

Towards a gender-equal Europe

What policymakers can learn from the Dynamics of Inequality Across the Life-course (DIAL) research project

Key Findings

- There is some evidence of gender pay gaps narrowing, but they are still substantial in some countries and sectors.
- Investments in skills and training for older women could be promoted to help close gender pay differentials.
- Covid-19 led to an increase in housework by men during the Spring of 2020, but families with young children soon returned to previous patterns.
- Women face a greater risk of poverty throughout their working lives and into retirement because of breaks in paid employment and reduced work hours which have led to systematic disadvantage.
- Claims that life has got better for LGBTQI+ people do not always hold up to scrutiny nor match the lived experiences of individuals.

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About DIAL

Dynamics of Inequality Across the Life-course (DIAL) is a multi-disciplinary research programme consisting of thirteen European projects. The projects examine the sources, structures and consequences of inequalities in contemporary societies. The programme is funded by NORFACE for the period 2017–2021.

Policy context

Addressing multiple gender gaps

The EU's Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs brought family and labour market policies together and emphasised the importance of labour market integration for both parents.

The EU's Gender Equality Strategy¹ for 2020–25 focuses on closing gender gaps in the labour market: achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy and addressing the gender pay and pension gaps. It also mentions the need for women to secure better education and training.

Seniors

In recent decades the European Union has promoted Active Ageing and the OECD has strongly encouraged governments to introduce policies designed to extend working life. The EU's Gender Equality Strategy recognises that as a result of pay and pension gaps, older women are more at risk of poverty than men.

LGBTQI+

A recent survey of almost 140,000 people who describe themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or intersex (LGBTI) by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights² found that while the number of respondents aged 18 or over who were always or often open about being LGBTI had increased since 2012, the proportion who felt discriminated against at work or while looking for work had changed very little.

Education and training

DIAL research has looked at how elements of education policy could lead to gendered outcomes, both for children and for adults.

A study³ drawing on data from selective high schools in Paris, where pupils chose their major areas of study after one year, found selectivity was a potentially important determinant of a gender gap in science learning. Female students who went to the most selective schools were less likely to choose to study science, especially if their academic abilities were well balanced between science and humanities.

Another DIAL study⁴ found women returning to formal education later in life could gain large benefits from doing so. Research from Norway showed that women could compensate for career

interruptions after childbirth by investing in new skills well into their 40s and 50s. This training could be valuable, particularly for women who had not completed a college degree. Fixed subsidies for training, funded by increases in the basic tax rate, could increase take-up and improve earnings and employment of mothers.

Family life and gender inequality

A DIAL study⁵ from the UK documented the evolution of the gender pay gap in the UK over three decades and concluded that policies that incentivise mothers of young children to remain actively in full-time work are likely to help their career progression and pay handsomely in the long term, particularly for those mothers with medium to high qualifications.

Another piece of research⁶ looked more closely at the role of parenthood on the gender gap in pay among top earners in Norway. It found women in professions with nonlinear wage structures, such as those requiring an MBA or a law degree, suffered a child earnings penalty of more than 20 per cent 10 years after having a child. Women in medicine or STEM careers had a smaller drop in earnings after childbirth which was largely closed again by the time their first child was 10.

Further research from the UK⁷ looked at women's ability to return to work, comparing the effects of offering free child-care on a part-time and on a full-time basis. It found that while part-time child-care only had a marginal effect on women's return to work, free full-time child care had a much more substantial effect.

DIAL research⁸ has also examined whether Finnish family-friendly policies, designed to support work-life balance and to increase social and gender equality achieved their aim. The research found that the combination of marriage, motherhood, and gainful employment is rewarded generously in terms of earnings. However, an earnings disparity between married fathers and married mothers remains.

The research also found a surprisingly large group of low earning never partnered childless men. This should be considered a social risk group by policy makers and researchers, especially in the context of falling fertility rates in Finland.

DIAL researchers⁹ looked at the gender division of housework during Covid-19 and found that while there was some increased input from men during the first lockdown in the UK, families with

young children were the first to return to previous patterns. The researchers compared families with children at home to those without. Men's share of the housework increased across all types of households, but couples with children under five were quickest to return to pre-lockdown patterns.

A study on the effects of divorce¹⁰ analysed longer-term outcomes in terms of both economic and personal wellbeing. It found that in the medium term, men and women suffered similar consequences in terms of their mental and physical health and psychological wellbeing. But the major gender difference, it found, was that women suffered disproportionate losses in their household incomes and were at higher risk of poverty. While the negative effects on men were transient, those on women were chronic.

Older people

DIAL research has looked at workers aged 50-plus in a range of employment sectors across five countries.¹¹ The findings suggested women in this age group were more likely than men to be in part-time or precarious employment and less likely to be able to afford to contribute to private pensions. Extending working life might not be an option for older women with caring responsibilities or those facing health challenges.

Certain cohorts of women – for example, those affected by a bar on public sector working by married women in Ireland until 1973 – were doubly discriminated against because they were not given pension credits for time spent caring.

In policy terms this research pointed to a need for gender-proofing of future pension reforms to ensure they did not leave women at a disadvantage. For those in physically demanding or stressful work, there should be an option to retire at 65 or earlier. Working past traditional state pension age should be an option rather than being imposed by raising state pension age. Precarious employment needed to be addressed by governments, and further research was needed on the gender and health implications of extending working life.¹²

Further research¹³ analysed large-scale data covering a 12-year period in 11 countries to assess the influence of institutional and individual factors on retirement decisions in different settings. It found the retirement pathways varied within and between countries and types of system and were not uniformly 'gendered.'

For example, women in Mediterranean countries were less likely than men to take early retirement and more likely to extend their working lives. In Nordic countries, men were twice as likely to stay in work longer. One possible explanation was that Nordic women were more likely to have a history of continuous employment and therefore to be able to afford early retirement.

The study also found the influence of individual characteristics such as education, health and marital status on retirement pathways varied between contexts and according to gender.

Research on the gendered impacts of policies to extend working life was highlighted in a special edition of the journal *Ageing and Society*.¹⁴ Older women's labour force participation had increased, it found, but their outcomes in terms of earnings, pension-building and employment prospects were still relatively poor. Gender pay gaps, part-time work and career breaks for bringing up children tended to place them at a disadvantage.

In the European Union, more than 20 per cent of women aged 65 and above were at risk of poverty or social exclusion compared to 15 per cent of men at the same age, and as a result they were likely to have to work for longer.

Inequalities experienced by LGBTIQ+ people

Despite legislative and policy changes at European and national levels designed to protect LGBTIQ+ citizens, DIAL research has uncovered ongoing inequalities, absences, precarity and discrimination. The improved policy documents are often not unproblematic either.¹⁵

One study¹⁶ investigated the ways in which LGBT individuals in Germany, Portugal and the UK continued to experience discrimination, harassment and violence despite legal measures designed to protect them. The results showed trans individuals were more at risk of experiencing negative incidents than cisgender gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals. Among cisgender LGB individuals, lesbians seemed most at risk of discrimination and harassment, while gay men were more at risk of violence.

A study from Portugal¹⁷ looked at the professional lives of people with non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities and found three major tendencies: workers felt ignored or dismissed, experienced negative evaluations or

the refusal of promotion or were subjected to ostracization or bullying; legal protection was treated as a last resort and was not a deciding factor in whether to come out at work; and a conservative rise which in Portugal was rooted in an attack on political correctness and the emergence of gender ideology panic.

Further research¹⁸ looked at job satisfaction among lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals in the UK and found lower satisfaction levels for bisexual men and lesbians, though not for gay men. The researchers put these low levels of satisfaction for bisexual men and for women down to unique forms of discrimination and stigma.

Another study¹⁹ looked at experiences of caring among LGBTQ adults in Southern Europe, focusing on victimisation, violence and health problems. Participants were asked about their partnerships, friendships and parenting experiences, and the centrality of informal caring emerged as a key theme: interviewees had often provided long-term care for friends and family members without full recognition. These caring roles included providing emotional and physical support to vulnerable friends and relatives, supporting the bodily and clinical needs of other trans and non-binary people and participating in wider social support networks.

Research conducted among the LGBTQI+ community in Scotland²⁰ highlighted how interviewees across the age-range reported generational continuations rather than generational change. Past experiences of inequality and discrimination continued to impact upon LGBTQI+ citizens' present lives and thoughts about the future.

Policymakers should take note that despite social and political progress towards recognition, protection and valuing diversity and equality for LGBTQI+ citizens in Europe, the implementation of policy at national and local levels remained uneven and lacked monitoring, consolidation and mainstreaming. The importance of differences and diversity within LGBTQI+ communities and how these mapped onto a range of other inequalities across the life course should become a priority.

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