that principle into a multidimensional agenda covering discrimination, violence, harmful practices, unpaid care, political participation, economic resources and reproductive autonomy.³⁴

The breadth of these commitments reflects an empirical reality: gender inequality rarely operates through a single institution. A woman may have the same formal educational right as a man, obtain an equivalent qualification and still face a different set of labour-market incentives after parenthood. She may possess the same formal right to work while carrying more unpaid care. She may enter an occupation on similar terms yet face greater penalties for temporal flexibility. She may possess equal voting rights while women remain underrepresented in the institutions setting economic, security and infrastructure policy. Equal rules can therefore coexist with unequal practical freedom.

The historical transformation has nevertheless been profound. In many economies women's educational attainment and labour-market participation have risen dramatically, fertility has fallen, legal barriers have been removed and occupational possibilities have broadened. Claudia Goldin's historical work shows that women's economic participation cannot be understood as a simple linear response to growth: it changed with technology, household production, education, social expectations and the structure of employment. The 2023 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences recognised this contribution to understanding women's labour-market outcomes and, in particular, the importance of parenthood and workplace organisation in contemporary gender gaps.⁵⁶

Yet convergence remains incomplete. The remaining gaps are often greatest not at the moment of entry but over the life course. Men and women can begin careers with relatively similar qualifications and earnings, while differences widen following partnership, parenthood and the accumulation of unequal responsibilities. Among highly qualified professionals, career interruptions, weekly hours and the nonlinear reward to long and inflexible hours can generate substantial divergence over time. In this sense, gender inequality is dynamic: small differences in time, flexibility and opportunity compound.⁷

This study therefore asks four questions. First, what dimensions of gender equality should be distinguished? Second, through which mechanisms do formally equal rights become unequal opportunities or outcomes? Third, why has educational and legal convergence moved faster than economic and political convergence? Fourth, which institutional arrangements are most relevant if the objective is substantive equality rather than merely identical rules?

The answer developed here places social equality at the centre. Gender equality is treated neither as the production of identical outcomes nor as a competition between women and

³ United Nations, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (New York: United Nations, 1979), arts. 1-3.

⁴ United Nations, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (New York: United Nations, 2015), Goal 5, targets 5.1-5.6.

⁵ Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, Scientific Background to the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2023: Claudia Goldin - For Having Advanced Our Understanding of Women's Labour Market Outcomes (Stockholm, 2023), 1-8.

⁶ Marianne Bertrand, "Gender in the Twenty-First Century," AEA Papers and Proceedings 110 (2020): 1-24, <https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20201126>.

⁷ Marianne Bertrand, Claudia Goldin, and Lawrence F. Katz, "Dynamics of the Gender Gap for Young Professionals in the Financial and Corporate Sectors," American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 2, no. 3 (2010): 228-255, <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.2.3.228>.

men. It is the condition under which gender does not systematically determine a person's rights, burdens, security, opportunities, social standing or capacity to exercise agency.

2. Conceptualising Gender Equality

2.1 From formal equality to substantive equality

Formal equality requires equal legal status and non-discrimination. This is foundational: where law restricts women's mobility, property rights, employment, entrepreneurship, marriage or parenthood, other forms of equality are constrained before individual choice enters the picture. The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law framework measures precisely these legal conditions across mobility, workplace, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, assets and pensions.⁸

Substantive equality asks a different question: can formally equal rights be exercised under comparable conditions? The distinction is analogous to the difference between access and capability developed in the first research of this series. A right to employment has limited practical value if care responsibilities make availability impossible, if violence restricts mobility, if social norms close occupations, or if jobs are organised around schedules incompatible with family responsibilities.

2.2 Gender as an institutional relationship

Gender is not only an individual characteristic. It also describes expectations and institutions that organise roles, behaviour and status. Social norms can shape occupational choices, household specialisation, leadership perceptions and acceptable forms of behaviour. OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index explicitly measures discrimination embedded in formal and informal laws, norms and practices, reflecting the proposition that observed outcome gaps often have institutional roots.⁹

This perspective avoids two analytical errors. The first is to assume that every statistical difference proves discrimination. Outcomes can also reflect preferences, sectoral composition, age, experience, family structure and other factors. The second is to infer from the existence of individual choice that institutions are irrelevant. Preferences themselves develop within social environments, and choices carry different costs under different institutional arrangements. The scientific task is to identify mechanisms rather than to assign every disparity to a single cause.

2.3 The limits of binary measurement

Most internationally comparable gender statistics operationalise gender through comparisons between women and men. This permits broad measurement but is incomplete. Gender-diverse and transgender people are often absent from administrative and survey systems, and sex-disaggregated statistics can conceal heterogeneity within women and men by class, race, ethnicity, disability, age, migration status, sexuality and geography. The binary structure of many datasets should therefore be understood as a measurement limitation rather than a complete account of gendered experience.

⁸ World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2023.

⁹ OECD, SIGI 2023 Global Report: Gender Equality in Times of Crisis (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), overview and chap. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4607b7c7-en>.

Dimension	Core question	Typical evidence	Failure mode
Rights	Do women and men possess equal legal status?	Law, regulation, enforcement	Formal exclusion or unequal protection
Time and care	Who performs necessary unpaid work and who controls time?	Time-use, leave, childcare	Unequal availability and cumulative career effects
Economic opportunity	Can qualifications convert into work, pay and ownership?	Employment, wages, occupations, assets	Segregation, pay gaps, child penalties
Safety and autonomy	Can people act without violence, coercion or loss of bodily autonomy?	Violence, health, reproductive autonomy	Restricted mobility, health and agency
Voice and power	Who makes consequential decisions?	Leadership, parliaments, management	Under-representation and unequal agenda-setting
Outcomes	What distributions ultimately emerge?	Income, wealth, health, status	Persistent disparities and intergenerational transmission

Table 1. A multidimensional structure of gender equality. Source: author synthesis.

3. Rights and Social Institutions

Legal equality is the most visible layer of institutional change. Across many countries, restrictions on women's employment, property, mobility and economic activity have been removed over recent decades. The World Bank reports that its global Women, Business and the Law score rose from 45.8 in 1970 to 77.1 in 2022. This is major progress, but it also means that measured legal equality remained incomplete. Only 14 economies in the 2023 assessment gave women the same rights as men across all eight measured areas, while nearly 2.4 billion working-age women lived in economies where they did not have the same economic rights as men.¹⁰¹¹

Law is also only one layer of social institutions. OECD's SIGI 2023 assessment covered 179 countries and reported that 40 per cent of women and girls lived in countries where discrimination in social institutions was assessed as high or very high. The family sphere was the area with the highest discrimination, including unequal unpaid care, inheritance practices and early or forced marriage. This matters because family institutions determine time, resources and bargaining power long before labour-market outcomes are observed.¹²

The distinction between law and practice is therefore crucial. Legal reform can remove direct barriers rapidly; norms and organisational practices may change more slowly. A rule permitting fathers to take parental leave, for example, does not guarantee that workplaces or households treat such leave as equally normal for men and women. Equal property law does not automatically produce equal asset ownership if historical accumulation and

¹⁰ World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2023; World Bank, "Pace of Reform Toward Equal Rights for Women Falls to 20-Year Low," 2 March 2023.

¹¹ World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2023; the global average score rose from 45.8 in 1970 to 77.1 in 2022.

¹² OECD, SIGI 2023 Global Report, executive summary and chap. 2.

inheritance remain unequal. Substantive equality requires both legal rights and institutional conditions that allow those rights to be exercised.

4. Work and Economic Participation

4.1 Access to employment

Paid work is central to economic independence, but conventional unemployment statistics understate some gender differences. In 2023 the ILO introduced a broader Jobs Gap indicator covering people who want employment but do not meet the strict criteria for being counted as unemployed. Fifteen per cent of working-age women globally wanted a job but did not have one, compared with 10.5 per cent of men; the gap had changed little over two decades. Personal and family responsibilities, particularly unpaid care, are an important reason why women who want work may not be immediately available to search or start.¹³

Employment differences are also qualitative. Women are concentrated in different sectors and forms of work, including care, education, services and informal employment. The World Economic Forum reported that much of the post-pandemic employment recovery for women occurred in informal work, where security and social protection are often weaker. Labour-force participation therefore cannot be treated as equivalent to economic equality. Job quality, hours, earnings, security, bargaining power and progression all matter.¹⁴

4.2 Pay and the structure of occupations

The gender pay gap is among the most visible indicators of economic inequality, but its interpretation requires care. Pay gaps can be measured in different ways and reflect differences in occupation, sector, experience, hours, family status and treatment. Blau and Kahn's review of the United States finds that traditional human-capital variables became less important over time, while occupation, industry, work interruptions, hours, gender roles and discrimination remained relevant. International research similarly shows that the evolution of gender gaps depends on industrial structure and the kinds of jobs available.¹⁵¹⁶

Goldin identifies a particularly important mechanism: the nonlinear price of time. Some occupations disproportionately reward employees who can work long, continuous and unpredictable hours or provide immediate availability to clients. Where one adult in a household becomes the primary carer, such jobs create a strong economic incentive for specialisation. The partner with fewer care constraints can pursue the high-return schedule while the other chooses flexibility at a wage cost. Because women still carry more care, the apparently gender-neutral design of work can generate gendered outcomes.¹⁷

The consequence is conceptually important. Equal hourly productivity does not necessarily produce equal earnings if the market assigns a premium to temporal availability. Gender

¹³ International Labour Organization, "New Data Shine Light on Gender Gaps in the Labour Market," ILO Brief, 5 March 2023; ILO, "Employment-related gender gaps greater than previously thought," 6 March 2023.

¹⁴ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2023, section "Evolving gender gaps in the global labour market."

¹⁵ Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn, "The Gender Wage Gap: Extent, Trends, and Explanations," *Journal of Economic Literature* 55, no. 3 (2017): 789-865, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20160995>.

¹⁶ Claudia Olivetti and Barbara Petrongolo, "The Evolution of Gender Gaps in Industrialized Countries," *Annual Review of Economics* 8 (2016): 405-434, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-080614-115329>.

¹⁷ Claudia Goldin, "A Grand Gender Convergence: Its Last Chapter," *American Economic Review* 104, no. 4 (2014): 1091-1119, especially 1109-1117, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.104.4.1091>.

equality therefore depends not only on equal pay for equal work, but on whether occupations can be organised so that flexibility, part-time work and temporary leave do not impose unnecessarily large career penalties.

Observed gap	Potential mechanisms	What the statistic does not establish by itself
Employment gap	Care, norms, job access, transport, discrimination, health	Why an individual is not employed
Hourly pay gap	Occupation, experience, hours, bargaining, discrimination	The causal contribution of each mechanism
Annual earnings gap	Hourly pay plus hours, interruptions and employment	Equal pay for comparable work
Leadership gap	Pipeline, promotion, networks, selection, care, bias	Whether all organisations use the same mechanism
Asset gap	Earnings, inheritance, property law, household allocation	Current discrimination alone

Table 2. Gender gaps are descriptive evidence; causal interpretation requires mechanism-specific analysis.

5. Care, Parenthood and the Allocation of Time

Care is the point at which household organisation becomes economic structure. Every society depends on the care of children, older people, people with disabilities and other household members. Much of this work is unpaid and therefore largely absent from conventional measures of market production. Yet it consumes time, shapes labour supply and determines who can accept jobs requiring travel, long hours or unpredictable availability.

The imbalance is large. ILO estimates based on time-use data found that women performed 76.2 per cent of total unpaid care work globally and spent about 3.2 times as much time on it as men. Updated UN Women modelling in 2023 estimated that women spent 2.8 more hours per day on unpaid care and domestic work than men globally. These averages conceal wide regional and socioeconomic differences, but the direction of the gap is remarkably consistent.¹⁸¹⁹

This unequal allocation affects both entry into employment and progression after entry. The ILO reported that 606 million women were unavailable for employment because of unpaid care responsibilities in 2018, compared with 41 million men. Care can therefore appear in economic statistics as non-participation, part-time work, career interruption or reduced geographic mobility rather than as an explicit gender barrier.²⁰

¹⁸ International Labour Organization, Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work (Geneva: ILO, 2018), executive summary and chaps. 1-2.
¹⁹ UN Women and Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures, Forecasting Time Spent in Unpaid Care and Domestic Work (New York: UN Women, 2023), 4-6.
²⁰ International Labour Organization, Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work (Geneva: ILO, 2018), executive summary and chaps. 1-2.

5.1 The child penalty

Event-study research has made the effect of parenthood particularly visible. Kleven and colleagues document a sharp and persistent decline in women's earnings following the birth of a first child across multiple countries, while men's earnings are affected far less. The magnitude varies substantially across countries, indicating that institutions and norms matter, but the qualitative pattern is strikingly consistent.²¹

Earlier research reached similar conclusions through different methods. Budig and England identified a wage penalty associated with motherhood even after controlling for experience and other characteristics. Correll, Benard and Paik demonstrated experimentally and through an audit study that equally qualified mothers could be evaluated less favourably than otherwise equivalent non-mothers, whereas fathers did not suffer a comparable penalty. These findings show that the parenthood effect is not reducible to one mechanism. Time, experience, occupational choice, household specialisation and employer perceptions can interact.^{22,23}

5.2 Policy is necessary but not sufficient

Care infrastructure, maternity protection, parental leave and childcare can reduce constraints, and the ILO argues for a transformative package of care policies covering leave and services. Yet policy design matters. Leave that is available almost exclusively to mothers can protect employment while also reinforcing gendered specialisation. Childcare can increase employment without eliminating the premium for continuous availability in high-paying occupations. Comparative work on Austria finds that large expansions of parental leave and childcare did not by themselves eliminate long-run child penalties.^{24,25}

The implication is not that family policies fail. It is that care policy and labour-market design must be analysed together. Equality requires a redistribution of care between households, the state, markets and communities and, within households, between women and men. It also requires jobs in which caring responsibilities do not automatically produce disproportionate losses in earnings and progression.

Stage	Care mechanism	Potential economic effect	Institutional response
Before parenthood	Expectations about future care	Occupation and career choice	Information, flexibility, non-discrimination
Birth / adoption	Leave and recovery	Temporary absence, attachment	Paid leave, job protection, father-specific leave
Early childhood	High care intensity	Hours, availability, employment	Affordable quality childcare, flexible work
School years	Scheduling and episodic care	Promotion, travel, continuity	Predictable schedules, shared care

²¹ Henrik Kleven et al., "Child Penalties Across Countries: Evidence and Explanations," AEA Papers and Proceedings 109 (2019): 122-126, <https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20191078>.

²² Michelle J. Budig and Paula England, "The Wage Penalty for Motherhood," American Sociological Review 66, no. 2 (2001): 204-225, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240106600203>.

²³ Shelley J. Correll, Stephen Benard, and In Paik, "Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?" American Journal of Sociology 112, no. 5 (2007): 1297-1338, <https://doi.org/10.1086/511799>.

²⁴ International Labour Organization, Care at Work: Investing in Care Leave and Services for a More Gender Equal World of Work (Geneva: ILO, 2022), executive summary, <https://doi.org/10.54394/AQOF1491>.

²⁵ Henrik Kleven et al., "Do Family Policies Reduce Gender Inequality? Evidence from 60 Years of Policy Experimentation," NBER Working Paper 28082, revised September 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w28082>.

Stage	Care mechanism	Potential economic effect	Institutional response
Later life	Elder and long-term care	Reduced hours or labour-market exit	Long-term care services and carers' support

Table 3. Care affects opportunity across the life course rather than at a single event.

6. Education, Skills and the Transition into Opportunity

Education is one of the areas in which gender gaps have narrowed most visibly. In the 2023 Global Gender Gap Index, 95.2 per cent of the measured educational attainment gap was closed, far ahead of economic participation and political empowerment. This progress is important in its own right and has transformed women's access to occupations and public life.²⁶

Yet educational parity does not automatically produce labour-market parity. The transition from qualification to occupation is shaped by subject choice, social expectations, recruitment, retention, working conditions and care. Women remain underrepresented in many science, technology, engineering and mathematics occupations. In the World Economic Forum's LinkedIn data, women accounted for 29.2 per cent of STEM workers, despite representing close to half of employment in non-STEM occupations. Representation declined further at senior levels in the STEM pipeline.²⁷

The difference between educational attainment and economic outcomes therefore illustrates a wider principle: capabilities must be convertible. A degree generates opportunity only if institutions allow the holder to enter, remain and advance in relevant work. Goldin's historical research emphasises that expectations about future labour-market participation also influence educational and occupational investments made years earlier. Equality requires institutions that make long-term investment rational for people regardless of gender.²⁸

7. Voice, Leadership and Power

Gender equality concerns not only access to resources but participation in decisions about their allocation. Political institutions determine taxation, infrastructure, education, care, reproductive rights, security and labour regulation. Corporate leaders influence employment practices, investment, product design and the distribution of economic opportunity. Representation therefore matters both symbolically and substantively, although the presence of women does not imply a single political or managerial viewpoint.

7.1 Political representation

Women remained substantially underrepresented in political leadership in 2023. The IPU-UN Women Map of Women in Politics reported that women held 26.5 per cent of parliamentary seats and 22.8 per cent of cabinet positions as of 1 January 2023. Women were heads of state in 17 of 151 non-monarchical countries and heads of government in 19

²⁶ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2023, key findings.

²⁷ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2023, section "Gender gaps in the labour markets of the future."

²⁸ Claudia Goldin, Career and Family: Women's Century-Long Journey toward Equity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), chaps. 1, 6-10.

of 193 countries. Representation also differed sharply by portfolio: women were concentrated in gender equality, family and social policy portfolios while men dominated defence, energy, transport and economic portfolios.²⁹

Political representation is not simply another outcome measure. It can alter the institutional environment within which other gender gaps are produced. Electoral rules, candidate selection, campaign finance, violence and harassment, care responsibilities and political networks all influence who enters and remains in public life. Quotas and other institutional mechanisms can change representation, but their effects depend on design and enforcement.

7.2 Economic leadership

A similar vertical pattern appears in organisations. World Economic Forum data for 2023 showed women representing 41.9 per cent of the workforce in its LinkedIn sample but 32.2 per cent of senior leadership and about 25 per cent of C-suite positions. The decline from entry-level representation to senior leadership suggests that equality of entry is not equivalent to equality of progression.³⁰

Leadership gaps can emerge through multiple channels: differences in sector and function, promotion systems, access to networks and sponsors, cumulative effects of care, evaluation bias and the premium attached to uninterrupted availability. These mechanisms are difficult to separate with aggregate statistics. The appropriate research question is therefore not simply why fewer women are leaders, but at which transitions representation falls and which institutional processes govern those transitions.

8. Safety, Bodily Autonomy and Capability

An equality framework centred only on education and work would omit a precondition of agency: personal security. Violence constrains health, mobility, employment, education, relationships and participation in public life. WHO's global estimates published in 2021 concluded that approximately 736 million women - around one in three - had experienced physical or sexual intimate-partner violence or non-partner sexual violence at least once in their lives.³¹

Violence is therefore not only a criminal justice or health issue. It is a capability constraint. Fear of violence can affect where people travel, when they work, which jobs they accept and whether they participate publicly. Economic dependency can also make it harder to leave abusive relationships, creating a feedback loop between economic inequality and personal security.

Bodily autonomy has a similar relationship to opportunity. Decisions about sexual and reproductive health affect education, employment, family formation and health. The Sustainable Development Goals therefore place reproductive autonomy within the gender equality agenda rather than treating it as a separate policy domain. A person cannot

²⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women, Women in Politics: 2023 (Geneva/New York: IPU and UN Women, 2023); IPU, "Women in power in 2023: New data shows progress but wide regional gaps," 7 March 2023.

³⁰ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2023, key findings on workforce and senior leadership representation.

³¹ World Health Organization, Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018 (Geneva: WHO, 2021), executive summary, 2-5.

exercise equal economic agency if fundamental decisions about their body and family formation are outside their control.³²

9. Social Norms and the Production of Choice

Gender inequality is often discussed as a conflict between structural explanations and individual preferences. The distinction is too simple. Preferences are real, but they form within cultures, expectations and institutional incentives. Historical evidence suggests that gender roles can be remarkably persistent. Alesina, Giuliano and Nunn link contemporary attitudes about gender roles to historical agricultural practices, illustrating how social norms can survive long after the original economic conditions have disappeared.³³

Norms influence both women and men. Expectations that women should provide care can constrain women's paid work, while expectations that men should prioritise earnings can discourage fathers from taking leave or reducing hours. Workplace cultures can then reinforce household patterns: if men face career penalties for caregiving, families have an economic incentive to allocate more care to women; if women anticipate that allocation, they may choose occupations with greater flexibility before children are born.

This creates endogenous specialisation. What appears at one moment as a private household choice may be a rational response to wage structures, leave design, childcare availability and social expectations inherited from earlier stages. Analysis must therefore distinguish free preference from preference under constraint without assuming that researchers can perfectly observe the boundary between them.

10. Intersectionality and Heterogeneity

Women are not a homogeneous category. Average gender gaps can conceal large differences by income, race, ethnicity, disability, migration status, age, family structure and geography. A professional woman in a high-income city with access to childcare and flexible employment may experience a very different opportunity structure from a low-income rural woman, a migrant domestic worker or a woman living under restrictive family law.

Intersectionality matters because institutions can interact. Gendered care burdens can have greater employment effects where public services are weak. Racial discrimination can compound gender discrimination in recruitment or pay. Disability can increase care needs while reducing access to employment. Migration status can determine legal rights and bargaining power. Averages should therefore be disaggregated wherever data quality permits, while recognising the statistical and privacy challenges created by increasingly small categories.

This heterogeneity also cautions against universal policy assumptions. The mechanisms driving inequality differ between countries and groups. In some settings, basic legal rights remain the binding constraint; in others, educational parity has been achieved but work remains highly inflexible; elsewhere, violence, transport or childcare may dominate. Gender equality requires a common normative objective but context-specific diagnosis.

³² United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York: United Nations, 2015), Goal 5, target 5.6.

³³ Alberto Alesina, Paola Giuliano, and Nathan Nunn, "On the Origins of Gender Roles: Women and the Plough," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 128, no. 2 (2013): 469-530, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjt005>.

11. A Causal Architecture of Gender Inequality

The evidence reviewed above can be organised into six interacting mechanisms. None is sufficient on its own, and their relative importance differs across contexts.

Mechanism	How it operates	Illustrative consequence
Law and formal institutions	Rights and eligibility differ by gender	Restricted work, assets, mobility or parenthood rights
Social norms	Expectations shape roles, behaviour and evaluation	Occupational sorting, unequal care, leadership stereotypes
Care and time	Necessary unpaid work is allocated unequally	Reduced employment, hours, flexibility and continuity
Labour-market design	Jobs reward availability, continuity and specific schedules	Nonlinear pay and promotion penalties
Organisational selection	Recruitment, evaluation, networks and promotion allocate opportunity	Motherhood penalties, leadership gaps
Safety and autonomy	Violence and coercion restrict movement and decision-making	Reduced health, agency and participation

Table 4. Six mechanisms through which gender becomes economic and social inequality.

These mechanisms are mutually reinforcing. Unequal care can reduce earnings; lower earnings can make household specialisation economically rational; specialisation can reduce future bargaining power; reduced representation can weaken incentives to redesign care or work; social norms can then interpret the observed pattern as evidence of natural preference. Gender inequality can therefore reproduce itself without any single institution explicitly intending the aggregate outcome.

The converse is also true. Change can compound. Equal rights expand feasible choices. Childcare and leave can protect labour-market attachment. More substitutable and flexible work can reduce the price of caregiving. Greater economic independence can strengthen bargaining power. Representation can broaden the range of experiences present in decision-making. Institutional complementarities are therefore central to the pace of convergence.

12. Measuring Gender Equality

No single index can capture gender equality. The most widely used measures answer different questions. Legal indices measure formal rights. Time-use surveys capture unpaid work. Labour statistics measure employment and pay. Household surveys reveal health and asset distributions. Political data measure representation. Violence surveys address security. Composite indices can summarise patterns but necessarily embed methodological choices about weighting and comparability.

Three distinctions are particularly important. First, gaps and levels are different. A country can have equal outcomes for women and men at a very low level of human development. Second, representation and power are related but not identical. The share of women in an institution says little about the authority attached to particular positions. Third, observed

outcomes cannot by themselves identify causality. A gender gap is a signal for investigation, not a complete explanation.

The World Economic Forum index illustrates both the usefulness and limitations of composite measures. It compares relative gaps across economic participation, education, health and political empowerment and therefore provides a broad picture of parity rather than absolute welfare. In 2023 it estimated 68.4 per cent of the global gender gap had been closed across 146 countries, but the subindices ranged from 96 per cent for health and survival to only 22.1 per cent for political empowerment. Such divergence is analytically more informative than the headline number alone.³⁴

13. Gender Equality in 2023

The evidence available in 2023 shows a pattern of asymmetrical progress. Education and many formal rights have moved closer to parity, while economic participation, care and political power remain substantially less equal. The 2023 Gender Snapshot by UN Women and UN DESA concluded that the world was off track to achieve gender equality under the 2030 Agenda and highlighted persistent gaps across poverty, food security, care and leadership.³⁵

In legal economic rights, the global Women, Business and the Law score was 77.1 out of 100. In employment, the ILO Jobs Gap was 15 per cent for women compared with 10.5 per cent for men. In unpaid work, women continued to spend several more hours per day on care and domestic work. In politics, women held roughly one quarter of parliamentary and cabinet positions. In personal security, violence affected women on a scale measured in hundreds of millions.³⁶³⁷³⁸³⁹⁴⁰

These indicators should not be collapsed into a single diagnosis. They describe different institutional layers. Their common feature is that the remaining gender gaps increasingly concern the conversion of formal opportunity into substantive capability. Women may enter education but not the same occupations; enter occupations but not progress at the same rate; obtain employment but retain disproportionate unpaid work; obtain formal rights while lacking physical security; enter political institutions while remaining concentrated away from the most powerful portfolios.

³⁴ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2023, key findings, pp. 5-10 in the report summary and online digest.

³⁵ UN Women and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023 (New York: United Nations, 2023).

³⁶ World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2023.

³⁷ International Labour Organization, "New Data Shine Light on Gender Gaps in the Labour Market," ILO Brief, 5 March 2023.

³⁸ UN Women and Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures, Forecasting Time Spent in Unpaid Care and Domestic Work (New York: UN Women, 2023), 4-6.

³⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women, Women in Politics: 2023 (Geneva/New York: IPU and UN Women, 2023).

⁴⁰ World Health Organization, Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018 (Geneva: WHO, 2021), executive summary, 2-5.

14. The Gender Equality System

The preceding analysis suggests that gender equality is best understood as a system rather than a list of gaps. The framework below places six domains in a connected sequence while recognising that causation runs in both directions.

1. Rights	2. Time & Care	3. Economic Opportunity	4. Safety & Autonomy	5. Voice & Power	6. Outcomes
Law property mobility parenthood	Unpaid work leave childcare long-term care	Work pay ownership skills progression	Violence health bodily autonomy mobility	Politics management networks agenda-setting	Income wealth health status representation
Defines formal possibility	Allocates availability	Converts capabilities into resources	Defines practical freedom	Shapes institutions and priorities	Becomes the next generation's starting condition

Figure 1. The Gender Equality System. Social norms and institutional design operate across all six domains; feedback runs from outcomes to future rights, resources and expectations. Source: author synthesis.

The model highlights four propositions. First, rights are necessary but insufficient. Second, time is an economic resource: unequal care affects the ability to exercise formal opportunity. Third, safety and autonomy are productive capabilities rather than peripheral social concerns. Fourth, power is both an outcome and an input. Who participates in decision-making affects how institutions governing care, work, taxation, infrastructure and security are designed.

Outcomes complete the feedback loop. Earnings and wealth affect household bargaining power and the resources available to children. Leadership changes networks and role expectations. Exposure to flexible work can change norms about caregiving. Conversely, persistent gaps can validate stereotypes and reproduce occupational or household specialisation. Gender equality is therefore path-dependent: present institutions shape both current outcomes and future expectations.

15. Institutional Implications

A systems perspective changes the policy question from “which programme closes the gender gap?” to “which combination of institutions removes the binding constraints to equal agency?” The appropriate mix will vary by country, but several principles follow from the evidence.

15.1 Secure equal rights and enforcement

Where formal legal differences remain, reform is foundational. Equal rights in work, assets, mobility, parenthood and pensions establish the legal possibility of independent economic action. Enforcement matters because rights that cannot be exercised do not create substantive equality. Legal reform should therefore be evaluated alongside access to justice and institutional implementation.

15.2 Treat care as infrastructure

Care should be analysed as part of the infrastructure of economic participation. Affordable childcare, long-term care, maternity protection and parental leave affect labour supply and capability formation. Policy should avoid assuming that care is a private residual to be

absorbed by women. It should also encourage men's participation in care rather than only protecting women from the consequences of providing it.

15.3 Redesign the price of time

The structure of work is central. Flexibility produces equality only when it is not purchased at a disproportionate earnings or promotion cost. Greater substitutability among employees, predictable scheduling, transparent performance criteria, remote or hybrid work where appropriate and reduced dependence on constant availability can weaken the connection between caregiving and career penalty. Goldin's analysis suggests that occupational redesign may be as important as formal anti-discrimination rules in closing high-skill pay gaps.⁴¹

15.4 Make progression visible

Organisations should measure transitions rather than only headcount: hiring, assignment, promotion, compensation, retention and leadership entry. A workforce that is gender-balanced at junior levels can still produce unequal opportunity if representation falls at each subsequent gateway. Transparent data help distinguish pipeline effects from organisational processes.

15.5 Protect safety and autonomy

Violence prevention, reproductive healthcare and bodily autonomy are integral to equality because they determine whether individuals can use education, work and public space. Economic policy and social policy cannot be treated as separate where insecurity constrains mobility or employment.

15.6 Increase participation without assuming uniformity

Greater representation in politics and leadership expands the range of experience present in decision-making, but women are not a homogeneous political or managerial constituency. The objective is equal opportunity to exercise power, not the expectation that women will make identical choices once there. Representation is a condition of equality, not a guarantee of predetermined policy outcomes.

16. Directions for Further Research

Several questions follow from this analysis. The first concerns the interaction between gender and other forms of social position. Average gender gaps may conceal qualitatively different experiences by race, ethnicity, income, disability and migration status. Understanding these intersections is necessary to avoid designing institutions around an abstract average woman.

A second direction concerns technology. Digital platforms, remote work and artificial intelligence may reduce some constraints by increasing flexibility, but they can also reproduce existing occupational segregation and data bias. The key question is whether new technologies reduce the price of flexibility and broaden access to high-productivity work, or simply reorganise existing inequalities.

⁴¹ Claudia Goldin, "A Grand Gender Convergence: Its Last Chapter," *American Economic Review* 104, no. 4 (2014): 1091-1119, especially 1109-1117.

A third concerns institutional complementarities. Family policy, labour-market design, taxation, social insurance and corporate practice are often studied separately even though households experience them simultaneously. More research is needed on combinations of institutions that allow care, work and leadership to be shared without imposing large opportunity costs on either gender.

Finally, gender equality should increasingly be studied as a question of power and value creation rather than only redistribution. Who owns assets, controls technology, allocates capital and designs organisations will become as important as who receives wages. This connects gender equality directly to the wider inquiry into an Economy of Equality.

17. Conclusion

Gender equality has advanced enormously, but progress has been uneven across the institutions that structure human life. Formal rights and education have often moved faster than economic participation, the allocation of unpaid care and access to political or corporate power. This divergence is not paradoxical. Different dimensions of equality are produced by different mechanisms and change at different speeds.

The central finding of this study is that care and time connect the private and public dimensions of gender inequality. Unequal responsibility for necessary unpaid work affects employment, hours, occupational choice, geographic mobility and advancement. Labour markets can amplify these differences when they disproportionately reward continuous and inflexible availability. Employer evaluation, social norms and legal institutions can reinforce them further. Parenthood therefore becomes a critical point at which formally similar opportunities diverge.

None of this eliminates agency. Women and men make genuine choices about work, family and care. But choices are made within opportunity sets that institutions help construct. Equality does not require identical preferences or outcomes; it requires that gender should not systematically determine the costs attached to those choices or the ability to participate in social and economic life.

The Gender Equality System developed here therefore links six domains: Rights, Time and Care, Economic Opportunity, Safety and Autonomy, Voice and Power, and Outcomes. Social norms and institutional design operate across the system, while outcomes feed back into the resources and expectations of the next generation.

This perspective leads to a demanding but practical definition. Gender equality exists when people possess equal fundamental status and comparable capability to choose, contribute and participate regardless of gender - when care does not predetermine economic dependence, when safety does not constrain public life, when work does not require one gender to carry a systematically greater opportunity cost, and when access to power is not organised around inherited roles.

The objective is not a society in which women and men become the same. It is a society in which gender ceases to be a reliable predictor of freedom, opportunity, security and power.

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