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Women in the economy: employment, entrepreneurship and gender-responsive budgeting

Report¹

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

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Summary

In a history of advances and setbacks, women have come far to affirm their economic value and to take their rightful place in the world's economies. But despite expert evidence, the still ongoing fallout from the global Covid-19 pandemic and the economic consequences of conflicts have shown the fragility of progress towards gender equality and how much remains to be done.

Women face more discrimination than men and gender biases operate to their disadvantage: in recruitment, women have to prove their dedication and leadership to a greater extent than their male counterparts, and the caregiving responsibilities they still predominantly assume often raise doubts about their perceived ability to perform efficiently in the economic sphere; moreover, the number of women with higher education qualifications has risen, but young women are less likely than young men to choose Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics (STEM) at graduate level.

The present report calls for more account to be taken of research showing women's potential and for more action to be taken, notably through gender-responsive budgeting tools embedded at all stages of national budget cycles and with built-in accountability mechanisms. Technology and automated decision making in employment must integrate diversity and intersectionality without generating discrimination. European leaders should respond to the challenge of changing mindsets – there must be a will to break the glass ceilings and mend the “broken rungs” of the economic ladder.

1. Reference to committee: Doc. 15562, Reference 4668 of 10 October 2022.



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A. Draft resolution²

1. Women have always had their place in the economy and arguably have a longer experience than men in managing the relationship between production of goods and services and management of available resources, on a day-to-day basis. Recognition of this place, however, is not widespread and has been ignored as in other areas such as science, the arts and literature. In a history of advances and setbacks women have come a long way to affirm their economic value and independence. Nevertheless, as in all the other dimensions of equality between women and men, there is still a long way to go, globally.
2. The Parliamentary Assembly last addressed the subject of women's place in the economy in 2018, with a report entitled "Empowering women in the economy" which led to [Resolution 2235 \(2018\)](#). The rapporteur, Ms Elena Centemero (Italy, EPP/CD), identified main areas requiring action (gender pay gaps leading to pension gaps, difficulties in accessing employment, slower career progression, gender segmentation, glass ceilings) and stressed the fact that "equality between women and men in the economy is a precondition for advances in other spheres, including public and political life".
3. A 2023 study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights notable advancements in two critical areas. Firstly, in the distribution of childcare responsibilities, where approximately 40% of fathers in several countries now take parental leave, albeit for systematically shorter periods than their female counterparts. Secondly, progress has been observed in transparency, particularly concerning gender pay gaps. In 55% of the 37 OECD member countries, private firms are now required to report on gender pay gaps.
4. Despite all the expert evidence and facts, the still ongoing negative impacts and fallout from recent crises, including the global Covid-19 pandemic and the economic consequences of the conflicts in and outside Europe, have shown the fragility of progress towards gender equality and how much remains to be done. This is particularly evident with respect to the persisting imbalance of care responsibilities, still assumed mainly by women both in the home and in institutions, and the lack of financial recognition for this type of work. So slow progress is coupled with a real risk of backsliding, especially in the current context. The Assembly considers that more account should be taken of research that shows women's potential, and more action taken to accelerate change.
5. Due to the persistent lack of recognition of their rightful place in the economy, women face greater discrimination compared to men. Both conscious and unconscious gender biases operate to their disadvantage, particularly in recruitment processes where women are asked to prove their dedication, determination and leadership abilities to a greater extent than their male counterparts. Moreover, the caregiving responsibilities that women predominantly assume, and for which they are seen as indispensable, tend to raise doubts about their perceived ability to perform efficiently within the economic sphere.
6. Although the number of women with higher education qualifications has risen, young women remain less likely than young men to choose Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics (STEM) as fields of study at graduate level. The existence of gender gaps in fields of tertiary study indicates that young women often do not build on good school performances to enter higher education in fields with better employment prospects, such as STEM and artificial intelligence (AI)-related studies. The OECD explains this in part by the lack of self-confidence girls have in their mathematics and science abilities during school, and the lack of role models for girls in STEM and AI fields, which means that young girls have little evidence to disprove the notion that mathematics and science are somehow more "masculine" disciplines.
7. The Assembly calls on European leaders to respond to one of the greatest challenges in establishing women's place in the economy, which is changing mindsets. There must be a willingness on all sides to break the glass ceilings and mend the "broken rung" – the first step up into managerial positions for women. Those who have succeeded must act as champions and role models, showing that their achievements are attainable by many other girls and women.
8. Equality must be championed in all aspects of daily life, with particular attention to ensuring that traditions, identities, and gender-specific cultural differences are not used to perpetuate existing inequalities. There is a need to address the negative impacts of the intersectionality of gender and other grounds of discrimination and to combat racism and all forms of intolerance that disproportionately affect women, especially those from diverse groups and disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, inclusive approaches to diversity must be prioritised and concerted efforts should be made to challenge and dismantle pervasive stereotypes.

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 3 October 2024.

9. The Assembly also calls for gender to be mainstreamed in all policies and budgets and all areas of government and governance and for adequate funding to be earmarked for equality. Cross-cutting policies must ensure continuity in support for women's equal participation in all areas. More disaggregated data is needed to identify root causes of inequality and clarify the orientations that should be taken, enabling evidence-based policy analysis that can more accurately address specific disparities and inform targeted interventions for achieving gender equality.

10. In light of the above considerations, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States as well as observer States and States whose parliaments enjoy observer or partner for democracy status with the Assembly to improve their law and policy with respect to gender-responsive budgeting. In particular, governments should:

10.1. ensure that gender-responsive budgeting is mandated in the budget law and budget documents and clearly defined within public finance management systems at the national, regional and local levels, and that gender-responsive budgeting tools are embedded at all stages of the budget cycle;

10.2. develop and introduce clear guidance and tools coupled with capacity building of public officials at all levels, to identify gender gaps through gender analysis and take specific action to address and close these gaps;

10.3. strengthen the accountability of budget execution with respect to gender equality and monitor results using gender impact assessment;

10.4. build the capacity of supreme audit institutions to audit expenditure through a gender lens and to evaluate whether intended gender outcomes have been achieved;

10.5. ensure that budgets are grounded in evidence-based policy analysis, and publish regular, real-time expenditure reports that are publicly accessible, enabling parliament, civil society, and the general public to see how resources are allocated to gender equality;

10.6. take steps to ensure that women can participate in budget discussions and have their voices heard.

11. With regard to employment, the Assembly calls on member States to make more efforts to:

11.1. impose pay transparency to expose gender pay gaps, and carry out effective reviews of these gaps in all public services and private business, accompanied by sanctions where differentiation persists;

11.2. develop and implement laws and policies to identify, eliminate, and sanction racism and all forms of intolerance and discrimination including intersectional discrimination against women from diverse groups in the labour market, which hinder their economic empowerment, and address the specific needs of disadvantaged groups;

11.3. eliminate conscious gender bias in recruitment, training and promotion processes, and learn to recognise and screen out unconscious bias;

11.4. ensure through legal measures, awareness-raising campaigns and media visibility that the workplace is seen as a safe space for everyone, and in particular women who are often the targets of multiple and persistent "microaggressions" and other forms of gender-based harassment;

11.5. recognise the value of types of employment where women are in a majority, first and foremost in care and medical fields, and reward these skills and competences at their true value;

11.6. promote women's participation in traditionally male dominated sectors, such as STEM fields, as well as in emerging sectors like the digital and green economy, by implementing targeted training and mentoring programs, to improve gender balance in the labour market and foster a more inclusive digital and green future;

11.7. develop specific grant programs for women entrepreneurs starting businesses and start-ups, with accessible application requirements for diverse backgrounds, along with support and advisory services to guide them through the application process, and provide financial literacy training;

11.8. ensure that technology used in human resources management takes into account diversity and intersectionality, and that automated decision making does not generate discrimination;

11.9. adopt measures to improve gender balance in leadership roles across the economy, including on corporate boards, senior management, and public-sector decision-making positions.

12. With regard to care and family responsibilities, the Assembly calls on member States to:
 - 12.1. enact legislation to support paid parental leave for both parents, flexible working arrangements and caregiving leave for those caring for children, elderly or disabled family members;
 - 12.2. provide affordable and accessible, high-quality childcare and elderly care services, reducing the caregiving burden that often falls disproportionately on women;
 - 12.3. promote the equal sharing of responsibilities through public awareness campaigns and policies such as paid paternal leave, in particular to encourage and incentivise men to share caregiving duties;
 - 12.4. introduce tax breaks or subsidies for families that employ caregivers or provide in-home care services;
 - 12.5. create programmes that ensure all children have access to universal early education to allow parents, particularly women, to engage in the workforce;
 - 12.6. compensate unpaid care work through social transfers, such as payment for childcare or for elderly care, or social security coverage for full-time homemakers;
 - 12.7. ensure that leave for care responsibilities does not affect pension rights;
 - 12.8. include unpaid work in national statistics by gathering quantitative and qualitative data, particularly time use surveys.
13. Concerning education, the Assembly calls on member States to:
 - 13.1. ensure that from the earliest age, school curricula avoid the gender bias and stereotyping which lead children to channel their energies into gendered and stereotyped roles and, in particular, lead to girls losing their confidence in their abilities in science and mathematics;
 - 13.2. provide equal opportunities for girls and boys to experience a broad range of theoretical and practical studies in different areas, and reinforce programmes such as job-information days or career fairs in schools for both parents and students and early work experience through education programmes and apprenticeships, to encourage girls' interest in science-related subjects;
 - 13.3. organise extra-curricular activities to enable girls to discover and exercise technological skills and computing competencies, such as computer coding in non-competitive, game-based surroundings;
 - 13.4. provide training and further training for teachers to enable them to recognise and address their own conscious or unconscious gender bias.
14. Finally, the Assembly calls on all Council of Europe member States as well as observer States and States whose parliaments enjoy observer or partner for democracy status with the Assembly to use the research and tools at their disposal to collect more disaggregated and intersectional data on gender-based discrimination in the economy in order to better address it at all levels, and to take into account the evidence showing that if the full potential of women were realised, national incomes would rise considerably in the short and medium term.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Sena Nur Çelik Kanat, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. A 2023 report by the World Bank entitled “Women, Business and the Law”³ shows that “women, on average, enjoy barely 77% of the legal rights that men do”. 2.4 billion women in the world do not have the same economic rights as men, a situation exacerbated in the current context of growing economic difficulties, where the “geopolitical tensions and the fragmenting of world trade are threatening to roll back decades of advances in women’s economic empowerment”.⁴

2. Among many other experts in economic matters, the European Investment Bank has expressed well the missed opportunities for the whole of society represented by this long-standing failure to use fully the skills and capacities of women, for instance in the crucial area of climate change: “The economic influence of women, who control or significantly influence 85% of consumer spending, underscores the vast growth potential in adopting gender-responsive strategies. Women also possess unique knowledge and innovative approaches that can contribute significantly to climate resilience and mitigation efforts.”⁵

3. Despite all the expert evidence, conclusions and simple facts, the still ongoing negative impacts and fallout from recent crises, including the global Covid-19 pandemic and the economic consequences of the conflicts in and outside Europe, have shown the fragility of progress towards gender equality and how much remains to be done. This is particularly evident with respect to the persisting imbalance of care responsibilities, still assumed mainly by women both in the home and in institutions, and the lack of financial recognition for this type of work. So, as well as progress being slow, there is a real risk of backsliding, especially in the current context. Discrimination against women is present throughout women’s lives, wherever they live and whatever their social position. In the economy this is manifest through persistent pay and pension gaps – more time spent in carer roles implies shorter careers and employment in care is seriously undervalued.

2. Work in the Parliamentary Assembly on women’s economic empowerment and scope of the report

4. The Assembly last addressed the subject of women’s place in the economy in 2018, with a report entitled “Empowering women in the economy” which led to Resolution 2235 (2018). The rapporteur, Ms Elena Centemero (Italy, EPP/CD), identified main areas requiring action (gender pay gaps leading to pension gaps, difficulties in accessing employment, slower career progression, gender segmentation, glass ceilings) and stressed the fact that “equality between women and men in the economy is a precondition for advances in other spheres, including public and political life”, a statement with which I totally agree.

5. In 2022 a questionnaire was addressed to national parliaments via the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD) on national legislation and policies supporting women’s economic empowerment, focusing on women in their different roles in the economy, as employees or self-employed workers, entrepreneurs or managers. The main aim of the survey was to gain an overview of existing measures that have proved successful or have a positive impact on women’s economic empowerment, against a background of widely varying levels of gender equality across Council of Europe member States.⁶

6. The over 30 replies reported on many policies and practices – a first conclusion is that if all measures highlighted were implemented, women would have been on an equal economic footing many years ago! Another observation is that many countries have introduced some form of gender-responsive budgeting into their processes, and for some this has been the case for a long time. Another very positive recent development has been the extension of parental leave for both parents, allowing women to ensure better continuity in employment. The extensive replies also contain valuable information on the mechanisms designed to introduce equal pay and transparency in remuneration, and on how women with intersectional

3. World Bank Group, “Women, Business and the Law 2023”, Washington DC, p. 15.

4. European Central Bank (ECB), “Empowering women in a changing global economy” – Speech by Christine Lagarde, President of the ECB at the International Women’s Day event organised by the World Trade Organization (WTO), Geneva, 8 March 2023.

5. European Investment Bank, “The crucial intersection between gender and climate”, 4 December 2023.

6. A majority of member States are included in the Gender Equality Index calculated yearly by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), where scores from 1 to 100 ranked EU countries from 56.1 in Romania to 82.2 in Sweden in 2023. While this index is based on various indicators, the situation of women in the economy is an important part of it.

backgrounds, especially national or other minorities, are taken into account. Funding for micro-projects and start-ups led by women, and incentives for women's participation in boards of administrators were also among frequently reported measures.

7. On 15 September 2023, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination held an exchange of views with Ms Valérie Frey, Senior Economist at the Social Policy Division of the Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), who provided a useful overview of the situation in OECD member States – largely reflected in those of the Council of Europe.

8. I was part of the *ad hoc* sub-committee of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination to participate in the UN Women's annual Commission on the Status of Women in New York from 11 to 13 March 2024 (CSW68). Its theme, "Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective", was very relevant to this report: I had the opportunity to speak at the side-event entitled "Parliamentarians as drivers for women's empowerment."

9. On 14 and 15 May 2024, I carried out a fact-finding visit to London where I met with members of parliament, government officials dealing with equality matters, academics and civil society representatives working to promote women's participation in the economy. I would like to thank the secretariat of the UK delegation for their valuable help in organising these highly relevant meetings: the information I gathered during my visit features as a case study in chapter 5 of the present report.

10. As a last contribution, the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination held an exchange of views during a meeting in Tirana on 5 June 2024, with the participation of Ms Delina Ibrahimaj, Minister of State for Entrepreneurship of Albania, Ms Milva Ekonomi, Member of the Committee on Economy and Finance of the Albanian Parliament, Ms Emiriana Sako, Mayor of Durrës, Ms Jonida Halili, Vice-mayor of Tirana and Mr Emanuel Salinas, World Bank Country Manager for Albania. The speakers gave an interesting close-up of the situation in a country where women have reached a high level of political equality.

3. Existing economic gender inequalities and the urgent need to address them

11. Gender equality obviously implies equal rights for women and men, and equal distribution of resources between women and men is an important dimension of these rights. Matters of economy are not within the direct remit of the Council of Europe's work, but there is an acute awareness of the importance of economic empowerment for women, in particular in the current context. For instance, the Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029 adopted by the Committee of Ministers in March 2024 states in its introduction that "In a context of growing economic difficulties following the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the triple planetary crisis of pollution, climate change and biodiversity loss, certain negative effects of technological and digital developments, austerity policies and measures, political uncertainties and rising inequalities at all levels of society, it is crucial to address the human, social and economic aspects of gender inequality." The text continues by stating that "Due attention must also be paid to securing or improving women's economic independence, including by redressing the gender pay gap, and striving for equality between women and men in relation to unpaid care and domestic work."⁷

3.1. Women's lesser share in the labour market

12. It is therefore more necessary now than ever to counter gender inequalities in the economy and recognise the significant further potential of women's contribution, which whilst achieving a more balanced presence of the whole of society in the economy would yield better economic results overall. The World Bank has stated that "closing the gender employment gap could raise long-term GDP per capita by nearly 20% on average across countries. Studies estimate global economic gains of \$5-6 trillion if women started and scaled new businesses at the same rate as men do",⁸ showing clearly that women's full economic empowerment would have positive effects for the whole of society.

13. At the hearing on 15 September 2023, Ms Frey confirmed that economic empowerment was all the more challenging for women in the present context. The OECD's latest report "Joining Forces for Gender Equality – Horizontal work on women's economic empowerment" was an analysis of progress with the OECD's recommendations on gender equality in education, employment and entrepreneurship and on

7. Council of Europe, "Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029".

8. World Bank Group, "Pace of reform toward equal rights for women falls to 20-year low", 2 March 2023.

equality in public life. The study had innovated in bringing together many different sectors of the organisation not involved until now. It also included the results of surveys of countries, for instance on issues perceived as the main hindrance to gender equality, where ending violence against women was seen by member States as the biggest obstacle, but this did not seem to lead to policy development, since healthcare, justice, housing, etc., were not a subject for co-ordinated policy in member States.

14. According to the study, overall, 58% of women worked in member States, against 73% of men. Women were thus less likely to be in the labour force, and less likely to be able to commit to working hours, which were five less per week than those of men (due to work in and around the home). This was obvious from the widening of the gap during childcare years. Only one-third of managerial posts were held by women.

3.2. The negative impact of intersectionality

15. In 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), pledging to ensure that “no one will be left behind” and to “endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.” SDG No. 8 concerns decent work and economic growth, and women are singled out as the targets of discrimination in the workplace. Despite anti-discrimination laws, individuals from diverse groups continue to face structural discrimination and barriers in joining and remaining in the labour market, and women are proportionally more affected. Some women are structurally underrepresented in the labour market, often due to the intersection of gender with additional conditions of vulnerability or marginalisation, such as belonging to an ethnic or religious minority or having a migrant background.⁹

16. Women are a heterogeneous group and may face intersectional and multiple discrimination based on several personal characteristics. For instance, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) addresses the often-neglected issue of discrimination against Muslim women in the labour market, documenting the disproportionate impact of anti-Muslim racism on Muslim women.¹⁰ Research cited by UNHRC found that Muslim women are three times more likely to be unemployed than women generally in Europe, due to a “triple penalty” impacting their job prospects: being women, being from an ethnic minority group, and being Muslim.¹¹ These findings are reinforced by reports of Muslim women being fired from their jobs for refusing to take off their headscarves.

17. It is thus vital that the Council of Europe member States develop and implement laws and policies to address various forms of discrimination and inequality that intersect with and compound gender inequalities in the economy. Gender equality policies in the labour market should respond to specific needs and unique challenges of women and girls from diverse groups and disadvantaged backgrounds, including single mothers, pregnant women, women with disabilities, women from minority groups, and women from rural areas, to ensure their equal access to economic opportunities. Strong and efficient measures are needed to reform and strengthen the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and sanction racism, and all forms of intolerance and discrimination that affect women's economic participation.

18. Intersectionality may also be the source of new forms of discrimination, as examined by the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) in a study entitled “Discrimination, artificial intelligence and algorithmic decision-making”. According to the authors, “Public sector bodies can use AI [artificial intelligence] for predictive policing for example, or for making decisions on eligibility for pension payments, housing assistance or unemployment benefits. In the private sector, AI can be used to select job applicants, and banks can use AI to decide whether to grant individual consumers credit and set interest rates for them.”¹² The study makes recommendations on how to address discrimination by AI and automated decision making (ADM) systems through tools such as data protection and sectorial regulation in employment laws.

9. European Commission, 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](#)”, 5 March 2020.

10. Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, “[Countering Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hatred to eliminate discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief](#)”, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR), 2021.

11. *Ibid.*

12. FJ Zuiderveen Borgesius, “[Discrimination, artificial intelligence and algorithmic decision-making](#)”, Council of Europe, 2018, p. 7.

3.3. Pay gaps and unequal career progression

19. Gender pay gaps also persist – in full-time work, women earn 12% less than men in OECD countries, in comparison with 19% in 1995 (the gap widens for part-time employment). There are four main reasons for these gaps: unpaid work, discrimination, vertical gender segregation, and horizontal segregation (job sectors). It is a fact that girls perform better than boys in maths at school, but are still a minority in maths-related jobs. And there is even less movement of boys into “female” jobs.

20. The American research company Mclnsey published an interesting study in 2023 on current trends in women’s economic progress,¹³ which contradicts some accepted concepts such as the “glass ceiling” purported to be stopping women from reaching leadership positions. According to the study, this phenomenon may have been a reality in the past, but from experience gathered in particular by interviews, the most difficult barrier to cross is the first step – what the authors call “the broken rung”, i.e. the very first step up into a managerial position. This is observed to be all the more obvious when women have an intersectional background.

21. The Gender Equality Index of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) (see footnote 6 above) points to markers of equality where the most progress has been observed, and to others where there has been little or no improvement, or even regression. According to the 2023 Index, gender inequalities are most pronounced in the area of “power”, despite recent improvements, with setbacks noted in eight countries compared with the last survey. Economic decision making, one of the subdivisions of this category, scores second lowest across the European Union, albeit with a slight improvement since 2020. The domain of “money” (financial resources and women’s and men’s economic situation) ranks second highest in equality in the index, but a backsliding is observed in economic situations since 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which also indicates potentially long-lasting consequences for gender inequalities in income, as women’s financial resources have remained static.

3.4. The links between gender-based violence and women’s equal participation in the economy

22. The abovementioned Mclnsey study points to the presence of gender-based violence in the workplace directed at women in the form of “microaggressions”. These have often been ignored to a large extent in policies and measures to guarantee equality, although they contribute to dissuading women from advancing in employment, or to changing women’s professional attitude in order to be either more conforming to perceived norms or to replicate the same way of interacting. Thus, their impact on careers is considerable.

23. Mclnsey finds from its research that women are 1.5 to 2 times more likely to experience a microaggression than men. These can range from “being mistaken” for someone else – of the same or similar race, colour or even gender, or with the same hair, for instance – to managers not supporting or defending the work of a female team member. These small humiliations taken individually can pass “below the radar” of behaviours defined as violent or aggressive. But when they form a succession of multiple microaggressions on a daily basis, women are 3.3 times more likely to consider leaving their organisation and 4.2 times more likely to feel burned out.

24. Unconscious gender bias is another obstacle for women, in particular as regards recruitment, and can also be seen as a form of aggression or violence against them. The language used in job descriptions, the evaluation of candidates, and final hiring selections are still subject to this bias, where women trigger conscious or unconscious assumptions that they may be less competent in technical roles or leadership. Masculine wording in job advertisements, like “assertive” and “dominant”, can also discourage women from applying for instance.

25. Article 1 of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210) states that the purpose of the convention is, *inter alia*, to “protect women against all forms of violence” and “contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and promote substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women”. Legislation and policies to prevent and protect women against violence should take more account of violence in the workplace and recognise the need to monitor closely its effects.

13. E. Field, A. Krivkovich, S. Kügele, N. Robinson et L. Yee, “Women in the Workplace 2023”, Mclnsey and Company.

4. Gender-responsive budgeting: an effective tool for promoting gender equality and fostering inclusive economic development and growth

26. Budgets are one of the most powerful policy instruments a government can use. They shape a country's overall income and employment levels while also revealing its political priorities. Though the figures in budget documents may seem gender-neutral, research shows that spending patterns and revenue generation affect women and girls differently than men and boys, often disadvantaging the former. This disparity arises from the socially defined roles of women and men, the gendered division of labour, varying responsibilities and capacities, and the distinct challenges each group faces. As a result, women often find themselves in a less favourable position compared to men, with reduced economic, social and political power.

27. Gender budgeting, also referred to as gender-responsive budgeting,¹⁴ is a useful tool for promoting social change, gender equality and women's empowerment. Originally developed in Australia in the 1980s,¹⁵ this approach to budgeting has since been replicated in more than 100 countries around the world.¹⁶ It then gained new momentum in the 1990s, thanks to the United Nations 1995 "Beijing Platform for Action", which recommended that women's needs be taken more seriously into account in the elaboration of economic programmes and policies.¹⁷

4.1. What is gender-responsive budgeting?

28. Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) is a policy approach that aims to integrate a gender perspective in the policy-making process, thus ensuring that government budgets, policies and programmes pay specific attention to the needs and priorities of women. In other words, as highlighted by the Council of Europe as early as 2005,¹⁸ it is an application of gender mainstreaming in the budgetary process. It involves conducting a gender-based assessment of budgets and incorporating a gender perspective, at all stages of the budgeting and planning processes.

29. EIGE defines GRB as a strategy to achieve gender equality through the proper collection and allocation of public resources, and it highlights that the purpose of GRB is threefold: to promote accountability and transparency in fiscal planning; to increase gender-responsive participation in the budgetary process, for example by undertaking steps to involve women and men equally in budget preparation; and to advance gender equality and women's rights. Another definition, provided by UN Women, indicates that GRB helps to promote gender-responsive policies and to better distribute public resources, by ensuring that their allocation is carried out in ways that are effective and contribute to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.

30. GRB seeks to integrate gender considerations into public financial processes. This approach ultimately leads to the creation of gender-responsive budgets. These are not distinct budgets for women, but rather inclusive budgets that are designed, approved, implemented, monitored, and audited with attention to gender differences.

31. A GRB approach needs to be introduced at central government level, but also at regional and local levels. This is relevant since local and regional governments not only contribute to implementing the priorities set by the central level, but they also possess direct knowledge of the situation of women and men locally and have the ability to identify and address inequalities.

32. The design and implementation of GRB policies should abide by certain principles,¹⁹ the first being the accountability of governments. As "a mechanism for establishing whether a Government's gender equality commitments translate into budgetary commitments",²⁰ GRB holds governments accountable for their gender policy commitments. The second critical principle is transparency, which is obtained by increasing participation of women and men in the budgetary process.

14. I. Steccolini, "New development: Gender (responsive) budgeting – a reflection on critical issues and future challenges", *Public Money & Management*, Vol. 39 – Issue 5, pp. 379-383, April 2019.

15. R. Sharp and R. Broomhill, "Budgeting for Equality: the Australian experience", *Feminist Economics*, Vol. 8 (1), Routledge Taylor & Francis, Abingdon, 2002.

16. T. Sánchez Montaña, "Strengthening public finance management systems for gender equality and women's empowerment", UN Women, 2023.

17. J. G. Stotsky, "Gender Budgeting: Fiscal Context and Current Outcomes", International Monetary Fund (IMF) Working paper WP/16/149, July 2016.

18. Council of Europe, Equality Division, Directorate-General of Human Rights, "Gender Budgeting: Final report of the Group of Specialists on Gender Budgeting (EG-S-GB)", 2005.

19. EIGE, "Gender Budgeting Tool/Method" (accessed 7 June 2023).

33. Other keystones of the GRB approach are performance and results orientation, and effectiveness. This budgeting approach helps to better assess the effects of allocation and the impact of expenditures on women and men. It thus provides valuable data and a strong basis for an evidence-based decision-making process. While achieving certain goals may require additional resources, the issue in some cases is not simply about increasing funds, but reallocating resources to different activities or improving co-ordination across sectors. Implementation of GRB therefore enhances the efficiency of public spending through gender analysis.

34. GRB is a relevant monitoring tool, as it helps to track the allocation of resources, identify problems in implementation, and assess the effectiveness of policies in tackling gender-based inequalities. Furthermore, it provides a framework to include other stakeholders and civil society in the process of drafting new policies and adopting new measures to improve gender-responsiveness in budget planning.

35. In addition, GRB explicitly takes into account the unpaid care work which all over the world is undertaken primarily by women. The care economy would otherwise remain invisible despite its importance for the functioning of the market economy.

36. Today, gender-responsiveness plays an important part in the budget-making process at the domestic level in Europe,²¹ although its full potential is yet to be fully realised. Some member States have already integrated GRB into their policy-making process, whether in specific policy areas, or more broadly.

4.2. Examples of gender-responsive budgeting at different stages of implementation

37. A number of countries have enshrined the principle of equality, including gender equality, in their constitution. The Austrian Constitution goes further, as its Article 13 specifically refers to GRB, stating that the “Federation, the States and the Communes strive for the effective equality of women and men in their budget management.” Article 51 also mentions reaching real equality between women and men among the objectives of the budget management of the Federation. GRB was introduced in the country as part of the broader budgetary reform process from 2007, and its inclusion in the constitution made it a budgetary principle at all levels of government. The goal of gender equality is indicated in each chapter of the budget. According to the OECD review of the GRB system in Austria, the overall systemic approach to GRB, designed to require all ministries to consider gender equality in high-level goal setting and in more detailed specification of outputs and objectives, is a leading international practice.

38. In Belgium, in 2007, the national parliament passed the “Gender mainstreaming law”²² which requires a gender-based dimension in all federal policies, including budget policies. This law binds the ministries of each government to link gender-based objectives to the budget programs. It also stipulates that the budget should be discussed in parliament for a greater integration of gender equality measures and actions. The Belgian law also contains provisions on the collection of gender-disaggregated data, and the use of this data for a better evaluation of policies’ differential impact on women and men through a “gender test”.²³

39. Sweden’s GRB approach has also proven fruitful. Since 2014, the government has committed to effectively implementing GRB in the country, in accordance with the previous efforts to mainstream a gender perspective in its budgetary processes and policies. The “Plan For Gender Mainstreaming 2004-2009” introduced the principle that GRB was to become part of the regular work of gender mainstreaming. The aim of this plan was to integrate a gender-based analysis into the two main decision-making processes (legislative process and budgetary process). In addition, since 2016, the annual budget guidelines include instructions on how to apply GRB throughout the budgetary process. In Sweden too, gender-disaggregated data collection has been widely used since 2006, which has led to identifying new gender equality indicators.

40. GRB was introduced in Spain in 2008 and there is a legal obligation to conduct *ex-ante* gender assessments in all government regulations. In addition, the autonomous region of Andalusia offers an interesting and advanced implementation of GRB since 2003. The regional budget presented to the

20. R. Sharp and R. Broomhill, “Budgeting for Equality: the Australian experience”, *Feminist Economics*, Vol. 8 (1), Routledge Taylor & Francis, Abingdon, 2002, p. 26.

21. S. Quinn, “A survey of gender budgeting efforts in Europe”, IMF Working paper WP/16/155, July 2016.

22. *Loi visant au contrôle de l’application des résolutions de la conférence mondiale sur les femmes réunie à Pékin en septembre 1995 et intégrant la dimension du genre dans l’ensemble des politiques fédérales* (Legislation of 12 January 2007 to monitor the implementation of the resolutions of the World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995 and to integrate the gender dimension into all federal policies) (French only), *Moniteur Belge*, 13 February 2007.

23. S. Quinn, “Gender budgeting in Europe: what can we learn from best practice?”, *Administration*, Volume 65 (2017) – Issue 3 (August 2017), p. 104: “gender test: an assessment of the potential differential impact on women and men of all government policies, laws and measures perceived to have significant relevance to gender equality.”

parliament is required to contain a Gender Impact Report, and the Gender Impact Commission (an interdepartmental co-ordinating body composed equally of women and men) which was created within the Ministry of Finance oversees the execution and approval of the Gender Impact Report.²⁴ The government has made significant progress in the collection and management of sex-disaggregated and gender-relevant data, to the extent that in 2015, 50% of those in charge of budgets were trained in the use of sex-disaggregated data.

41. Türkiye has made significant progress in relation to GRB in the recent years. The Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men of the Turkish Parliament established a sub-committee on GRB in 2012, which resulted in the inclusion of GRB in all development programmes of the central government since 2014. The 12th Development Plan of Türkiye (2024-2028) explicitly emphasises the importance of integrating GRB into public finance management practices. Central and local budgeting guidance documents also highlight the need for adopting GRB approaches in planning and budgeting processes. GRB is one of the assessment criteria for investments proposed in the sectors of education, health, employment, and social inclusion. As a result, the number of indicators on women's empowerment in central government budget programs increased year by year. Türkiye is working to sustain this progress through the "Implementing Gender-Responsive Planning and Budgeting in Turkey Project", run by UN Women Türkiye in co-operation with the Ministry of Family and Social Services and the Presidency of Strategy and Budget since 2020, with the overall goal of strengthening gender equality through the integration of gender perspective at all stages of national and local policy making and budgeting processes.²⁵

4.3. Pillars of gender-responsive budgeting

42. For effective and sustainable design and implementation, international organisations such as the OECD and the Council of Europe recommend that the GRB approach should be based on the following pillars: institutional and strategic arrangements, methods and tools, enabling environment, accountability and transparency, and impact.²⁶

43. GRB efforts require political commitment, strong leadership and clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of various actors across the government to ensure that a well-co-ordinated whole-of-government approach is in place. GRB is most effective where it is embedded in the legal framework, budgeting process and relevant budgetary documents, applied at national, regional and local levels, and guided by a national gender equality strategy outlining overarching gender goals. Institutionalising GRB through a strong legal framework and clear institutional arrangements ensures that its practice induces changes in political and economic priorities.

44. To successfully implement GRB, a variety of analytical tools should be applied throughout the budgetary process. The OECD typology classifies these tools based on the stage of the budgetary process in which they may be used, and distinguishes GRB approaches into three categories: *ex ante*, concurrent, and *ex-post*.²⁷

45. The *ex-ante* approach involves analysing new budget measures before the budget proposal is submitted to parliament. This analysis, along with an assessment of key gender gaps across policy areas, ensures a gender perspective in resource allocation and leads to budget proposals designed to close priority gender equality gaps. The concurrent approach sets gender-related performance targets and makes financial allocation decisions during the budget approval phase. Finally, *ex post* approach, applied after the budget has been spent, conducts a post-allocation audit of spending to assess whether the budget measures achieved their intended goals in improving gender equality.²⁸

46. An advanced approach to GRB incorporates a gender perspective at every stage of the budget cycle, from planning and approval to evaluation, ensuring that various GRB tools and approaches are applied together to restructure revenues and expenditures in line with analytical findings, thereby improving the effectiveness of budget policy in meeting gender equality goals. Recommended for all Council of Europe member States, requirements such as gender impact assessments and other GRB tools, transparency in

24. Lisa L. Kolovich, "Fiscal Policies and Gender Equality", IMF, Washington DC, 2018.

25. UN Women, "Türkiye mainstreams gender responsive planning and budgeting with new strategy", 22 March 2024.

26. OECD, "Gender Budgeting in OECD Countries 2023", *OECD iLibrary*, 18 July 2023.

27. R. Downes, L. Von Trapp and S. Nicol, "Gender budgeting in OECD countries", *OECD iLibrary*, vol. 16/3, 2017.

28. R. Downes, L. Von Trapp and S. Nicol, "Designing and implementing gender budgeting – a path to action", *OECD iLibrary*, Vol. 20/2, 2020.

results and accountability help to counter typical challenges to successful implementation, such as the lack of political support, the failure to provide technical expertise and data, and the difficulties in involving stakeholders.²⁹

47. GRB will be most effective where there is a supportive enabling environment. This includes training and capacity development for government staff, structured engagement with civil society and trade unions, oversight by accountability institutions such as parliament and the supreme audit institute, as well as co-operation and exchange of good practice with international organisations and institutions.

48. In 2022, UN Women published an “Action Kit – Engaging parliaments in Gender Responsive Budgeting”,³⁰ targeting “actors who want to build an effective system for integrating GRB into the annual state budgetary process. This will include Members of Parliament (MP), parliamentary staff and committees, caucuses of women MPs, as well as other actors [...] who may want to initiate and support a stronger role for parliament and MPs in GRB”.³¹ The Action Kit’s aim is to strengthen parliaments’ ability to “conduct budget analysis from a gender perspective, and public engagement and evidence-based analysis by oversight committees and building partnerships between parliaments and other oversight actors”.³² The kit includes examples of successful GRB implementation at domestic level, a description of the fundamental processes needed to implement a gender-responsive public financial management system, and some quick tips and entry points for parliamentary engagement.

49. In addition, public authorities should use monitoring tools to measure the progress achieved through GRB policies. To this end, gender-specific data should be regularly collected and updated to identify gender equality gaps, as well as failures in the implementation of gender-responsive policies.

4.4. Overall Analysis of gender-responsive budgeting practices in Council of Europe member States

50. There is broad consensus on the important role GRB plays in closing gender gaps and promoting gender equality. However, GRB is used less widely than expected in Council of Europe member States and its potential benefits are largely underutilised.³³ In the European Union, only 12 countries actively implement GRB. Nine countries neither practice GRB nor consider introducing it, since they view their gender equality policy as sufficient. The remaining three countries are currently discussing or piloting its introduction.³⁴ GRB is increasingly practiced in OECD member countries and is now a budgeting tool used to help close gender gaps in 61% of member countries.³⁵

51. The Council of Europe member States that have introduced GRB are at different stages in its implementation. Some are using pilot projects to monitor its effects, while others have already integrated it into their annual budget procedure over a longer period. Legal requirements, institutional set-ups, methodological approaches, analytical tools, level of government involved and the structure of responsibility for GRB vary significantly.³⁶ Countries at more advanced stages are now trying to improve the implementation, data collection and documentation, increase the number of GRB tools and considering to introduce performance budgeting in other areas related to social or environmental policies.³⁷

52. Council of Europe member States have adopted various GRB tools and approaches, but many apply only a few tools at a single stage of the budgetary process, limiting the potential benefits of GRB. All member States are recommended to increase the number of tools and approaches they apply and adopt a more advanced approach, like Austria and Sweden, by implementing multiple GRB tools at every stage of the budget cycle and fully integrating a gender perspective throughout the process.

29. I. Steccolini, “New development: Gender (responsive) budgeting – a reflection on critical issues and future challenges”, *Public Money & Management*, Vol. 39 – Issue 5, April 2019, pp. 379-383.

30. K. Deveaux and G. Dubrow, “Action Kit – Engaging parliaments in Gender Responsive Budgeting”, UN Women, 2022.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

33. I. Steccolini, *op. cit.*, pp. 379-383.

34. European Parliament Policy Department for Budgetary Affairs, “Gender budgeting in the Member States”, October 2023.

35. OECD, “Gender Budgeting in OECD Countries 2023”, *op. cit.*

36. E. Bova and J. Jerosch Herold da Costa Reis, “Gender Budgeting Practices Concepts and Evidence”, European Economy – Discussion Papers 165, DG ECFIN, European Commission, 2022.

37. European Parliament Policy Department for Budgetary Affairs, “Gender budgeting in the Member States”, October 2023.

53. Challenges hindering the implementation of GRB measures in Council of Europe member States vary. The main challenges include poor availability of disaggregated data, inadequate legal and institutional framework, insufficient political will, lack of resources, knowledge or technical experience and limited impact on budget decisions.³⁸

54. While the majority of Council of Europe member States practicing GRB require that gender information accompanies budget proposals, only 9% of OECD member countries reported that this information is always or often used in decision making, 59% said that it is sometimes used and 32% rarely use it.³⁹ Therefore, it is important for Council of Europe countries to work towards increasing the impact of GRB on budget, policy development and resource allocation decisions.

55. It is important to note that several Council of Europe member States outlined their plans to further develop their GRB practices. Finland noted plans to undertake a gender impact assessment of the government's economic policy over the parliamentary term. Iceland is expanding the scope of GRB to include more intersectional analysis. Ireland is discussing the development of a tagging system to link budget allocation line items to dimensions of equality, green, well-being and SDG budgeting. Türkiye intends to establish a reporting system that will monitor and evaluate gender equality indicators linked to budget measures and help better inform decision-making processes.⁴⁰

56. Overall, while some Council of Europe member States have introduced GRB, progress remains slow, with practices often limited in scope and facing implementation challenges. Member States are urged to advance GRB by establishing strong legal frameworks and clear institutional arrangements, improving data collection, and integrating gender analysis throughout the budgetary process, ensuring broader application across all levels of government. Following the recommendations in this report, along with those from international organisations, is key to creating gender-equal budgets by restructuring revenues and expenditures to close gender gaps and promote gender equality.

5. Snapshot: the United Kingdom

57. My visit to London on 14-15 May 2024 confirmed the United Nations' findings on the all-too-slow progress in all areas of women's equal participation in the economy: the idea of "equal pay for equal work" has been part of workers' claims since the 1970s in the United Kingdom, resulting in the early introduction of compulsory gender pay gap reporting, but even with half a century of law and policy, the aim of economic equality is still not close to being achieved.

58. Legislation is based on the Equality Act 2010, which covers all areas, including ethnicity, disability as well as gender equality. There is a legal duty to carry out equality impact assessments of new legislation (one of the main principles of GRB), but from the exchanges I had it became clear that a more systematic and in-depth study, and subsequent accountability, were needed. The representatives of the UK Government's Equality Hub informed me that "naming and shaming" businesses that do not promote equality are more efficient in pushing for equal pay than financial penalties.

59. Recent measures brought in by the government include the doubling of free childcare entitlement for parents from 15 to 30 hours a week. Although this shows recognition of one of the major obstacles for women's participation, the new measure has not, for the moment, been followed up by sufficient provision of daycare infrastructure and staffing to be functional. In addition, encouraging women to work less hours (because they are still the main carers) is seen to constitute a risk for their careers. A campaign to encourage better sharing of parental leave in the country has yielded some positive results.

60. Women's health is another key area where gender-specific health issues are currently being given substantially more attention in the United Kingdom, for instance in relation to a better understanding of the problems of menopause in the working environment and how to mitigate the consequences. Maternal mortality is a severe problem among ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom – the rate is 4-5 times higher than in the rest of the population. Similarly to many other countries, the Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on equality – in the UK disadvantaged situations and vaccine hesitation amongst ethnic minorities led to wide disparities in morbidity.

38. OECD, "Gender Budgeting in OECD Countries 2023", op. cit.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

61. Brexit was not seen by the government representatives I met as an obstacle to policy implementation – most of the relevant provisions from EU law have been incorporated into national law, and EU law had to a certain extent been inspired by British legislation. The Equality Hub is concentrating on businesses as a channel for more equality. Girls' and women's participation in scientific, technological, engineering and mathematical (STEM) studies has increased in the United Kingdom up to high school age, but there is still a very large difference in related professions, where there are much lower entry rates and higher drop-out rates than for men (mainly due to care responsibilities).

62. A select committee of the British Parliament, the Women and Equalities Committee, set up by David Cameron in 2015, oversees bills for new legislation and their impact on equality. Caroline Nokes, Chair of the committee, underlined the cross-cutting nature of this committee, which scrutinises equality across the government, working on disability, ethnicity and intersectionality as well as broad issues of women's equality. This supervision was useful, but the recommendations made are often rejected by government.

63. Ms Nokes informed me that gender pay gap reporting had ceased and should be resumed, and that the government's gender impact assessments of new laws should be a legal obligation and should be made public. She recommended that women and equalities committees should exist in all parliaments. Public campaigns (around menopause, race and gender, misogyny, etc.) are a good tool for changing mentalities, and more should be done about harassment, in particular in public services, in the police, armed forces, and in hospitals where sexual harassment was "rife and covered up".

64. Another interesting mechanism which exists in the United Kingdom for independent oversight of equality legislation is the Women's Budget Group (WBG), founded in 1989 by women economists who, observing that men were deciding most, if not all policies, decided to examine and analyse the spring and autumn budget statements and debates and issue commentaries. The WBG provides deep analysis of budgets within a week of their publication, focusing on gendered aspects, inviting experts to make contributions according to the subjects. Ms Samah Krichah explained, during our meeting, that these reports were increasingly appreciated, and the WBG was now receiving grants to carry out its work. WBG now also offers training on how to use census data in advocacy, currently in partnership with King's College London but soon to be set up around the country.

65. The group also works to assist women in overcoming their reluctance and lack of confidence in manipulating data and using mathematics. Ms Krichah repeated that the different impacts of policies on men and women are not sufficiently taken into account – cost of living fluctuations affect women more than men, for instance, and the benefits they often depend upon do not rise with inflation.

66. Recommendations here were to close the gaps in gender-disaggregated data and to "question old ways of thinking about the budget" by more involvement of academia and civil society in governments' budgetary work. The WBG provides a unique model which could be reproduced in other countries.

67. During my visit to London, I also met with the Women's Resource Centre, an umbrella organisation for a large number of small, grass-roots associations, many of them working with black and other minoritised women, groups identified as needing the most support. CEO Ms Vivienne Hayes told us that many organisms did not take questions of race or of disability into account. Procurement procedures are too complicated for many women and are applied even where not legally required.

68. Ms Hayes made four clear recommendations for advancing women's economic empowerment. The first is free, universal childcare: childcare in the UK is apparently among the most expensive in the world, and is a deterrent, for mothers especially, to return to work, resulting in the entrenchment of gender roles and limiting women's opportunities. She also informed us that only children whose parents earn at least the equivalent of 16 hours per week at national minimum or living wage are entitled to the new 15 and 30 hours of free childcare, which again discriminates against parents who are out of work and entrenches inequality.

69. The second recommendation is to remove restrictions on the right to work during asylum applications, and the third to set up a national, independent women's fund. The Centre's experience is that women's organisations are chronically underfunded and undervalued, and that despite providing life-saving services, they are not considered a statutory service and face more cuts as local authorities face bankruptcies and tighter budgets. The fourth and related recommendation is to create an independent, national mechanism to promote women's rights and adequate funding for the women's sector. The Centre concurs with the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) recommendation for national mechanisms to drive improvements to women's equality, but considers it important to include marginalised women's organisations in these mechanisms.

6. Good practices

70. According to the above-mentioned OECD study, there has been marked progress in two areas: parental leave for fathers (in Luxembourg, Iceland, Sweden, Denmark and Portugal, where 40% of men now take parental leave) although periods taken are systematically shorter. Pay transparency for equal pay has also improved, and 55% of countries now require gender pay gap reporting in private firms.

71. During the exchange of views on 15 September 2023, Ms Sabina Ćudić (Bosnia and Herzegovina, ALDE) informed members how with “acupuncture” interventions in Sarajevo good results had been obtained. For instance, by subsidising private kindergartens so they could offer the same prices as State structures they had allowed kindergarten waiting lists to be abolished. Child allowance had been increased from 90€ to 500€, based on the premise that this money was then channelled back into the economy. Financial independence was a shield against certain levels of domestic violence. These were not necessarily huge pieces of legislation, but they made a difference on the ground, as did subsidising care for the elderly.

72. Despite its many tragic consequences, the war of aggression against Ukraine has accelerated the development of women’s roles in the country’s economy. Half of small enterprises created since the invasion were started by women, and 30% of larger businesses were led by women. Since 2014, the gender pay gap had been reduced to 6-7%. A 2030 strategy for equality in employment was in place. Since November 2021, Yulia Svyrydenko has been both First Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine and Minister of Economic Development. It is evident that women will also have a major role in reconstruction, and the country and its partners must give priority to childcare (kindergartens) in reconstruction investment.

73. EIGE’s Gender Equality Index notes, on one hand, good performances in EU countries in equal access to health, but on the other hand, health is the only marker showing a decline since the previous edition and is also the area with the least progress since 2010. Since 2020 the biggest improvement in the European Union has been in the domain of “time” (measuring gender inequalities in time spent carrying out care and domestic work and engaging in social activities such as leisure and sport). An improvement in the time spent on care activities has been instrumental in the change, but is apparently due to women’s lower engagement in unpaid care and housework overall, rather than men’s higher participation in such activities.

6.1. *The need for champions of economic empowerment*

74. I had the opportunity to meet a really inspiring woman during my mission to London in May 2024. Her story shows the importance and power of women sharing their experiences with others and I use it extensively here to illustrate the force for empowerment such women can be.

75. Founder of a UK registered charity named SHEWISE,⁴¹ from a South Asian family, Ms Sayeeda Ashraf grew up in central London where home and its traditions contrasted starkly with school and its predominantly white habits and pupils. When an arranged marriage with children ended in intimate partner violence, Ms Ashraf started a small business in catering with her sister, which eventually became the largest supplier of Asian food in the industry. But the struggle to juggle family and business and lack of support ended in the loss of the business in 2008 and a steep decline in confidence and self-esteem.

76. Emerging from this experience, she began coaching in entrepreneurship, soon extending to life coaching and guidance in domestic abuse services with the realisation that a holistic approach was essential. The principle of SHEWISE is to accompany (mainly Asian) women on a “journey”, along which first their basic needs are met before going on to individual coaching, designed to boost confidence, change their self-perception as “lesser individuals”, help recognise and react to violence and put themselves first, while learning to communicate effectively.

77. Ms Ashraf now also works to train National Health Service staff and the police on identifying and assisting domestic abuse victims, as well as to help South Asian women to overcome their distrust of the police and under-reporting out of fear of family rejection or of losing their children. Getting more men involved was also an objective, pursued through work with leisure centres, for example, where youth are encouraged to talk about healthy relationships.

78. Ms Ashraf informed us that government funding followed quite narrow criteria which preclude some important actors and ethnic organisations are not always successful in understanding how government services work. One of Ms Ashraf’s recommendations was that large stakeholders, such as banks and industry, work on a more local level, focusing on sponsorship of local communities and more local recruitment.

41. www.shewise.org.

6.2. The experience of Albania

79. The round table on 5 June 2024 in Tirana provided insight into another interesting national situation, where active policies were making a difference to women's presence in the economy and in decision-making roles. Minister Ibrahimaj informed participants that the gender pay gap in Albania stood at 6.8% and that there was serious investment in promoting women's employment. GRB was estimated to be applied to just 10% of the national budget, but this represented a rise from 7% in 2017. However, "social transfers" made up 50% of the State budget, so GRB was higher than reported, because more social benefits were paid to women than to men.

80. Vocational training, support for mothers returning to work and incentives to parents were all part of State measures, and education for women and girls was improving, evidenced by their increased presence at top levels of academia and in STEM areas – in Albania as in other countries, women and girls had the skills but were still to attain the same rates of employment as men. Digitalisation was facilitating increased equality in access to employment in general. There had been a gender equality law in Albania since 2008 and in 2014 mechanisms for GRB had been put in place. A new law on local finances had been designed with a gender perspective – there was still a long way to go, but the mechanisms were in place and were operating.

81. The Mayor of Durrës Ms Emiriana Sako recounted the challenges of the past four years in her city, where the destructive earthquakes of 2019 (50 victims) had been followed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Much energy and funding had been spent on shelters for families and the restoration of buildings, primary health and education infrastructure (47 new schools had been built). Women doctors and nurses had been vital in this period, and 78% of educational funding had been allocated to women and girls. Efforts were made to bring services closer to citizens, and progress had been made towards a society based on equality, for instance with better access for girls to education and social integration. Tourism had also been developed as a source of income.

82. It was interesting to learn how policies at local and regional level were devised and implemented. The Deputy mayor of Tirana Ms Halili stated that there was an equality co-ordinator for each municipality unit in Tirana, as well as services against violence and action plans drawn up in accordance with the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life. National and local levels of government were co-ordinated and direct contributions were made to women's empowerment. Women were active and influential in politics, 72% of Albania's top managers, 67% of middle management and 80% of vice-mayors in Albania were women. Direct grants were given to women's economic initiatives, and marginalised groups such as Roma were prioritised, with special encouragement for craft work and young women's innovation. Consultations were held on GRB, including with the public. Again, as in the United Kingdom, the usefulness of small grants and microloans for women's start-ups and small businesses was made evident.

83. The World Bank country director for Albania, Mr Salinas, pointed to the need to retain human capital in a low-income country like Albania, as lack of prospects created a movement of emigration. If women's economic empowerment was not fostered in the Balkans, the region would never attain middle income status, which in his opinion was more crucial than connectivity, for instance. EU membership was also very important. Health and education deficiencies were also factors of loss of human capital – according to research, women's active participation in the labour market after maternity would enable an increase of 12% in GDP, and the cost of domestic violence should also be taken into account.

84. Mr Salinas added that part of the World Bank's communication efforts concentrated on emphasising that empowering women was not a question of "benevolence", but that their full participation in the economy was a precondition for economic development, especially with the increasingly evolving nature of employment away from the subsistence economy towards jobs requiring more socio-emotional skills for which women had great capacities. Men needed to know that the transition did not mean social or political disenfranchisement, and more incentives were needed. I believe this is one of the key messages of my report.

6.3. Women's role in a "green and digital future"

85. Women and girls have enormous potential for contributing to a green and digital future which leaves no one behind, yet they encounter many challenges to their fullest participation and in taking up the unprecedented opportunities that technology has to offer. In central sectors such as STEM, numerous barriers hinder women and girls' access to education, public services and a wide range of life opportunities and deter them from joining and remaining in the workforce in this field. Eliminating the gender stereotypes that prevent women and girls from following vocations in STEM from education to employment is essential.

86. Women and girls must also be empowered to use digital technology as a tool for equal participation in decision making in the workplace. The global digital divide has a strong gender-based dimension, where women find themselves undertrained and with more complicated access to digital tools. Digital technologies also bring with them new forms of gender-based violence and harassment previously centred principally around the physical workplace, now with new manifestations. These emerging threats against women and girls must be understood and prevented, to ensure a safe, fair, and equal working environment for women and an inclusive green and digital future.

87. Solutions to these challenges and which should be supported and replicated. During the CSW67 in New-York in 2023, the Assembly jointly with the Netherlands and Estonia organised a side event entitled “Towards a Green and Digital Future: Opportunities and Challenges for Women and Girls in Public Life and the Workplace, where good examples were showcased, such as the Dutch recovery and resilience plan which increased investment in digital skills education and development to increase the number of female ICT specialists. In Estonia, the Unicorn Squad initiative offered robotics and tech activities for girls between 8 and 12 to break down the myth that technology is only for boys.

88. Research reveals some unexpected results of gender equality in economic spheres: for instance, a greater proportion of women on corporate boards has a positive influence on the reduction of CO2 emissions. According to the European Investment Bank, “Women now control 40% of global wealth, and they want to invest in a sustainable future. Some 74% of women report being interested in increasing the share of ESG [environmental, social and governance] investments in their current investment portfolios, compared to 53% of men. Firms that fail to make room for women overlook an opportunity to outperform their competitors.”⁴²

7. Conclusions

89. Legislation on women in the economy is certainly slow, but is opening up new possibilities for women. GRB, shared parental leave, more equal pay and transparency have all improved. Policy makers must consider the promotion of gender-responsive policies as a top priority to even out inequalities, and policies need to be designed in a cross-cutting way, involving all the different sectors of policy structures.

90. One of the greatest challenges is changing mindsets. There must be a willingness on all parts to break the glass ceilings, and for those who have succeeded to act as champions, showing that their achievements are attainable by many other girls and women. Equality must be championed in daily life: traditions, identities, gender-specific cultural differences are no excuse for perpetuating inequalities. There must also be a better approach to diversity and stereotypes must be countered. An intersectional approach should be adopted to prevent multiple layers of discrimination against women from diverse and disadvantaged groups in the economy.

91. That said, these changes can only happen if they are accompanied by proper investment, which in turn requires recognition by decision makers and leaders in the economy that equality can only mean profit in the long run. To quote the Sustainable Development Goals’ annual Gender Index for 2022, which looked back extensively on the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, “The social transformation needed for gender equality must be funded, which requires gender-responsive budgets, progressive taxation and strong investment in public services and public (including care) infrastructure.”⁴³

92. Gender needs to be mainstreamed in all policies and budgets: social affairs, family, equality ministries need to erase siloing as far as possible, and also make sure that adequate funding is earmarked for equality. Cross-cutting policies must ensure continuity in support for women’s equal participation in all areas.

93. From my interviews with civil society actors in the United Kingdom, I learned that it is not always the money that is lacking to support women entrepreneurs. Grants are often subject to complex application requirements and often procurement processes, which are beyond the reach of women wishing to start small businesses or start-ups. There is a need for small grants to be awarded directly, without the red tape, which makes obtaining funding too slow and complicated for most women, especially the most disadvantaged among them.

42. N. Calviño, K. Georgieva, and O. Renaud-Basso, “The Economic Power of Gender Equality”, European Investment Bank, 8 March 2024.

43. 2022 SDG Gender Index Equal Measures 2030 (EM2030): “Back to normal is not enough”.

94. The Assembly often points to insufficient data collection as an obstacle to designing targeted policies: the issue of women's equal participation in the economy is no exception to this lack. Disaggregated and intersectional data is needed to identify root causes of inequality and clarify the orientations that should be taken.