DOI: 10.31648/pw.12108

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WOMEN ON THE LABOUR MARKET: HISTORICAL TRENDS AND GENDER INEQUALITIES

ABSTRACT: The paper explores gender disparities in the global labour market through historical and contemporary perspectives, addressing the challenges and progress in female labour force participation. It highlights systemic barriers such as gender norms, discrimination, and contextual constraints, emphasizing the economic benefits of narrowing gender gaps. Utilizing frameworks like the Gender Employment Gap Index and data from the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Reports, the study examines regional and temporal variations in gender equality. Particular attention is paid to the situation of women in Europe, including Poland and Ukraine. A review of the world literature helps highlight the importance of a historical perspective in economic empirical research. Historical insights reveal the influence of socio-economic systems and cultural norms, while recent case studies – such as Ukraine during wartime – illustrate shifts in female economic roles. The paper underscores the critical role of integrated policy measures – from education and healthcare to childcare provision – in achieving economic gender parity.

KEYWORDS: labour market, women employment, gender gaps, historical perspective

Introduction

Equality is the goal of democracy, so the task of a democratic state is to guarantee equality of opportunity for all citizens in social, political and economic life. Since groups at particular risk of unequal treatment are present in every society, measures are taken to level the playing field for those facing discrimination on any grounds. Discrimination can occur either on the basis of gender, age, race, nationality, disability, religion, sexual orientation, etc.

Across the world, women face lower earning opportunities compared to men. Women are less likely to be in the market labour force and have fewer opportunities for business expansion or career advancement.

The World Bank estimates, using the Gender Employment Gap Index (GEGI), that countries could gain up to 20 per cent of their GDP per capita if women were employed at the same rate as men do, see (Halim | O'Sullivan | Sahay 2023). Word Bank analyzing case studies and good practises over the globe offers for policy makers some lessons that legal reforms are an important requirement for promoting Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR indicator – the ratio between the total labour force divided by the total working age population) but this is not enough. They need to be complementary for example, with parental leave, childcare provision, etc. Effective communication and 'mainstreaming' of such reforms are also needed to stimulate change.

Norms are a constraint in all contexts, particularly in countries where Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP) is stagnant or declining. (FLFP includes women's participation in wage employment, self-employment, casual work and family home work – both paid and unpaid. It does not include unpaid domestic and care work). Addressing one constraint is often necessary but insufficient. Measures that address multiple pressures (including norms) have the potential to shift women and economies to a new equilibrium. A lack of evidence on cost-effectiveness makes it difficult to compare alternative strategies in a context of limited budgetary resources. The level and growth of FLFP is affected by regional differences and existing conditions. Shifts in the demand for women's labour can generate an increase in supply. Economy wide demand shocks can also erode restrictive norms around women's outside the home and boost their human capital. Investing more in girls human capital is important. However, it is often not enough to translate this into employment. However, expanding girls' and women's access to quality education and health care should remain a top priority in economic and social policies (Halim | O' Sullivan | Sahay | 2023).

Female labour force participation is constrained by a variety of demand-side, supply-side and contextual barriers:

- demand side barriers include a mismatch between the skills and education required for available jobs, gender gaps and discrimination in hiring and retention, and a lack of benefits with inadequate support for care, maternity leave, re-entry programmes and career advancement;
- supply side barriers include time constraints related to childcare and domestic work, and mobility limitations related to work outside the home. Gender differences in endowments – including technical and socio-emotional skills, assets and networks;

- contextual factors include social and cultural norms, restrictive policies and laws, and the risk and incidence of gender-based violence, particularly sexual harassment in the workplace. These factors reinforce each other as well as supply and demand constraints.

1. Economic and leadership gender inequalities

Given the significant role of labour in the economy and the consequent impact on individual and family living standards, the gender approach is popular in economic and social science research. Over the past few decades, the proportion of women employed in wage labour has increased significantly in many developed economies. This represents a significant change in the labour market. However, gender inequalities persist in most countries and regions. Inequalities in the global labour market are mainly characterised by lower female labour force participation rates and lower wages (gender gap). The barriers to equality at work described by T. Rees remain relevant and have a negative impact on women's experience of paid work. Reducing the gender pay gap is therefore a key priority for gender policy at both EU and national level. At EU level, narrowing the gender gap is a priority in the fight against female poverty until 2025 (EC 2020). The question arises: why is it so difficult for countries with high levels of economic development to overcome the gender gap?

Some researchers try to answer the question from a historical perspective: how is it that the socio-economic environment, the political system, cultural norms, religions, expectations for the future shape the present? (Goldin 1990; 2021; Olivetti | Ngai 2015). Others have shown how social norms, differences in family-friendly policies, and women's representation in politics influence cross-country heterogeneity inovercoming gender gaps (Campaña | Gimenez-Nadal | Velilla 2023; Sumer | Altan 2022).

The labour population activity should to be a topic of interest economists and sociologists research because of its significant importance for the state economy and for the living standards of individuals and families. The results of many studies can inform and guide economic and social policy makers at different levels of government and administration.

Many organizations and institutions elaborate and deliver systematic data sources suitable for international comparisons and analysis. The World Economic Forum has published annual Global Gender Gap Reports since 2006. The reports include the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI). The GGGI is published annually and provides data on the evolution and current state of gender parity. It covers four sub-indices: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The Global Gender Gap Index measures

scores on a scale of 0-100, and scores can be interpreted as the distance to parity (the percentage of the gender gap that has been closed). International cross-country comparisons provide information on progress and efforts to close these gaps over time. The data cover more than one hundred countries in all continents of the world.

> Looking at the 101 countries covered continuously from 2006 to 2024, the gap has improved by +.1 points to reach 68.6%. The lack of meaningful change is effectively slowing the rate of progress towards parity. Based on current data, it will take 134 years to achieve full parity, approximately five generations beyond the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target. What's more, the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index shows that while no country has achieved full gender parity, 97% of the states included in the last edition have closed more than 60% of their gap, up from 85% in 2006. Iceland (93.5%) is once again in first place and has led the index for a decade. It also remains the only economy to have closed more than 90% of its gender gap. Of the remaining nine economies in the top 10, eight have closed more than 80% of their gap. European economies occupy seven of the global top 10. In addition to Iceland, these are Finland (2nd, 87.5%), Norway (3rd, 87.5%), Sweden (5th, 81.6%), Germany (7th, 81%), Ireland (9th, 80.2%) and Spain (10th, 79.7%). The remaining three places are occupied by economies from East Asia and the Pacific (New Zealand, 4th, 83.5%), Latin America and the Caribbean (Nicaragua, 6th, 81.1%) and sub-Saharan Africa (Namibia, 8th, 80.5%). Lithuania (11th, 79.3%) and Belgium (12th, 79.3%) dropped out of the top 10, while Spain and Ireland climbed +8 and +2 places respectively to join the top performers in 2024 (June 2024 Global Gender Gap Report 2024). Since 2006, the sub-indices have shifted at different rates. Overall, the most significant shift has occurred in the political empowerment index, where parity has increased by a total of 8.3 percentage points over the last 18 GGGRs to 22.8%. Health and survival is the only sub-indicator to show a moderate decline. With the evolving pace of each sub-indicator affecting its respective timeline to parity, this year's results have extended the wait for parity in educational attainment to 20 years, political empowerment to 169 years, and economic participation and opportunity to 152 years. The time to close the gender gap in health and survival remains undefined (June 2024 Global Gender Gap Report 2024).

2. Political power inequalities

In the 18th and 19th centuries, women did not have the right to vote or sit in parliaments. In the decades since the Second World War, women have become much better represented in almost all countries, gaining the right to vote and be elected, and more often reaching the highest political office in their country. However, women still do not have the right to vote everywhere, they are a minority of parliamentarians in most countries, and female political leaders remain rare. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the world average for the

percentage of seats held by women in all parliaments is 27% as of 01.09.2024. Table 1. shows the regional averages for the percentage of seats held by women in different parliaments.

Table 1. Regional averages of the percentage of seats held by women in parliaments

Region	Lower chamber and unicameral (%)	Upper chamber (%)	All chambers (%)
Americas	35.2	36.6	35.5
Europe	31.8	31.5	31.7
Sub-Saharan Africa	27.2	26.9	27.2
Asia	21.5	22.5	21.6
Pacific	19.4	49.4	22.5
Middle East and North Africa	17.9	11.7	16.6

Source: Global and regional averages of women in national parliaments, [in:] https://data.ipu.org/women-averages/?date_month=9&date_year=2024 (accessed: 05.04.2025).

Gender quotas are extremely important for equalizing parity, especially for parliaments in young democracies. For example, Ukraine has seen progress. In the parliament of the last convocation in 2019, 21% are women. This figure is much better than in 2012, when it was about 10%, and in 2014, when it was more than 11%. This is the result of the consistent implementation of gender policy in Ukrainian legislation. In addition to introducing gender quotas in party election lists at 40%, the state has increased responsibility for domestic and gender-based violence. It also ratified the Istanbul Convention.

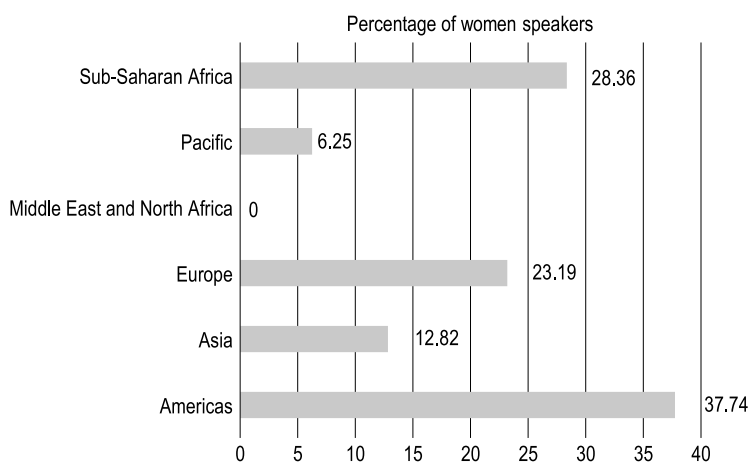


Figure 1. Global and regional percentages of women presiding officers in national parliaments
Source: Women Speakers: Global and regional percentages, [in:] https://data.ipu.org/speakers-percentages/ (accessed: 05.04.2025).

Progress in women's political representation has been limited and uneven. In only a few dozen countries do women make up around half of all representatives. In many, women parliamentarians are a small minority. In a few, there are none. For example, in countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the figure is zero (Figure 1).

Women's political representation in parliament is important, but so is their representation in a country's highest political office (Herre 2024).

In the Pacific and Asia, the representation of women leaders in parliament leaves much to be desired – 6, 25% and 12.82% (Women speakers: global and regional percentages). Even in Europe, the stated goal of 40% of women in decision-making bodies across the EU is not yet achievable. Fewer women hold the highest position of chief executive – head of state or head of government. The world has come a long way towards political equality, but many gaps remain.

3. Women's economic power

The prospects for improving the position and growth of women's economic power, and increasing their role in management are not optimistic. McKinsey's research on the representation of women in governance bodies shows fluctuations in this indicator from 22 to 30% and a downward trend on a global scale (ESG report 2023).

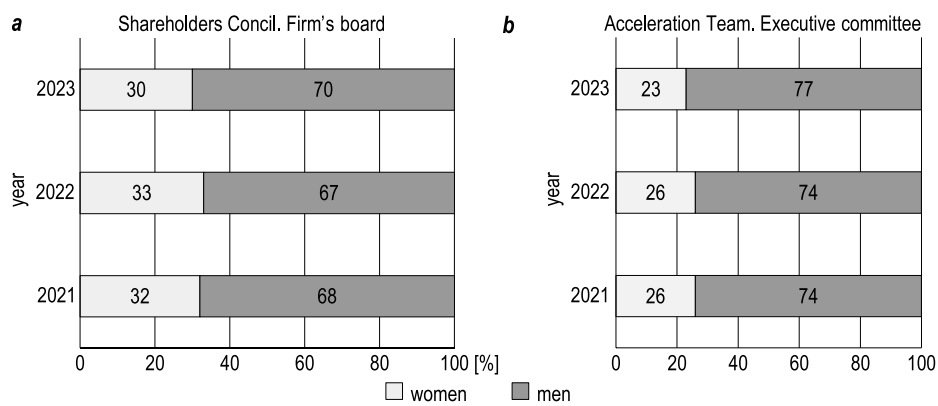


Figure 2. Representation of women in global governance bodies
Source: https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/about%20us/social%20responsibility/2023%20esg%20report/mckinsey-2023-esg-report.pdf (accessed: 05.04.2025).

The share of women in the management boards of companies (board of shareholders) in 2021, 2022 was 26%, in 2023 – 23%. The share in executive committees (decision acceleration team) in 2021 – 32%, 2022 – 33%; 2023 – 30% (ESG Report 2023).

The situation in the EU strata is slightly better than the global average. According to Eurostat, women accounted for just over a third (35%) of managers in the EU in 2021. The highest proportions of women in this position were observed in Latvia (46%), Poland and Sweden (both 43%), and Estonia (41%) (The life of women and men in Europe 2022 interactive edition).

Turbulence during the pandemic period and prolonged crises in the world economy in recent years, also have an impact. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated a situation where gender inequality is decreasing. The findings of Claudia Goldin's study are of particular relevance to Ukraine see (Libanova 2023). The country is suffering from war and economic shock. Under such conditions, the role of women's labor is growing due to a significant reduction in the supply of male labor and a rapid increase in demand for women's labor both during the war and in the post-war reconstruction processes. Significant reserves for increasing labor supply are associated with the growth of women's economic activity and changes in women's roles, even in traditionally male professions (public transport drivers, etc.). This requires the creation of conditions, including political and social support, for combining intra-family and extra-family responsibilities.

After the outbreak of war, millions of women had to leave their homes and change their lives. Women had to learn to adapt to fulfil their social roles under martial law. The war led to internal migration and forced exodus from the war, with more than 6 million people leaving for other countries (Ukraine Refugee Situation 2024). The war also led to the relocation of businesses. Among internally displaced women entrepreneurs, approx: 15% have started a business in a new location, 20% have already relocated their business, and 20% are planning to relocate (Gender Profile 2023).

Nearly 24% of newly created businesses in 2023 are owned by women. In total, there are almost one million active commercial companies registered in Ukraine. On average, women own only 18% of enterprises, only 7% of large enterprises are owned by women, and another 11% are mixed (where both women and men are owners). The situation is different in small businesses, for example, 20% of farms are run by women, and almost 27% of organic farm managers are women (Gender Profile 2023). In other words, the scale of women's enterprises is mainly micro, small and medium enterprises. There is a pattern: the smaller the capital of the business, the smaller the gender gap. Among the top economic sectors in which women entrepreneurs start businesses are: auditing and accounting, education, tourism, health care, and retail trade.

The war and modern business practices are changing stereotypes and old trends. A typical portrait of a Ukrainian entrepreneur during the war is a woman aged 36, with about 6 years of business experience, low trust in the state and credit, who started her own business for self-realization.

While the adoption of economic policies to advance gender equality has increased overall, there are clear differences across regions not only in the adoption of regulations, but also in access to instruments and implementation in practice (known as de facto, de legis differences). Raising the required resources to close the gap requires a fundamental mindset to recognize gender parity as an engine for new, high-quality, sustainable growth.

Encouragingly, policy developments in the care economy signal a growing recognition of the economic value of the women caring roles.

Companies' and government's efforts to improve gender parity are gaining momentum, leading to increased productivity, adaptability to change and more innovations. Gender parity than, should be treated as a competitive advantage in the macroeconomic and business environment.

4. Developing gender gaps in the global labour market

Parity in labour force participation has continued to improve globally to reach 65.7% for the constant sample of economies tracked since 2006 – and a aggregate score of 66.7% for those included in 2024 alone. However, remain regional differences which show that while women's labour force participation is recovering at the global level, parity is progressing at very different rates. However, the sustainability of this trend remains uncertain. Global unemployment is expected to rise in low-income economies, and the jobs gap, a broader measure of job seekers, also includes a disproportionate number of women.

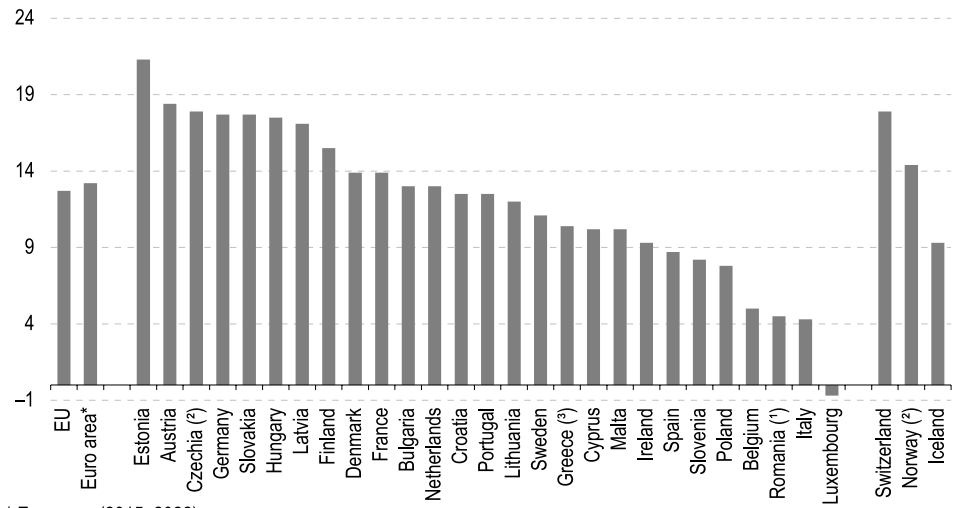
In the World Economic Forum's GGGR 2024, in section on workforce representation and leadership, data shows that in 2024, women's representation in the workforce remain below that of men across all industries and economies, with women making up 42% of the global workforce and 32% of senior leadership positions. While women are close to filling almost half of entry-level positions, they will only make up a quarter of leadership positions. (Global Gender Gap Report 2024).

Economic development does not guarantee the disappearance of inequalities in the labour market. We can take two high-income regions as an example: the Scandinavian countries and Saudi Arabia. The hypothesis that increasing GDP goes hand in hand with increasing women's empowerment is false in these examples.

Equality policies enforced by political bodies do not always lead to the elimination of inequality. Enforcing legislation alone is not enough. As an example we can observe differences in member EU countries under common equality policy regulations. Gender pay gap statistics for the EU are collected every 4 years. In 2022, the value of the gender pay gap averaged 12.7% (Figure 3).

The highest rate in the EU was recorded in Estonia (21.3%) and the lowest in Luxembourg (-0.7%) (Gender pay gap statistics 2022). In practice many regional differences can be observed.

Analyzing the literature we can notice that the use of short-term empirical data for econometric modelling studies could also lead to misleading conclusions about the women work and factors influencing their economic and social roles. Literature review, research analyzes and comparisons, should begin with a presentation of the Claudia Goldin achievements, professor from Harvard USA, the 2023 Nobel Prize winner in economic sciences (she is the first woman in this discipline).



* Euro area (2015–2022)
(1) Estimated data
(2) Definition differs (see metadata)
(3) 2018 data

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(3) 2018 data.

Figure 3. Gender pay gap in EU countries
Source: Eurostat (online data code: sdg_05_20), Gender pay gap statistics (2022), [in:] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_pay_gap_statistics (accessed: 05.04.2025).

The Alfred Nobel Prize Committee on Economics announced that Nobel price too C. Goldin is "for having advanced our understanding of women's labour market outcomes" (Andersson | Enfo | Hjalmarsson et al. 2023). Goldin's works published since the 1960s, concern the issue of women labour force participation and its' determinants from a historical perspective. Goldin years-long empirical research involved searching in archives for gathering statistics and historical facts from

more than 200 years of the U.S. history, to prove, that women's labour market participation during the whole period studied, did not show an upward trend with economic growth, but formed a U-shaped curve on the axis of time. Among others, she analyzed that the reasons for this process are multiply (Goldin 1992).

The global economy is in a state of constant, sometimes revolutionary change. Historically, apart from economic downturns and crises such as pandemics and wars, it has generally been a process of socio-economic development and technological progress. One would assume that participation in the labour market should follow an upward trend. The Nobel laureate's research has shown that this is not the case.

By taking a historical perspective of more than 200 years, Goldin analysed how the situation of women changed as the US economy transform from a traditional agriculture to a modern post industrial society. Looking on statistical data she stated that women's work was under-recorded in historical sources, so by empirical and analytical studies, was able to identify patterns that not only challenged existing knowledge, but also changed the outlook on women's participation in the labour market.

Before Goldin's book published in 1990, researchers had mainly been looking at data from the twentieth century and found that there was a positive correlation between economic growth and the share of women in paid employment. In other words, as the economy grew, more women were in work. However, because there had been research on last decades data, this relationship remained unclear over a longer period of time. Goldin's first observation was that female employment rates were often misreported in historical censuses. For example, in the past it was common that married woman occupation use to be classified as 'just wife' in censuses and public records. In reality even if they were married it was not automatically the case that they didn't work. It was common for women to work alongside their husbands in agriculture or in any various forms of family business. Women also worked in home-based industries such as textiles and crafts or dairy processing, but their work was not documented in the records. Development of hand craft and homemade industries keeps women at houses.

By analyzing historical sources Goldin was able to correct the data on woman's participation in the labour market. She found that the proportion of women in the US workforce at the end of the 1890s was much higher than official statistics showed. For example, her corrections showed that the employment rate for married women was almost three times greater than that which had been recorded in censuses.

When the industrial revolution started in textile industry leads too growing demand for women work in the factories. Opposite trend evolves with development of heavy industries with growing demand for man's work. Female labour force participation declines again in the heavy industrial economies. In the period, when the economies become service oriented women participations increases.

Her research on education led to the issue of birth control, when women could delay motherhood and marriage in time to invest in education, and thus in the future. She used statistics and historical facts to show why and when more women were going to university. A hundred years ago, it was clear that a woman with a university degree had to choose between career and family. Today, there are more women in higher education than ever before, and more women want to work and be mothers at the same time. But the challenges of balancing work and family life still exist (see in: (Bloom | Canning | Fink et al. 2009; Goldin 2021; Goldin | Katz 2002).

The 20th century saw a huge shift in perceptions of gender equality, and it has been highlighted why it is so difficult to achieve real equality between women and men. Anti-discrimination laws and a conscious leadership are necessary, but they will not solve the problem. The Nobel prize-winner explains why we need to make fundamental changes in the way we work and how we value domestic and caring work if we are ever to achieve gender equality and partnership in relationships. When we study the gender gap in labour force participation or the lower pay women receive for work of equal value (the gender pay gap), we don't always get to the root causes.

It is important to note, however, that women are still over-represented in low-paid jobs, even in developed countries such as the US (where women's participation in the labour force increased dramatically in the second half of the Twentieth Century. Last decades women's college attendance exceeds that of men. In such circumstances, female childcare workers are paradoxically unable to afford childcare for their own children (Entmacher 2014).

When we study the gender gap in labour force participation, or the lower pay of women for work of the same value (the gender gap), we don't always get to the real cause see (Andersson | Enfo | Hjalmarsson et al. 2023).

Researchers from Uppsala University in their empirical studies compare women's income and wage trajectories with those of their male partners before and after parenthood. Focusing on the within-couple gap allows to control for both observed and unobserved characteristics of the spouse and to estimate both short- and long-term effects of entering parenthood. They find that 15 years after the birth of the first child, the gender gap in earnings and wages has increased by 32 and 10 percentage points respectively. (Angelov | Johansson | Lindahl 2016).

Some authors, in countries around the world, have used quantitative analysis to measure the relationship between gender equality and economic growth. Researchers hypothesised that "as economies grow, the relationship between women's participation in the labour market and GDP per capita increases". The positive relationship between gender equality and the level of GDP per capita has been observed in the countries of the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) with different levels of economic and social development. Some researchers, using econometric models, have shown that the correlation between the variables studied has become stronger from period

to period, the linear regression models they have used have shown a stronger and stronger relationship (Gdakowicz et al. 2023; Hozer-Koćmiel et al. 2017). Other researchers proof hypothesis that "greater participation of women in the labor market leads to greater economic growth". Increased women's activity on the labour market means a more effective allocation of human resources, better use of people's talents (both women and men), the consequence of which is a positive impact on economic growth. Using statistical data they find that the relation between GDP per capita and female work was proved statistically significant (Dollar | Gatti 1999).

E. Boserup, in Woman's Role in Economic Development (1970), presented evidence that the process of economic development (measured by GDP per capita) often affects women differently from men (Boserup 1970).

Some of the above-mentioned authors have focused on gender factors that trigger an increase in economic growth for both low- and high-income countries, leading to inclusive economic growth and that gender equality brings economic growth, but economic growth does not necessarily bring gender equality (Andersson 2010; Brashaw | Castellino | Diopet, 2013; Seguino 2000).

Matuszewska-Janica presented the results of investigation of the various factors impact on the level of male and female wages inequality. Gender Pay Gap (GPG) varied among EU countries. There were observed that on the gender pay differences influenced some factors like: feminization of employees groups, women activity rate at labour market, character of individual countries.

In the states with low women's labour market activity (e.g. Malta, Italy) there were observed smaller wages differences between men and women. On the other hand, in the states with high rate of women's labour market activity gender pay gap was much more bigger (Matuszewska-Janica 2014).

Mozzarelli (2023) have delivered arguments that gender issues have a interdisciplinary character. Her findings imply that gender equality has positive implications for economic and social development, and that different areas of gender equality may change in importance depending on the level of economic development. Moreover, the results reveal that gender equality is more important for Human Development Index (HDI) and social development, compared to solely economic output. The problem of the feminisation of occupations is also widely discussed in the literature (England | Allison 2007).

Empirical research at the University of the Life Sciences in Warsaw, Institute of Economics and Finance, included in Joanna Łagoda PhD dissertation conducted in two stages, the first in 2011-2013 and the second in 2018. The empirical research included a target sample of 1,000 rural households from the Mazowieckie Voivodeship and the survey questionnaire was the measurement tool. The aim of the research was to identify factors affecting women's labour market participation and inactivity (Łagoda 2023). Her research in two types of localities – near the Warsaw agglomeration and in remote areas – does not confirm the linearity of changes

in factors affecting women's occupational position and the hypothesis that economic growth leads to progress in women's position and opportunities everywhere. This suggests that the relationship between GDP per capita and women's work and position is not simple and linear. The next hypothesis, that women's labour force participation increases as their level of formal education increases, was found to be positive. According to the respondents, factors influencing women's inactivity include: insufficient availability of nurseries and kindergartens in remote areas, too few jobs in the place of residence, the unprofitability of taking low paid jobs, high commuting costs, cultural pressures for a woman to be a housewife and perform caring functions in the family.

Summary

The analysis and literature review show that many studies attempt to identify factors affecting women's participation in the labour market and the different roles women play in the family and society. Statistical data show gender inequalities in many areas. The main determinants of gender inequality are: segregation in the labour market, feminisation of occupations (women dominate the education, health and social care sectors where wages are lower), women working more often than men, working part-time or in the informal economy without social security, having lower or no pensions. Women have difficulties in combining paid work with other household and family responsibilities. There are very large regional differences in the status and position of women around the world, caused mainly by cultural norms, customs, religions, traditions, political systems.

Drawing on frameworks like the Gender Employment Gap Index (GEGI) and insights from the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Reports, it was possibility to analyze the systemic barriers women face. The analysis incorporates historical trends, including Claudia Goldin's Nobel Prize winning research on the U-shaped trajectory of female workforce involvement in the U.S. within the two centuries period. Goldin's work, alongside other empirical studies, underscores the complex interplay between industrial shifts, educational access, and cultural norms in shaping women's economic roles.

The regional and temporal variations, were analyzed including case studies like Ukraine during wartime, to illustrate shifts in female economic participation. Persistent disparities, such as the gender pay gap, occupational feminization, and challenges in balancing professional and domestic responsibilities, are addressed. Quantitative evidence confirms that while gender equality fosters economic growth, the reverse is not necessarily true. The research advocates for integrated policy measures targeting structural barriers, such as wage disparities, childcare access, and societal norms, as essential for achieving inclusive economic development and closing gender gaps.

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