



Promoting social cohesion and convergence

# Upward convergence in gender equality: How close is the Union of equality?



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The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is an autonomous body of the European Union established to strengthen gender equality across the EU. Equality between women and men is a fundamental value of the EU and EIGE's task is to make this a reality in Europe and beyond.

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# Introduction

Over the last decade, the EU has made progress towards gender equality, albeit at a snail's pace. While the EU is considered to be a global leader in gender equality, this obscures the diversity of achievements at national level. Progress is much more pronounced in some Member States than in others, with millions of Europeans still prevented from realising their full potential because of their gender. Developments have now taken a turn for the worse due to the COVID-19 pandemic and threaten to roll back much of the recent progress.

The EU gender equality strategy for 2020–2025 acknowledges the slow speed and mixed outcomes of policy in this field, and emphasises the need for further advances in, among other areas, tackling gender gaps and unequal labour-market participation. It also recognises the Gender Equality Index, developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), as a key benchmark for gender equality and sets out its intention to introduce annual monitoring of gender equality, building on the index.

The Gender Equality Index is a powerful tool that measures the progress of gender equality in the EU. It covers a range of indicators in the core domains of work, money, knowledge, time, power and health (and two additional domains, violence and intersecting inequalities, which do not directly contribute to the overall index score). The indicators are closely linked

to EU targets and international commitments such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

So far, the Gender Equality Index has mostly been used to provide detailed information on progress towards gender equality in the EU and its Member States. But, given the diverse patterns observed at national level, it is also crucial for understanding the evolution of disparities between Member States and their implications for upward economic and social convergence in the EU. This requires answering an important question: have Member States converged upward in gender equality, with all Member States improving their performance, and disparities between them declining? Other questions follow: which Member States are catching up fastest with the best performers, and which continue to lag? Are there any significant differences in these patterns across different domains of gender equality?

This policy brief, jointly produced by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) and EIGE in the context of the ongoing cooperation between the two agencies, aims to answer these questions by investigating patterns of convergence in the Gender Equality Index among Member States over the 2010–2018 period.



## Policy context

Gender equality is a core value of the EU, established as a fundamental right in the EU treaties. The EU gender equality strategy for 2020–2025 strives for a union of equality, where women and men can pursue their chosen path in life in a society free from violence and stereotypes, where leadership is shared equally and where individuals thrive in a gender-equal economy. The EU has also long demonstrated its dedication to gender equality through its international commitments, such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

The commitment to achieving gender equality in the EU should be understood within the context of convergence towards better living and working conditions – a broader political promise that is key for sustaining the cohesion and legitimacy of the EU itself. The European Pillar of Social Rights, together with the Action Plan contributing to the implementation of its principles, is one of the major initiatives launched in recent years to reimburse the EU's economic aspirations with a strong social dimension. The overarching aim of the pillar is to serve as a compass for a renewed process of upward economic and social convergence among Member States. Gender equality is one of the key principles of the Social Pillar. From a gender equality perspective, progress would

ideally be observed in each Member State, while less gender-equal societies catch up with the most gender-equal societies, reducing the overall disparities.

In this context, it is a positive sign that in the past few years, there have been several notable EU legal and policy developments to promote gender equality across all Member States. For example, the work–life balance directive was adopted in 2019 to improve access for parents and carers to working-time arrangements that enable them to better manage the demands of family life (such as family- and care-related leave and flexible work arrangements) and to encourage men to take up such provisions. On 4 March 2021, the Commission proposed a directive to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value for women and men through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms.

But the Commission's proposal came only following the failure of the 2014 Recommendation on gender pay transparency to nudge all the Member States to introduce pay transparency measures. The absence of transparency has contributed to the persistence of a gender pay gap, with women's gross hourly earnings 14.1% below those of men, on average, in 2019. Progress on increasing women's labour market

participation is also disappointing: the gender employment gap has stagnated at 12 percentage points since 2014.

Reaching a consensus across the Member States has proved difficult in some areas. For instance, while the EU has taken important steps to accede to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention), it is facing increasing resistance to ratification from several Member States. The proposal for a directive to improve the gender balance among non-executive directors of companies listed on stock exchanges was tabled in 2012 but remains blocked.

Looking forward, the gender equality strategy outlines key policy objectives and actions over the 2020–2025 period. It sees EIGE's Gender Equality Index as an important tool to measure progress towards gender equality in the EU, alongside a number of Eurostat and Eurofound indicators related to gender equality priorities outlined in the United Nations sustainable development goals and the EU social scoreboard. The analysis presented in this policy brief aims to contribute to these monitoring efforts by analysing whether the recent progress towards gender equality has fulfilled the aspirations of upward social and economic convergence outlined in the pillar.

# Key findings

- Between 2010 and 2018, the Gender Equality Index score rose in the EU as a whole and in all the Member States, although the pace of progress is slow overall and varies a lot by Member State. National disparities widened between 2011 and 2014 but narrowed in later years. The overall trend was one of upward convergence.
- Sweden ranked first in advancing gender equality throughout the entire period, while Greece struggled the most. Several Mediterranean Member States and some of the Baltic Member States were among those catching up most with the EU average. In Italy, Cyprus, Malta and Portugal, the index increased by more than 7.5 points. Estonia recorded the most impressive rise of the three Baltic Member States – 7.3 points.
- On a less encouraging note, several Member States, mainly from central and eastern Europe, which were already trailing behind in 2010, improved their performance at a slower pace than the EU average, falling further behind. Others were still in virtually the same position by 2018; this was especially the case for Czechia, Hungary and Poland.
- While the index comprises six core domains (work, money, knowledge, time, power and health), it was achievements in the domain of power that drove the overall progress in gender equality between 2010 and 2018. This domain covers the representation of women and men in a range of the highest decision-making positions across the political, economic and social spheres. However, positive developments in this domain were accompanied by increasing disparities between Member States, resulting in a clear pattern of upward divergence.
- Striking improvements in gender balances on company boards in several Member States (notably France and Italy, but also Belgium and Germany) improved the overall index score in the domain of power, but also increased national disparities because other Member States trailed behind. The sharp increases in the proportion of women on company boards are closely linked to the adoption by Member States of legally binding quotas for gender-balanced representation.
- Developments stemming from the COVID-19 crisis threaten to roll back recent achievements in gender equality, especially in the domains of work and time. Measures to contain the pandemic took a heavy toll on women's employment and caused a surge in their care responsibilities. There is also a tangible risk that the economic and social fallout following the health crisis may drive divergence and downward trends in Member States, as the disproportionate effect that the current crisis is having on women varies considerably by Member State.



## Exploring the evidence

This section comprises two parts. The first investigates trends of upward convergence in the Gender Equality Index from 2010 up to the latest available data in 2018. It also presents individual national developments in gender equality, highlighting the best- and worst-performing Member States. The second part looks in more detail at key patterns of convergence and the most significant trends across the six core domains of the Gender Equality Index: work, money, knowledge, time, power and health.

### Trends in the Gender Equality Index

#### Measuring upward convergence

Eurofound defines ‘upward convergence’ as the co-occurrence of an improvement in Member States’ progress towards a target and a reduction of the disparities in their performances.

The concept of performance improvement ultimately represents progress towards a policy target of better living and working conditions. This makes upward convergence a normative concept derived from a political consensus on the desirability of the progress measured by the indicator in question. In the context of

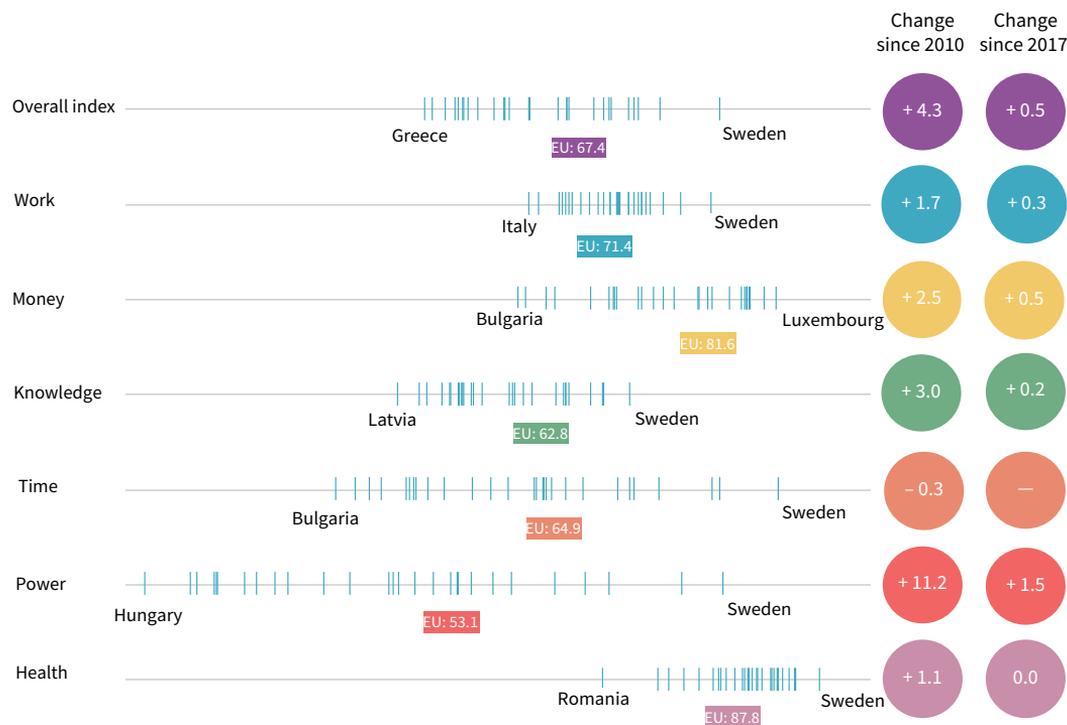
this policy brief, upward convergence means increasing equality between women and men in each Member State, while less gender-equal Member States catch up with the most gender-equal ones, reducing disparities across the EU as a whole.

The Gender Equality Index provides a comprehensive measure of progress towards gender equality in the EU. It scores the EU and its Member States on a scale of 1 to 100, where 100 represents full equality between women and men. The index has been used to monitor progress since its first edition in 2013. In October 2020, the fifth edition was released, which provides scores up to 2018.

Based on 2018 data, the EU-27’s score in the Gender Equality Index in 2020 stands at 67.4 out of 100, representing an increase of only 4.3 points since 2010 <sup>(1)</sup>. Progress towards gender equality was most marked in the domain of power, accounting for around two thirds of the improvement observed in the overall index score. Progress in other domains of the index, such as work or money, was much slower. Figure 1 shows the changes in the Gender Equality Index and its domains between 2010 and 2018, and over a one-year period between 2017 and 2018.

<sup>(1)</sup> The 2020 Gender Equality Index score (based on 2018 data) is 67.9, and covers the EU-27 and the United Kingdom together (EIGE, 2020a). The score has been recalculated here for just the EU-27.

**Figure 1: Ranges of Gender Equality Index scores across Member States in 2018 and changes over time, EU-27**



**NB:** This figure presents data for the EU-27 aggregate, based on a weighted average across the 27 EU Member States. In contrast, the convergence analysis that follows uses an unweighted EU-27 average for aggregate index scores, following the Eurofound methodology for convergence analysis. In the domain of time, no new data were available in 2017.

**Source:** EIGE, Gender Equality Index

The investigation of upward convergence in the Gender Equality Index that follows uses three complementary statistical measures of convergence:

- the reduction in disparities between Member States;
- the extent to which Member States that were lagging behind in 2010 have caught up;
- the reduction in the differences between the best-performing Member State and the others.

Further methodological information on the types of upward convergence and on the statistical measures typically used to capture each one is provided in the box below.

## Box 1: Measures of upward convergence

Measuring upward convergence involves quantifying two concepts: improvement and convergence.

Improvement is measured by the change in the unweighted averages of Member States' performance on selected indicators. Unweighted averages are used to give each Member State the same representation and importance in determining the overall trend.

As for convergence, Eurofound distinguishes between two types of upward convergence.

- Strict upward convergence occurs when all Member States improve their performance, while disparities between them are reduced. In this case, no Member State is left behind.
- Upward convergence (without the qualifier 'strict') occurs when an improvement is recorded in the EU average, while disparities decline. In this case, however, not every Member State records an improvement.

In addition to upward convergence, and following the same logic, Eurofound defines three other possible situations: upward divergence, downward divergence and downward convergence. A downward trend indicates a movement away from the desired direction of an indicator, while divergence describes a rise in disparities.

Three statistical measures are typically used to capture convergence: sigma, beta and delta convergence. Each measures a different aspect of the convergence process.

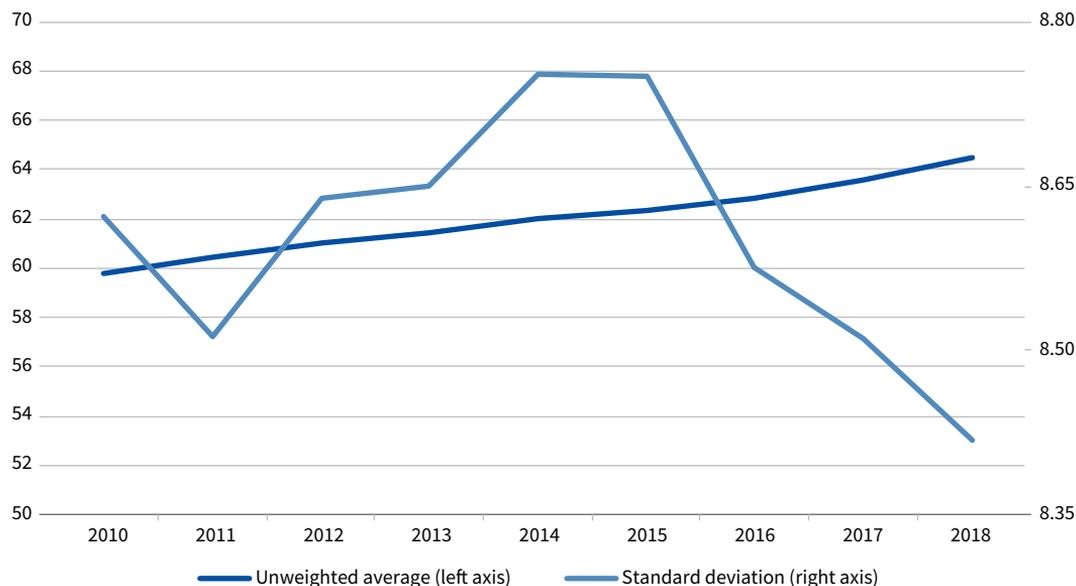
- Sigma convergence refers to the overall reduction in disparities between Member States over time and is measured by the change in the statistical measures of dispersion, such as the standard deviation or the coefficient of variation. A decrease in the standard deviation or the coefficient of variation over time indicates convergence.
- Beta convergence is used to measure whether Member States starting from initially low performance levels grow faster than better-performing Member States – in other words, whether the former are catching up with the latter.
- Delta convergence is used to analyse Member States' distance from the best-performing Member State and is usually measured through the sum of the distances between the Member States and the top performer.

### Improved Gender Equality Index score and moderate reduction in disparities

Between 2010 and 2018, the Gender Equality Index score grew steadily though sluggishly in the EU-27, as shown in Figure 2. While the positive evolution of the EU average was smooth, the same does not hold true for the disparities between Member States, measured by the standard deviation. The disparities widened over 2011 to 2014 (mainly driven by

a strong divergence in the domain of power, discussed in more detail later), after which they narrowed again. Despite this temporary hike in variation, progress had been recorded for all Member States by 2018, albeit to different extents, leading to strict (but moderate) upward convergence in gender equality in the EU-27. As for the performance at national level, Sweden ranked first throughout the entire period, while Greece struggled the most in advancing gender equality.

Figure 2: Upward convergence in the Gender Equality Index (in points), EU-27, 2010–2018



Source: EIGE, Gender Equality Index; authors' calculations.

### Several Member States falling behind

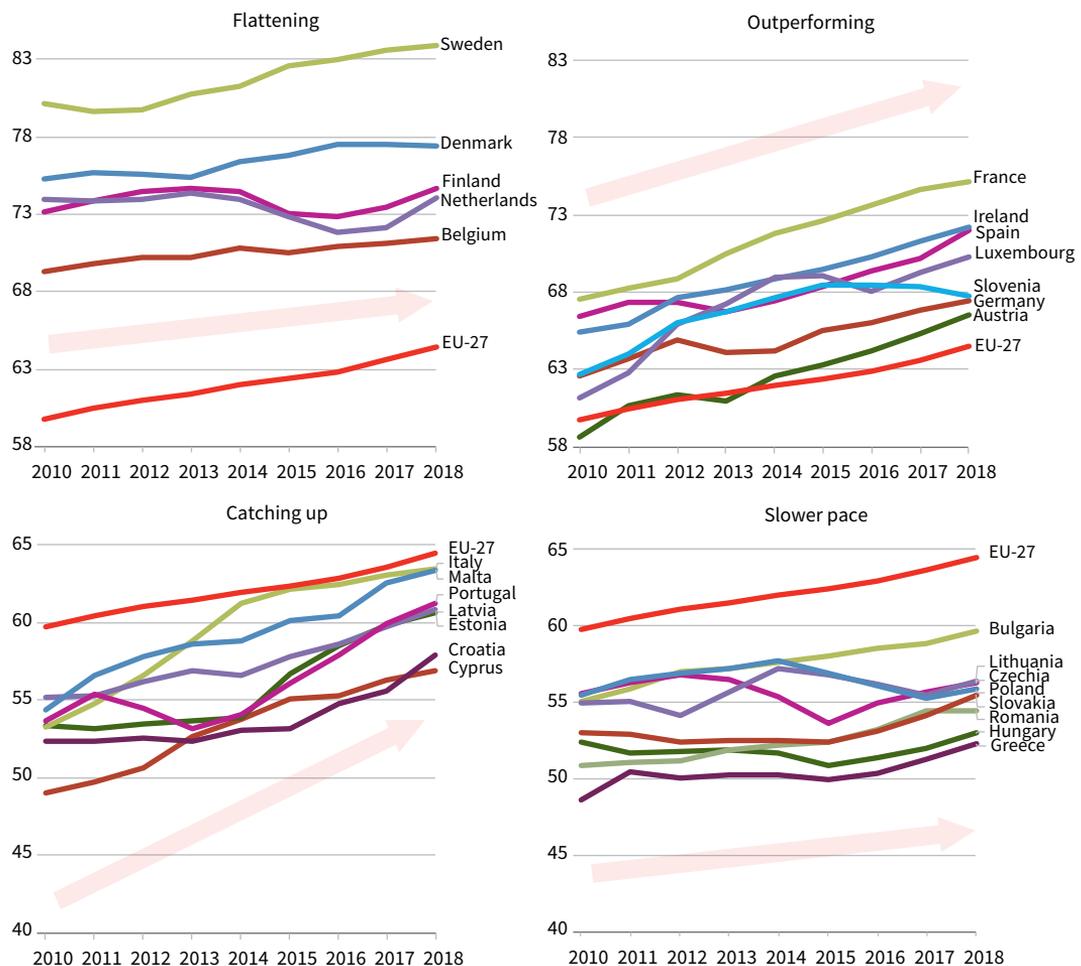
When the performance at national level is looked at more closely, the following different scenarios can be identified, reflecting each Member State's improving or worsening performance compared to the EU average (see Figure 3).

- **Flattening.** This occurs when a Member State's Gender Equality Index score is better than the EU average, but is growing at a slower pace. This is, for instance, the case with the Scandinavian Member States.
- **Outperforming.** This occurs when a Member State's score is above the EU average from the beginning and also improves at a faster rate, with the result that the gap between it and the average increases. Austria has been included here even though its performance was below the EU average in the initial year. Mainly older EU Member States followed this trend.

- **Catching up.** This pattern occurs when the performance of a Member State is initially lower than the EU average, but improves more quickly and reduces the gap. This development is evident in several Member States from the Mediterranean region and in two Baltic Member States (Latvia and Estonia).
- **Slower pace.** This occurs when the performance of a Member State is initially lower than the EU average and also grows at a slower rate, increasing the gap over time. This is the case for many Member States from central and eastern Europe that joined the EU in 2004, as well as Greece.

When looking at the magnitude of the progress achieved over the 8 years, it can be seen that mainly the southern EU Member States improved gender equality the most: in Italy, Cyprus, Malta and Portugal, the index increased by more than 7.5 points (alongside France, Luxembourg and Austria). Among the Baltic Member States, Estonia has the most impressive rise – 7.3 points.

**Figure 3: Member States' scores in the Gender Equality Index grouped into four patterns, 2010–2018**



**NB:** Performance is shown relative to the (unweighted) EU average.

**Source:** EIGE, Gender Equality Index; authors' calculations.

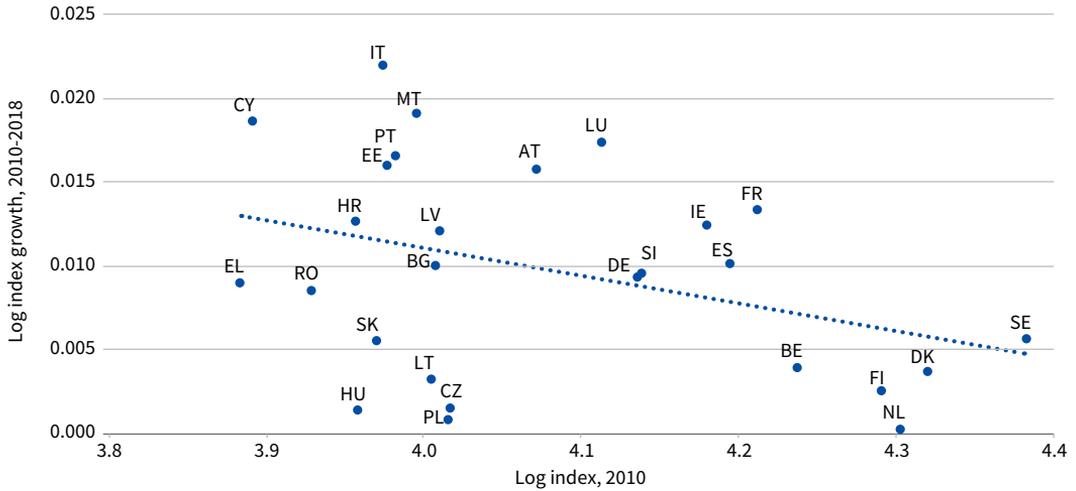
### Fastest progress in least gender-equal Member States

When the performances of all Member States are taken together, and in particular when improvements over time on their initial situations are compared, a clear pattern of catching up emerges at the aggregate EU level. This is depicted in Figure 4 and is represented by a negative relationship between the growth of the Gender Equality Index between 2010 and 2018 and its initial value in 2010, as indicated by the downward trendline.

Several Member States that initially performed worse in terms of gender equality recorded

faster improvements than other Member States. In relative terms, Italy, Cyprus and Malta achieved the largest improvements in gender equality (the index grew by more than 16 % in each). On the other hand, the growth in Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden (which already had higher index scores in 2010) did not exceed 5 %. On a less encouraging note, several Member States from central and eastern Europe that were already trailing behind in 2010 were still in virtually the same position by 2018. This is especially the case for Czechia, Hungary and Poland, none of which saw improvements of more than 1.2 %, and for Lithuania, with a modest 2.6 % growth.

Figure 4: Catch-up in the Gender Equality Index, EU-27, 2010–2018 (\*)



(\*) See the back inside cover for a guide to the country codes.

NB: The p-value for the beta coefficient is < 0.05.

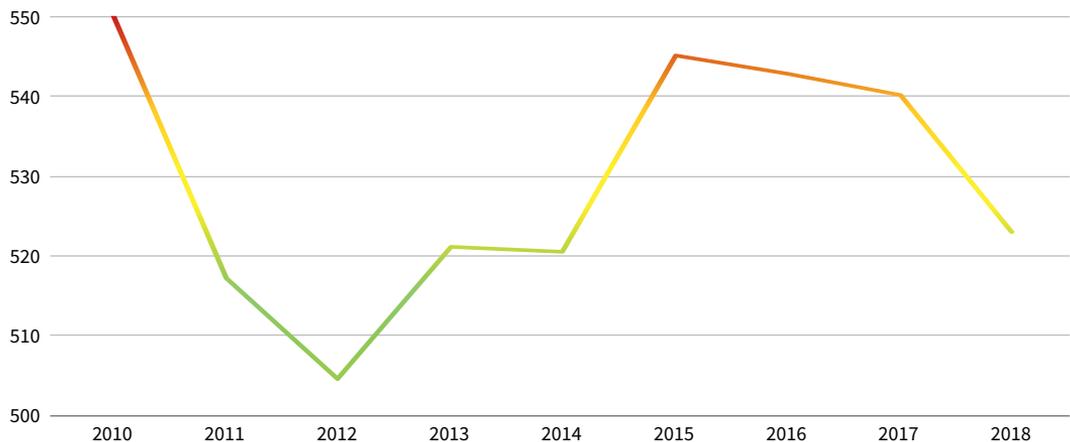
Source: EIGE, Gender Equality Index; authors' calculations.

### Closing the gap with the pacesetter

Often considered a gender equality role model, Sweden has paved the way for the rest of the EU – in 2018, it ranked first in all the index domains except money (where it ranked sixth). The distance between this pacesetter in gender equality and the other Member States is another indicator of progress in achieving upward convergence at EU level, and the aim

is to close it. This distance is evaluated using another convergence measure: the sum of the distances of all the Member States' scores from the top performer (expressed as differences in index scores, in points). This analysis shows that the distance fluctuated considerably over time. Overall, however, a modest reduction was recorded between 2010 and 2018, indicative of long-term progress (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Distance between the top performer and the other Member States in the Gender Equality Index (in points), EU-27, 2010–2018



NB: The distance is calculated as the sum of the differences between Sweden's Gender Equality Index score (in points) and the scores of all the other Member States.

Source: EIGE, Gender Equality Index; authors' calculations.

## Key patterns across index domains and indicators

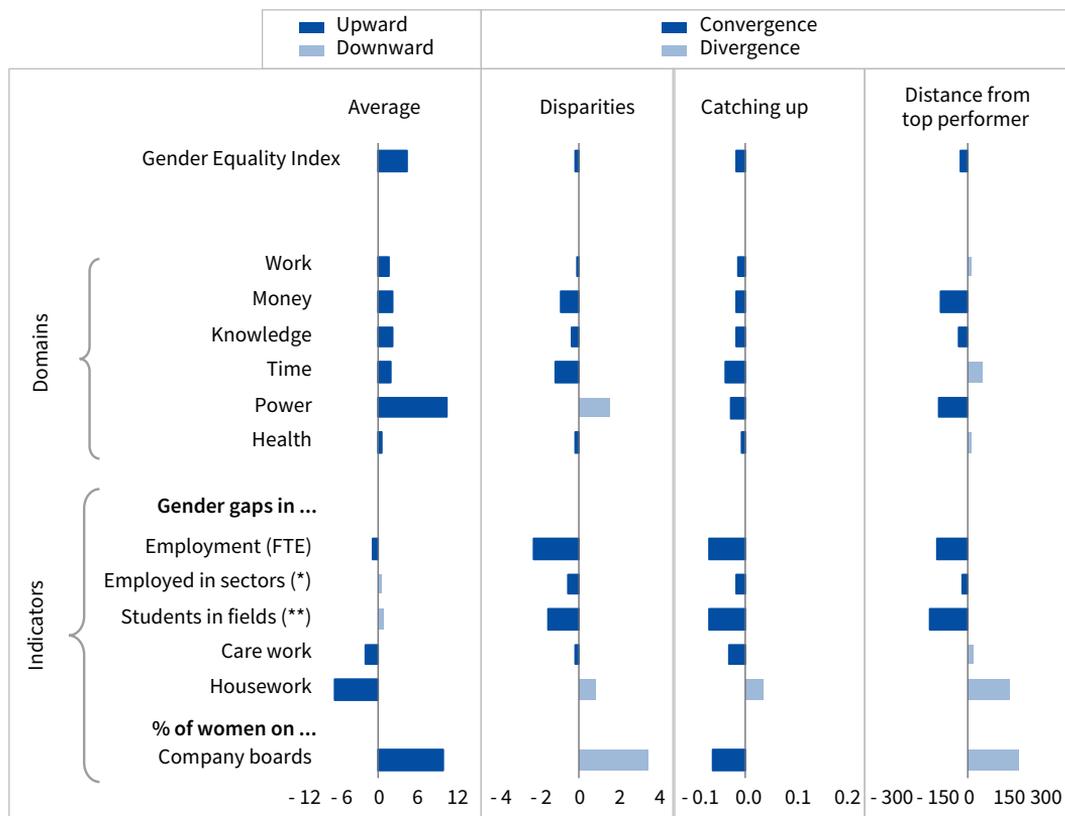
The overall index score is calculated based on scores from the six core domains of the index (work, money, knowledge, time, power and health), which are themselves calculated using a range of key indicators in each domain. To understand the convergence dynamics in the overall index score, it is important to analyse convergence within the domains and among the indicators.

While the analysis above showed some progress in the overall index score, accompanied by reduced disparities across Member States, a less reassuring picture

emerges when focusing on the domains (see Figure 6). While gender equality in all six domains evolved positively (i.e. the unweighted EU-27 averages increased), disparities between Member States rose in the domain of power. Furthermore, the cumulative distance from the top performer in the domains of work, time and health was larger in 2018 than in 2010.

Since systematic analysis goes beyond the scope of this short brief, a selection of examples of different dynamics are examined below, covering several key indicators. The full list of index indicators can be found in Annex 1 of the EIGE report *Gender Equality Index 2020 – Digitalisation and the future of work* (EIGE, 2020a).

**Figure 6: Convergence and divergence across the index domains and selected indicators, 2010–2018**



(\*) The relevant sectors are education, human health and social work.

(\*\*) The relevant fields are education, health, welfare, humanities and arts.

**NB:** The values of beta convergence (labelled 'catching up') are statistically significant for all the domains, with the exception of the domain of work, and for all the indicators, with the exception of gender gaps in care work and housework.

**Source:** EIGE, Gender Equality Index; authors' calculations.

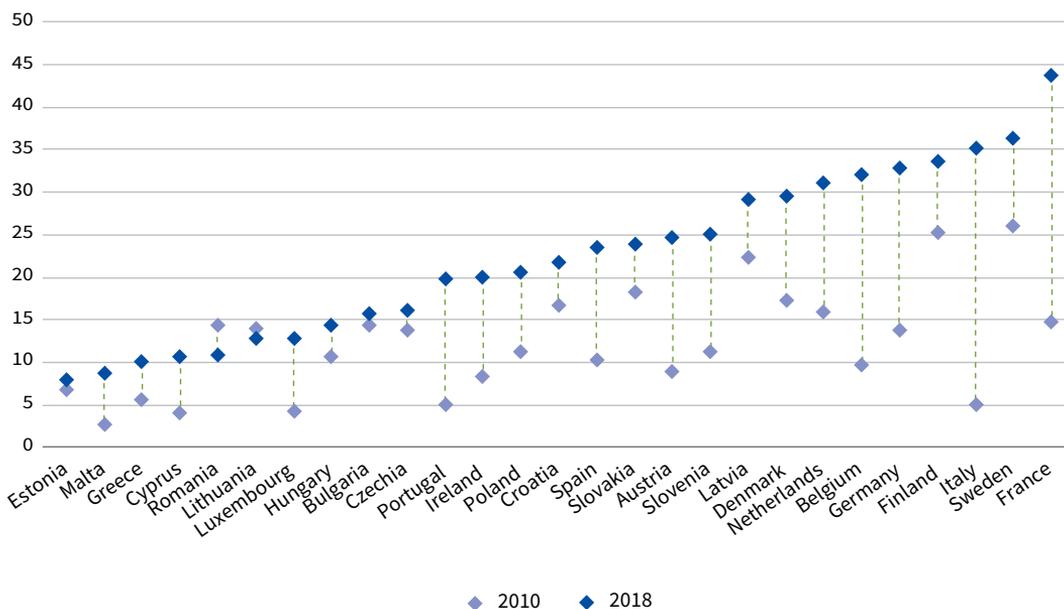
## Upward divergence in gender equality on company boards

Between 2010 and 2018, disparities sharply increased between the Member States in the domain of power, which analyses the representation of women and men in a range of the highest decision-making positions across the political, economic and social spheres. At the same time, the index score for the domain of power substantially increased, resulting in a clear pattern of upward divergence.

Much of the increase in disparities results from a surge in the proportion of women on

the boards of the largest quoted companies in several Member States: in France and Italy, the percentage rose by more than 29 percentage points, and in Belgium and Germany by more than 19 percentage points (see Figure 7). Improvements in Mediterranean Member States that were initially poor performers, such as Greece, Cyprus and Malta, helped them to catch up, but these advances were insufficient to match the top performers (such as France and Sweden) throughout the period. Romania and Lithuania were the only Member States where the proportion of women on company boards decreased (by 3.5 and 1.1 percentage points, respectively).

**Figure 7: Proportion of women on company boards (%), by Member State, 2010 and 2018**



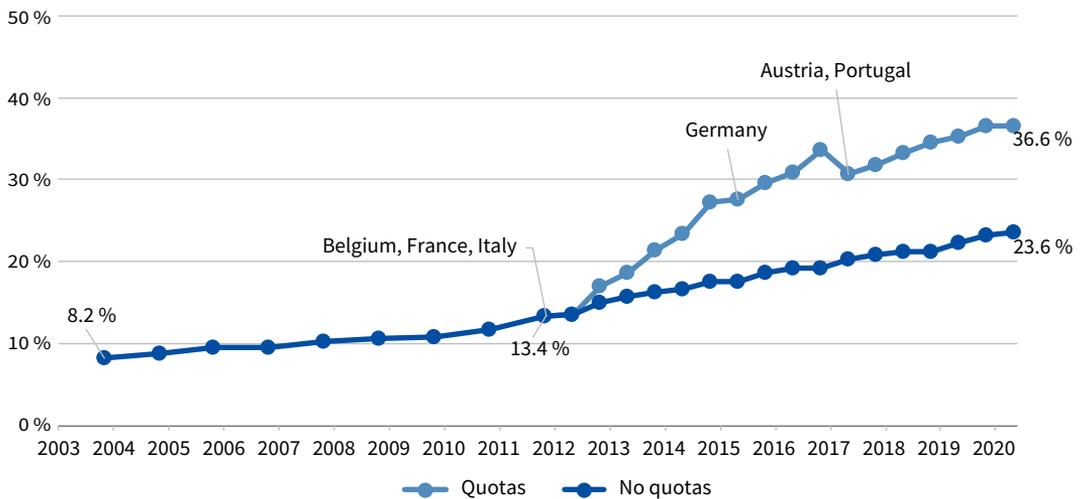
**NB:** Data refer to the representation of women on the boards of the largest quoted companies. The 2010 and 2018 values represent 3-year averages (2009–2011 and 2017–2019, respectively).

**Source:** EIGE, gender statistics database – women and men in decision-making; authors’ calculations.

The boost in the proportion of women on company boards in certain Member States seems to be linked to the adoption of legally binding measures (quotas, for instance) on minimum representations of each sex (EIGE, 2020a). Between 2010 and 2018, six Member States (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Austria and Portugal) adopted such measures and

their impact was clear (see Figure 8); Greece more recently enacted similar legislation. By October 2020, women accounted for around 37 % of board members in the largest quoted companies in the Member States with binding quotas, compared to less than 25 % in Member States that did not take such measures.

**Figure 8: Proportion of women on company boards: comparison of Member States with and without national gender-balance quotas, 2003–2020**



**NB:** Data exclude Czechia, Lithuania, Malta and Poland for 2003 and Croatia for 2003 to 2006 (as these Member States were added to the data collection in 2004 and 2007, respectively). Greece is included in the 'no quotas' group as its quota legislation was not passed until July 2020.

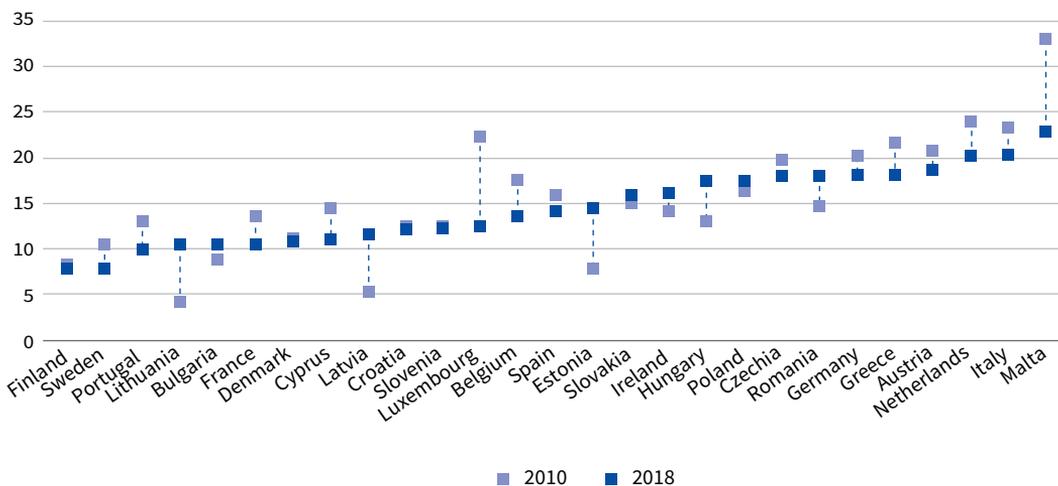
**Source:** EIGE, gender statistics database – women and men in decision-making; authors' calculations.

## Upward convergence in full-time equivalent employment

From 2010 to 2018, upward convergence was achieved in the reduction of the gender gap in full-time equivalent (FTE) employment, which is defined as the difference between the absolute values of the FTE employment rates of women and men. The FTE employment rate takes into account the higher incidence of part-time employment among women and is obtained by comparing each worker's average number of hours worked with the average number of hours worked by a full-time worker. Since men are less likely to be employed on a part-time basis than women, the use of this indicator is pertinent from a gender equality perspective as it takes into consideration the heterogeneity of working hours among employed people.

The gender gap in FTE employment decreased slightly at EU level, while disparities between

Member States fell considerably. Luxembourg and Malta, which were among the worst performers in 2010, are catching up and stood out from the rest of the EU thanks to their impressive steps forward in women's employment, with the gap declining by one third in Malta and almost halving in Luxembourg by 2018 (see Figure 9). Italy and the Netherlands lagged behind throughout the entire period, due to a lower employment rate for women in Italy and an exceptionally high rate of women in part-time employment in the Netherlands. The situations of Finland and Sweden, the best performers in 2018, with gender gaps of 7.9 percentage points, represented a slight improvement from 2010 (especially in Sweden). However, convergence in a strict sense was not achieved, because the gender divide deepened in nine Member States. Among these were the Baltic Member States, whose gender gaps were the lowest in 2010 but almost doubled over time.

**Figure 9: Gender gaps in FTE employment (in percentage points), by Member State, 2010 and 2018**

Source: Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey; authors' calculations.

These achievements may well be at risk due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment. In the second quarter of 2020, the EU employment rate declined by about 2.5 % for both women and men compared to the previous year. This was accompanied by a sharp drop in total actual hours worked in the main job among those who remained in employment, which affected women more than men, likely widening the gender gap in FTE employment (EIGE, 2021).

Furthermore, during the first wave of the pandemic, women were more at risk of dropping out of the labour market, most likely because they took on a larger share of the care responsibilities within the household. In Q2 2020, unemployed women tended to move into inactivity more often than unemployed men in the majority (17 out of 23) of EU Member States (EIGE, 2021).

From a convergence perspective, the impact of the crisis varied substantially by Member State, both in overall magnitude and in the degree to which women and men were affected. For example, Bulgaria, Ireland and Spain saw the largest falls in both women's and men's employment, with twice the average reduction observed in the EU. In Italy, Malta and Poland, large reductions in employment have widened existing gender gaps (EIGE, 2021). This may

well have contributed to an increased disparity in gender gaps in employment and labour-market participation across Member States.

### Persisting segregation in sectors and fields of study

Gender segregation across sectors and occupations and across fields of study is a well-documented, deeply rooted inequality in the EU. Women still account for the majority of employment in education and human health and social work (over 70 %) and also of service, sales and clerical support workers (over 60 %). In contrast, women are severely under-represented in certain jobs in science, technology, engineering and mathematics – for example, they account for less than one in five ICT specialists. These sectoral and occupational gender imbalances contribute to disparities in the quality of jobs held by women and men and the higher concentration of women in part-time, temporary, low-paid and precarious employment (EIGE, 2020b; Eurofound, 2015).

The index captures progress in tackling labour-market and educational segregation by monitoring changes in the proportion of women and men employed in education, health and welfare (EHW) activities and the proportion of women and men enrolled in

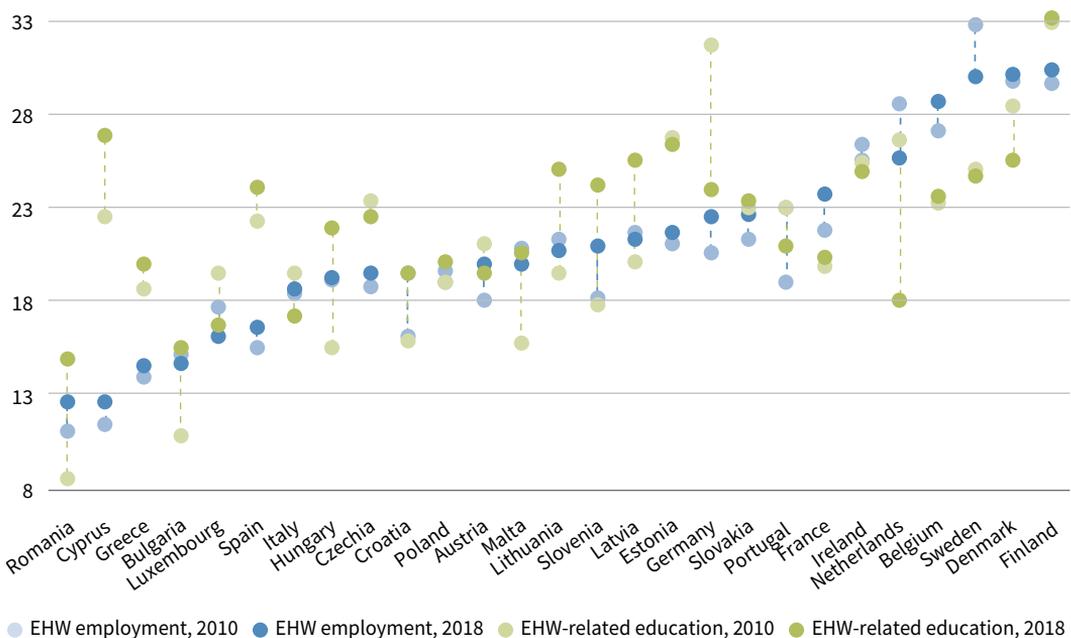
related fields of study. The gender gap in EHW employment has widened in 19 Member States since 2010 (see Figure 11). The largest gaps in absolute terms were observed in the Scandinavian Member States, where EHW work accounts for a higher share of overall employment – for example, in Sweden, EHW accounted for 42 % of all women’s employment, compared to 12 % of men’s. In Member States with the lowest gender gaps, the proportions of both women and men employed in EHW is much lower than in Scandinavia – for example, in Romania, EHW accounts for 16 % of all women’s employment, compared to 4 % of men’s. However, in relative terms, these figures describe rather similar situations – in both Sweden and Romania, the share of women’s employment accounted for by EHW is roughly four times that of men’s employment.

Overall, convergence (in terms of catching up) was recorded in the EU because gender gaps

in EHW sectors decreased in some Member States, such as the Netherlands and Sweden, while increasing in Cyprus and Romania, for example, where gender gaps are among the narrowest. In line with these developments, a marginal decline in disparities was also observed.

Education also shows evidence of segregation, with deepening gender discrepancies in the proportions of tertiary education students enrolled in EHW-related fields of study in 16 EU Member States (see Figure 10). Gender gaps in this regard widened by more than 6 percentage points in Hungary, Romania and Slovenia between 2010 and 2018; nevertheless, strong progress was made in Germany and the Netherlands, where the gaps narrowed by more than 7 percentage points. These developments, although unfavourable in some Member States, favoured convergence.

**Figure 10: Gender gaps in EHW employment and in enrolment in related fields of study (in percentage points), by Member State, 2010 and 2018**



**NB:** The gender gaps in EHW employment are calculated as the differences in the proportions of women and men employed in EHW activities in each Member State. The gender gaps in enrolment are the difference in the proportions of women and men studying in the fields of education, health and welfare, humanities and arts.

**Source:** Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey; author’s calculations.

The segregated nature of the EU labour market came into the spotlight during the COVID-19 crisis as, on the one hand, women were over-represented in certain essential occupations (such as healthcare and social work), but, on the other hand, also accounted for a majority of workers in some of the most severely affected economic sectors and occupations (such as accommodation and food services and domestic services). The concentration of women in the worst-affected jobs and also in precarious employment helps explain the widening of some gender disparities in the labour market during the pandemic: for example, women account for 69 % of the job losses registered among part-time workers aged 15–64 (EIGE, 2021).

In contrast to the economic crisis of 2008–2012, which decimated employment in manufacturing and construction first and foremost (both male-dominated, mid-paid sectors), the COVID-19 pandemic has primarily impacted service sectors that involve a high degree of social contact, many of which employ more women than men and where average pay tends to be low. As a result, when compared to the earlier crisis, the impact of COVID-19 has been more balanced in its employment loss in terms of gender, but this loss has been felt most sharply by women working in low-paid service sectors (Eurofound, 2021).

### Mixed trends in unpaid care and housework

Looking at changes in the proportions of women and men who do unpaid work at home daily reveals dissimilar patterns in care and housework responsibilities <sup>(2)</sup>. The gender gap in care responsibilities declined only marginally, and no clear pattern of

convergence or divergence in the EU can be identified. The situation improved more visibly, however, in terms of housework responsibilities, albeit with increasing disparities between Member States (and a notable widening of the distance from the best performer, Sweden).

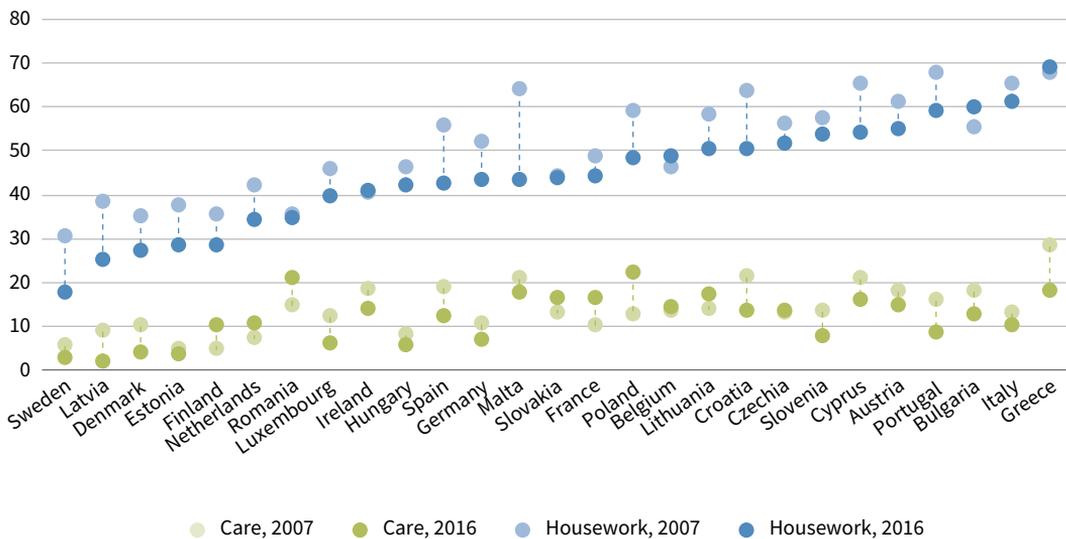
As Figure 11 shows, the reductions in the gender gap in housework (cooking and/or doing housework) varied a lot by Member State: the substantial progress achieved by Member States that were already leading in this area (the Baltic and Scandinavian Member States) contrasts with the backsliding and the minute improvements seen among the worst performers (such as Bulgaria, Greece and Italy). Despite some impressive achievements (especially by Malta, which reduced its gap from 64 percentage points to 43), by 2016, the gender gap in housework was still significant in the EU, ranging from 17.4 percentage points in Sweden to 69.3 percentage points in Greece.

As for unpaid care work, in 2016, 38 % of women cared for children, grandchildren, older people or people with disabilities every day for 1 hour or more, compared to 25 % of men. There were noticeable differences between Member States in the gender gap in unpaid care responsibilities: the gap ranged from only 2 percentage points in Latvia to 22 percentage points in Poland. However, disparities between Member States remained fairly stable over time. The most significant progress was recorded in Greece, Croatia and Portugal, where the gender gap declined by more than 7 percentage points, but negative developments were observed in nine Member States (among them the Netherlands and Finland, where gaps had been small in 2010).

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(2) Unpaid care work and housework indicators are based on data gathered by the 2007, 2012 and 2016 Eurofound European Quality of Life Surveys.

**Figure 11: Gender gaps in unpaid care work and housework (in percentage points), by Member State, 2007 and 2016**



Source: Eurofound, European Quality of Life Surveys; authors' calculations.

The COVID-19 crisis has led to massive short-term changes in the time spent on unpaid work at home. A comparison with pre-pandemic data from Eurofound's 2016 European Quality of Life Survey shows that the care burden increased for both women and men, although women continued to bear the brunt (EIGE, 2021). According to the data from Eurofound's e-survey, in July 2020, on average, women reported spending 35 hours per week caring for children or grandchildren, compared to the 25 hours per week reported by men; women also reported spending 18 hours per week on average doing housework, compared to men's 12 hours. The difference between women and men in terms of participation in childcare and housework was even higher among respondents with children aged under 12 (Eurofound, 2020c).

These impacts are among the unintended consequences of certain measures adopted to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, such as nursery and school closures, which led to a dramatic rise in the amount of unpaid care being provided at home, and in turn led to a general deterioration of work–life balance, especially for mothers of young children, who have had to juggle work, homeschooling and care, all at once and within the same physical space (Eurofound, 2020b; Mascherini and Bisello, 2020). While there were some signs of men taking on a higher share of unpaid work during the pandemic, these were rather fragile. Whether these changes will help dismantle traditional gender norms in the household in the medium to long term – and perhaps contribute to narrowing the gender gaps in this domain – remains to be seen, and is far from certain.



## Policy pointers

- The Gender Equality Index showed some progress towards gender equality in the EU from 2010 to 2018, accompanied by a moderate reduction in disparities between national achievements. An improvement was recorded for all Member States, albeit to different extents.

Despite this evidence of upward convergence, there are also some serious causes for concern, which demand the urgent attention of policymakers in order to avoid seeing progress stall or reverse and national differences increase in the coming years.

Firstly, the progress made in the domain of power, a key driver of the overall progress, has been accompanied by increasing differences between Member States. Secondly, a number of Member States lag behind in gender equality and their progress is slower than the EU average. Finally, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis threatens to derail what has been achieved so far and may well result in increasing disparities between Member States.

- It is necessary to adopt further measures to promote gender equality across the EU, especially in Member States that lag behind. For example, in the domain of

power, the adoption of legally binding measures to improve gender balances in key economic decision-making positions drives progress: Member States that adopted measures such as quotas to force a balance of genders on the boards of large, listed companies achieved dramatic improvements that left other Member States behind.

Wider adoption of such measures would be an important step forward in increasing equality between women and men and reducing disparities between Member States. Legislative action at EU level can act as a key driver of this process – for example, the adoption of the directive on gender balances on corporate boards that was proposed in 2012 could guarantee the representation by women of at least 40 % of non-executive directors of listed companies in all EU Member States. Leading equally is one of the key pillars of the EU gender equality strategy for 2020–2025, which underlines the importance of a gender balance in leadership positions in politics, the economy and social life (European Commission, 2020).

- Following the outbreak of COVID-19, gender equality appears to be at a crossroads, especially in the domains of work and

time. Measures to contain the pandemic took a heavy and disproportionate toll on women's employment in low-paid sectors and increased the amount of time women were required to spend on care responsibilities. The impact, however, varied considerably across the Member States. In rebuilding after the pandemic, it will be crucial to ensure that:

- recovery measures are gender sensitive, for example by investing in female-dominated sectors that were critical during the crisis (healthcare, education and social work) but where working conditions and pay are key issues to be addressed;
- non-standard, flexible or informal forms of employment are better paid, formalised and covered by social protection;
- men's participation in unpaid care work increases, for example by increasing compensation for parental leave and making more of it non-transferable, to encourage fathers' involvement in childcare;
- emergency and recovery decision-making bodies are gender balanced and take gender differences into consideration in crafting responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2021).
- The different consequences of economic shocks for women and men, be it the current COVID-19 crisis or the 2008 financial collapse, are often reinforced by the gender segregation in the labour market and education. To reduce the potential of such crises to entrench gender inequalities, it is necessary to take action to promote the participation of women in male-dominated fields (science, technology, engineering, mathematics or ICT), as well as to bring more men into female-dominated areas (such as the care sector). Measures adopted to tackle this problem need to focus both on the education system (for example by providing gender-sensitive career counselling) and on the labour market (for instance by improving pay and career prospects in care-related jobs).

# Resources

EIGE's Gender Equality Index is available at <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020>

All Eurofound publications are available at [www.eurofound.europa.eu](http://www.eurofound.europa.eu)

All EIGE publications are available at [www.eige.europa.eu](http://www.eige.europa.eu)

The EU convergence monitoring hub is available at <http://eurofound.link/convergencehub>

The Eurofound topic page 'Gender equality' is available at <http://eurofound.link/genderequality>

EIGE (2018), *Study and Work in the EU: Set apart by gender*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (available at <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/study-and-work-eu-set-apart-gender-report>).

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Eurofound (2020b), *Women and Labour Market Equality: Has COVID-19 rolled back recent gains?*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (available at <http://eurofound.link/ef20068>).

Eurofound (2020c), *Living, Working and COVID-19*, COVID-19 series, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (available at <http://eurofound.link/ef20059>).

Eurofound (2021), *COVID-19: Implications for employment and working life*, COVID-19 series, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (available at <http://eurofound.link/ef20050>).

European Commission (2020), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – A Union of Equality: Gender equality strategy 2020–2025, COM(2020) 152 (available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0152>).

European Commission (2021), *2021 Report on Gender Equality in the EU*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5ab127eb-a0bb-11eb-b85c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-207961039>).

Mascherini, M. and Bisello, M. (2020), 'COVID-19 fallout takes higher toll on women, economically and domestically', Eurofound (available at <http://eurofound.link/ef20065>).

# Country codes

BE	Belgium	FR	France	NL	Netherlands
BG	Bulgaria	HR	Croatia	AT	Austria
CZ	Czechia	IT	Italy	PL	Poland
DK	Denmark	CY	Cyprus	PT	Portugal
DE	Germany	LV	Latvia	RO	Romania
EE	Estonia	LT	Lithuania	SI	Slovenia
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Over the last decade, the EU has made slow progress towards gender equality. As achievements in gender equality vary considerably by Member State, it is important to understand the evolution of disparities between the Member States and the implications this has for upward economic and social convergence in the EU. Crucially, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis not only threatens to undo past achievements but may well result in increasing disparities between Member States.

This policy brief, which was jointly prepared by Eurofound and EIGE, investigates patterns of convergence in gender equality as measured by the Gender Equality Index in the Member States over the 2010–2018 period.

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**The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is a tripartite European Union Agency established in 1975. Its role is to provide knowledge in the area of social, employment and work-related policies according to Regulation (EU) 2019/127.**

**The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is an autonomous body of the European Union established to strengthen gender equality across the EU. Equality between women and men is a fundamental value of the EU and EIGE's task is to make this a reality in Europe and beyond.**

