

Precarious work from a gender and intersectionality perspective, and ways to combat it ¹

Background

For the purposes of this study, 'precarious work' is taken to mean employment that satisfies at least one of the following criteria: very low pay, very low intensity working hours, or low job security. The latter criterion is interpreted broadly to encompass not only temporary contracts, but also jobs with few training and career development opportunities, a lack of collective representation and an absence of social protection rights or employment-related benefits. Intersectionality, the ways in which sex and gender intersect with other personal characteristics or identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination, is built into the core of this study's definition of precarious work. Discrimination in the form of 'intersecting inequalities' based on a person's age, country of origin, disability, level of education or sexual orientation, is a key determinant both of a person's exposure to and experience of precarious work. Although men are clearly affected by precarious work, it is women who are particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon.

Key findings

Achievements in the area of precarious work

Over the last decade, a range of standards has been adopted both at the international and EU levels to tackle precarious work, in particular that of women. Most notably, the EU Directives on 'transparent and predictable working conditions' and 'work-life balance for parents and carers' seek to prohibit the abuse of atypical contracts and to put women and men on a more equal footing by challenging perceptions as to the responsibilities attributed to the two sexes. These binding EU standards are complemented by two European Parliament resolutions on 'working conditions and precarious employment' and 'precarious women workers', as well as a range of policy initiatives targeting a reduction in the number of people in short-term contracts and unemployment, and challenging stereotypes relating to education and career paths.

Remaining challenges

Despite these achievements, precarious work remains an issue in both the EU as a whole and the eight Member States within this study's scope, where it is apparent that women are more likely to be affected by precarious work than men. This overrepresentation is due, among other factors, to the disproportionate amount of time that women spend in caregiving roles and domestic work, both of which are unpaid and largely unrecognised. Embedded stereotypes are another factor triggering female precarious work, with career choices being partially socially constructed and gender segregation a deeply entrenched feature of educational systems and occupations across the EU. This has resulted in a high prevalence of female precarious work in some sectors, notably the care sector, where women tend to experience less favourable pay and working conditions than in

¹ Full study in English:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/662491/IPOL_STU\(2020\)662491_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/662491/IPOL_STU(2020)662491_EN.pdf)



other sectors. Other female-dominated sectors such as education, cleaning, tourism, and personal services have particularly high shares of part-time work, often associated with exclusion from social benefits and disadvantages in terms of access to promotion.

Although it is not always possible to identify common gender patterns between particular groups of men and women, across all eight Member States non-EU born women and men and those with an ethnic minority background, young people, those with low qualifications and people with disabilities are all particularly vulnerable to precarious work. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is having a tangible impact on precarious workers. Women are particularly affected given that the sectors that have been hardest hit (e.g. the care sector, education and hospitality) are those in which women are overrepresented. The pandemic has also had negative repercussions on work-life balance and caring responsibilities, with women's share of unpaid work increasing considerably with more time being spent at home. One result of this situation is that women are more likely than men to have either lost their job or quit it since national lockdowns began.

Good practices in tackling female precarious work

This study identifies a number of good practices which can potentially improve the conditions of women in precarious work. In the legal area, the introduction of a minimum wage has proven effective in lifting women out of precarious conditions in Germany and Spain. Moreover, pay transparency (Germany), the recognition of equal pay for equal work (Sweden), limitations to the duration of atypical contracts and the extension of workers' rights under such contracts (France, Germany, Italy and Poland) as well as parental leave measures (Italy) have also had a positive impact on the reduction of women's precarious work. Policy-wise, good practices include: equality certificates for companies implementing gender equality, programmes helping migrant women to enter the labour market, initiatives aimed at reconciling work and family life, campaigns enhancing women's IT skills, improving working conditions in the care sector, and measures to mitigate the work-related impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

Building on the above findings, this study puts forward a number of recommendations for improving the situation of women in precarious work. Among them are propositions for EU legislation to be adopted, most notably a Directive on Pay Transparency, which would address the lifelong consequences of the gender pay gap in terms of the lack of women in high-paying, male-dominated professions and their overrepresentation in poorly paid precarious work situations. Moreover, amendments to existing EU legislation (e.g. the Directive on work-life balance) are proposed to enhance the protection of single parents, who are often in precarious jobs. The EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention would guarantee greater protection for victims of both workplace violence (women in precarious jobs are often victims of harassment at work) and in the household, especially considering the increased amount of time women spend at home during the pandemic.

A range of policy measures is also recommended, including educational programmes and awareness raising campaigns to prevent and combat precarious work and challenge gender stereotypes in education. Given the extent to which women in the care sector are affected by precarious work, care should be a key priority for the EU and its Member States in the coming years, with significant investment being needed in the sector. The mobilisation of trade unions and other actors is also important in insuring the rights of workers in precarious conditions. Furthermore, more research on undeclared work and data collection on gender pay gaps should be undertaken to shed light on these precarious work-related aspects. Finally, it is of fundamental importance that gender is mainstreamed in national and EU COVID-19 recovery plans, and that gender budgeting is made commonplace.

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