

# **D2.2. GENDER EQUALITY ATTITUDES IN EUROPE**

**RETHINKING INCLUSION AND GENDER EMPOWERMENT: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**



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# **D2.2. GENDER EQUALITY ATTITUDES IN EUROPE**

## **A SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS**

## **RETHINKING INCLUSION AND GENDER EMPOWERMENT: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

### **SHORT SUMMARY DELIVERABLE**

#### **Objectives**

This report aims to describe, by using two large datasets, the changes with respect to different aspects of gender equality in Europe during the past 30 years. The larger aim is to obtain a historical and comparative view on changing attitudes towards gender inequalities and gender empowerment and prevailing gender gaps across different social, economic and cultural spheres, and how they vary across time and *per* partner country. The state of gender equality in Europe is examined in comparative terms across the five European countries, part of the ReIncluGen Consortium.

#### **Main findings**

The analysed data tell a story of growing gender equality in Europe, yet one where there is still much progress to be made. Women are, even today, less likely to have paid jobs than men and conversely are more often involved in unpaid care work. Moreover, a significant portion of the European population is still not in favour of gender equality, especially when looking at attitudes toward working mothers and the role of women in the family and society. In addition, the data show that although the female population is generally better educated than the male population, working women are still facing important disadvantages in terms of career advancement and remuneration.

# The ReIncluGen Project

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## Deliverable

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## Executive summary

The state of gender equality in Europe is examined in comparative terms, looking at five European countries that differ considerably in history, social structure, welfare state, and multiple other aspects: Austria, Belgium, Italy, Spain, and Poland. In addition to the comparative perspective, this report also analyses the temporal dimension, examining historical changes, on the one hand in the socioeconomic conditions of women in Europe, and on the other in public opinion regarding gender roles. How have gender inequalities changed over the past 30 years? Have women's socioeconomic conditions in Europe seen similar transformations to what has occurred in public opinion toward gender empowerment? What are the differences and commonalities among European countries? Are women systematically more supportive of gender equality than men? These are some of the questions that guide the analysis. In order to have a meaningful group of reference for an analysis focused on gender, a central aspect of the report is the comparison with men, both in terms of attitudes and in terms of work, higher education, and unpaid care work.

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# Acronyms & Abbreviations

ESS	European Social Survey
EVS	European Value Survey

## INTRODUCTION

This report aims to describe, by using two large datasets, the changes with respect to different aspects of gender equality in Europe during the past 30 years. The ReIncluGen project will conduct research in Belgium, Poland, Italy, Spain, and Austria. Secondary data analyses of existing large-scale datasets help to situate and frame our findings, and highlight differences and similarities across countries as well as changes over time.

The last decades have witnessed major changes in what concerns women empowerment. Since the second half of the 20th century, women's participation in the labour market has increased, at different rates, in many European countries (Biffi, 2007). Similarly, the presence of women in universities has also seen a steady rise. Today, in many nations around the world, the percentage of women with higher education outnumbers that of men<sup>1</sup> (Van Bavel et al., 2018). These remarkable achievements have come along with a shift in individual attitudes and beliefs toward gender equality<sup>2</sup>. These values can be measured by asking people what they think about the roles of women and men in the family and society: in this context, having a traditional gender-role attitude means supporting the male-breadwinner model, whereas having an egalitarian gender-role attitude means favouring a fair sharing of economic and caregiving responsibilities (Lomazzi et al., 2018).

In the following pages, the state of gender equality in Europe will be examined in comparative terms, looking at five European countries that differ considerably in history, social structure, welfare state, and multiple other aspects: Austria, Belgium, Italy, Spain, and Poland. In addition to the comparative perspective, this report also analyses the temporal dimension, examining historical changes, on the one hand in the socioeconomic conditions of women in Europe, and on the other in public opinion regarding gender roles. How have gender inequalities changed over the past 30 years? Have women's socioeconomic conditions in Europe seen similar transformations to what has occurred in public opinion toward gender empowerment? What are the differences and commonalities among European countries? Are women systematically more supportive of gender equality than men? These are some of the questions that will guide the analysis. A comparison with men, both in terms of attitudes and in terms of work, higher education, and unpaid care work (Ferrant et al., 2014) is important in order to have a meaningful group of reference for an analysis focused on gender, which is itself a relational concept. In other words, it is relevant, for example, to understand how much the percentage of working women has

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<sup>1</sup> Despite women's high levels of education, gender inequalities persist in employment status and earnings - what has been termed as a stalled revolution (Ridgeway, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Establishing the direction of causality between individuals' attitudes toward gender roles and institutional changes is beyond the scope of this report - however, the relationship between public policies regarding gender equity and changing values is a current research topic (e.g., André et al., 2013).



increased, but without knowing how many men are working, an important piece is missing to draw a satisfactory framework of gender empowerment.

To study gender equality in Europe, this report uses two datasets: the European Social Survey (ESS) and the European Values Study (EVS). These datasets were selected because they contain rich information regarding the 5 European countries of interest for a time period of about 20 years for ESS - i.e., from 2002 to 2018 - and about 30 years for EVS - i.e., from 1990 to 2017<sup>3</sup>. The reason for choosing two datasets stems from the fact that the two surveys deal with different issues through different questions. Therefore, ESS will be used to study the socioeconomic conditions of women in Europe as it includes detailed information on people's employment status, education, and unpaid care work performed. Whereas EVS allows us to investigate the change and stability of values and public opinion. Specifically, there are three dimensions of attitudes toward gender equality that this report considers: opportunities in the labour market, the perceived relationship of a working woman to her children in preschool years, and finally, the traditional role of women in the family and society. By considering attitudes towards gender equality on the one hand, and women's socioeconomic conditions on the other; we believe we can get as complete a picture as possible of the state of the multidimensional concept comprising gender empowerment over time and among European countries.

However, before reading the report and drawing conclusions, it is necessary to be aware of some important limitations that this analysis presents. First, the perspective on gender equality that we adopt - and that can be studied using the European surveys considered - focuses solely on aspects of the sexual division of work and women's entry into the labour market. Other elements, such as, for instance, decision-making and bodily autonomy issues, are absent - yet not for this reason they do not deserve more attention. Thus, it is worth keeping in mind that when, in the text, we talk about women empowerment we are referring to a limited dimension of a much broader, multifaceted concept. That said, the cross-country and longitudinal analysis of the performance of unpaid care work, paid work and education of women and men in Europe offers important insights into some of the major changes in women's lives in recent decades.

The second aspect that needs to be reflected upon concerns the status of migrant women and girls in Europe. Unfortunately, the very limited number of people with migrant backgrounds in the sample does not allow for an intersectional perspective to be adopted. Moreover, the population considered in the analysis disproportionately over-represents white, middle-class women (Billiet et al., 2007) - think, for example, of how migrants in irregular situations are absent in our sample. It is therefore likely that female migrants are excluded from the reality as presented by the data in the following paragraphs. As a matter

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<sup>3</sup> Both EVS and ESS lack information on some waves for some countries. However, both questionnaires contain enough longitudinal information for each nation to allow a satisfactory comparative analysis over time.

of facts, migrant women and girls face multiple challenges and oppressions derived from their disadvantaged position in the host countries.

The report is organised as follows: it will begin with a description of the two datasets used, the sample, and finally the variables and their operationalization. Then will follow the historical and comparative analysis of gender empowerment in Europe. The first part of the analysis will consider the attitudes of the population toward gender equality, distinguishing between what women think and what men think. Next, there will be a discussion of the (changing) percentage of working women, women with higher education, and women doing unpaid care work in different European countries. Here, too, a comparison between genders will be made, albeit – as previously explained – mostly focused on a specific segment of the population. Finally, a conclusion will summarise the main findings and provide some tentative interpretation.

## DATA AND METHODS

### EUROPEAN VALUE SURVEY

The European Values Study (EVS) is a large-scale, cross-national, and longitudinal survey research program on basic human values. It started in 1981 when a thousand citizens in the European Member States of that time were interviewed using standardised questionnaires. Every nine years, the survey is repeated in a variable number of countries. EVS provides insights into the ideas, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values, and opinions of citizens all over Europe. It is a unique research project on how Europeans think about life, family, work, religion, politics, and society.

In the present report, the analysis of European values on gender equality takes 1990 as the starting year - the second wave and the first year in which information is available for all five states considered - and 2017 as the ending year - the fifth and final wave of the questionnaire currently available. The total sample size is 31,648 individuals. The observations are divided between different European countries (i.e., Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Spain) and years: 31% of the sample was surveyed in 1990, 24% in 1999, 24% in 2008, and finally 21% in 2017. The reason why the number of observations is lower in 2017 is that observations for Belgium are missing.

The three questions the analysis considers are repeated in the same way in all countries and for different years, allowing longitudinal and cross-national comparison. The questions ask respondents to agree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, or declare they do not know, with respect to several statements. The statements are as follows:

1. When jobs are scarce, men have more rights to a job than women.
2. A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.
3. A job is alright but what most women really want is a home and children.

The variables were recoded as dichotomous: a value of 1 indicates a person in favour of gender equality and 0 a person who is not. Regarding the first statement, individuals who support gender equality are considered to be those who declared themselves to be in disagreement. All respondents who stated that they 'neither agreed nor disagreed', 'did not know' and 'disagreed' were considered as not supporting gender equality. The report adopted a rather restrictive criterion to define those in support of women empowerment<sup>4</sup>: only those who explicitly take a position in favour are so, while those with an undecided

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<sup>4</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, this concept of women's empowerment focuses heavily on the sexual division of labour and women's entry into the labour market, without considering other perspectives of empowerment.

position are placed in the category of those not in support. Similarly, for the second and third questions, those who disagree and strongly disagree are considered to be in favour of gender equality; while those who agree or strongly agree, as well as those who do not know, are found to be non-supportive of gender equality. In the macro-level analysis, which considers the public opinion of European populations, the average of responses in favour of gender equality for the five countries and for different years was calculated by gender.

## EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY

The European Social Survey (ESS) is an academically driven cross-national survey that has been conducted across Europe since its establishment in 2001. Every two years, face-to-face interviews are carried out with newly selected, cross-sectional samples. The survey measures the change in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour patterns of diverse populations in more than thirty nations in Europe.

As for ESS, this report looks at the period from the end of the first wave - that is in 2002 - to the penultimate wave - in 2018. It covers a total of 9 waves. It does not consider the last wave, conducted in 2020, as only data for Italy are currently available. As far as the sample is concerned, only individuals older than 25 years of age were selected. The rationale is that, to study the percentage of individuals with higher education, it is appropriate to look at the population in an age range in which education is assumed to have been, in most cases, completed. Similarly, the European Commission would measure and define people that have left school early, as those “between 16 and 24 years old who have completed at most a lower secondary education and were not in further education or training during the four weeks preceding the labour force survey (LFS)” (Eurostat, 2023). Hence, the 25-year threshold aims to compromise to perform a thoughtful analysis without losing too many cases. The total sample size is 61,579 cases. The higher ESS sample size compared to the EVS sample is due to the larger number of waves for ESS. For Austria and Italy, information is missing for 2 and 4 points in time, respectively, however, the general trend of women's socioeconomic conditions can be understood despite some holes in the data.

For the ESS, questions were selected that have been repeated consistently over time and across different countries. Following the same approach as for attitudes toward gender equality, socioeconomic indicators were also made dichotomous, thus simplifying the comprehension of the results. The first question considered looks at the percentage of the population with higher education. To take into account differences in the education systems of European states, a variable harmonising educational attainment was used - i.e., the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Individuals with higher education were considered those with a lower or higher tertiary education. All others were classified as having a lower educational level. Regarding employment, the report relies on a question that asks people if they have ever had a paid job. Finally, we consider a question asking if during the last seven days

respondents did any unpaid care work or looked after kids. In the analysis, the average number of people with higher education, who have ever had a paid job and have done unpaid care work was computed for the five European countries and for different years by gender.

## FINDINGS

### ATTITUDES TOWARD GENDER EQUALITY

With respect to the findings of the analysis of historical changes in attitudes toward gender equality in Europe, the report will begin with a general description of the main trends in public opinion, common to most countries. This will be followed by an overview of the specificities of each national context and the main differences in comparative terms.

Overall, the first thing to notice when looking at the images for all countries is a considerable growth in the percentage of the population that supports gender equality. This is true for all dimensions considered: equality between men and women in the labour market, the relationship of a working mother to her pre-school children, and the traditional role of women. To offer one example among many possible examples, in Poland the percentage of women who thought that a working mother could have a positive relationship with her children was only 7% in 1990, while in 2017 it is over half of the sample.

The data show that the numbers of the population supporting gender equality in the labour market is systematically higher than the percentage for the other two dimensions (i.e., the relationship of a working mother to her pre-school children, and the traditional role of women). However, it is difficult to draw conclusions: since this is a single question in a survey, the very wording of it may lead people to respond more or less positively, regardless of individuals' substantive opinion about women's opportunities in the job market. Rather, what is interesting to note is the change over time and how this varies across the national contexts in the percentage of agreement for the same statement.

In the case of gender equality in the labour market, despite steadily increasing, for all European countries we see a slowdown in the growth of the number of people with favourable attitudes during the last decade, i.e., from 2008 to 2017. On the contrary, regarding attitudes toward working mothers and the role of women, it seems that, at least for Spain and Italy, the percentage of people with gender equality attitudes has increased more substantially in the last decade than in previous years.

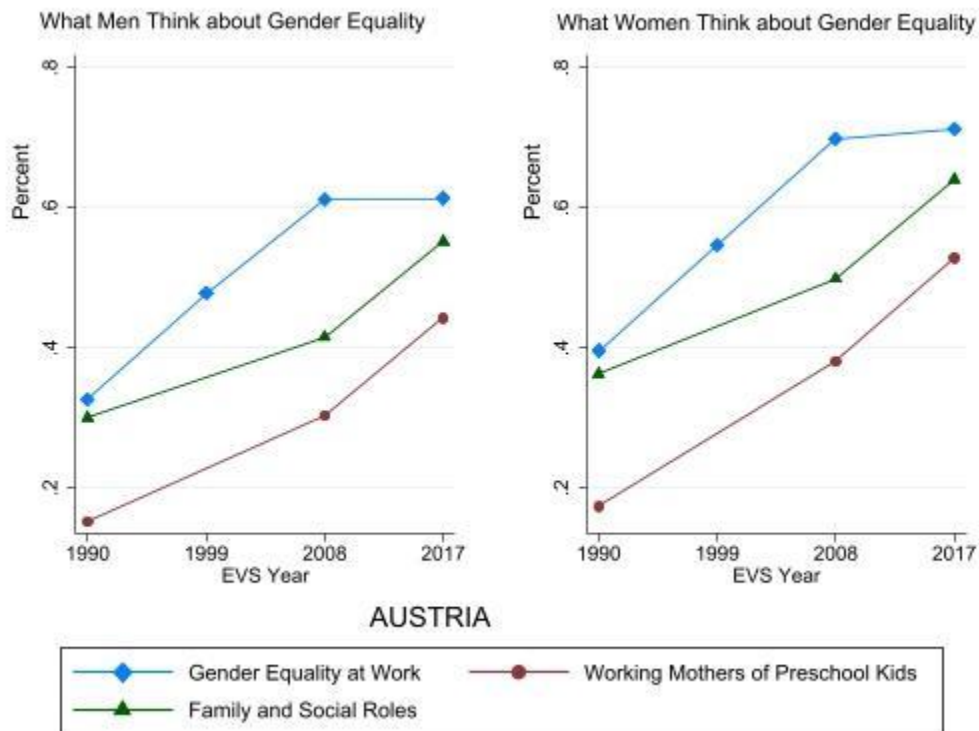
Finally, looking at gender differences in what people think toward gender equality, we see that women systematically have more egalitarian attitudes than men. This pattern is recognizable, albeit with cross-national differences, in all European states and for all years. In some countries studied, e.g., Austria, the difference is around 10 percentage points - a figure that is far from negligible. Otherwise, the historical change in values is similar for both genders - in fact, the percentage of men supporting equality has also steadily increased.

## AUSTRIA

In Austria from 1990 to 2017 there was a stable rise in support for all dimensions of gender equality<sup>5</sup>. However, in this country as in the others, growth in the support for gender equality at work has somehow slowed in the last wave compared to previous years - remaining roughly unchanged over the past decade. In 2017, 6 out of 10 men and 7 out of 10 women were in favour of gender equality in the labour market.

Attitudes toward working mothers register the lowest level of support for gender equality. However, it is worth noting that the trend has been growing and positive: while in 1990 the percentage of women supporting this aspect of gender equality was 17%, in 2017 it was 53% - a change of nearly 40 percentage points in less than 30 years.

Figure 1. The historical trend of Austrian men's and women's attitudes toward three different dimensions of gender equality.



Source: EVS, years 1990-2017. Author's data elaboration. Sample weights applied. N=6,136.

<sup>5</sup> In Austria's survey in 1999 the questions about working mothers and the role of women were not asked: as can be seen in figure 1 two points are missing in the graph.

## **BELGIUM**

Unfortunately, for Belgium there is a lack of information for all dimensions of gender equality attitudes for the last wave, that is, for 2017. This does not allow an analysis of historical change in values including the last decade, making it impossible to make a full and comprehensive comparison with the other countries. However, looking at figure 2 we can see that in 1990, for both men and women, Belgium was the country with the highest percentages of support for gender equality among the European countries considered. For example, in 1990 as many as 48% of men were in favour of gender equality in the labour market and this percentage reached 80% in 2008. No other state had such high figures. Moreover, there are few differences between men and women regarding their views on this gender equality dimension.

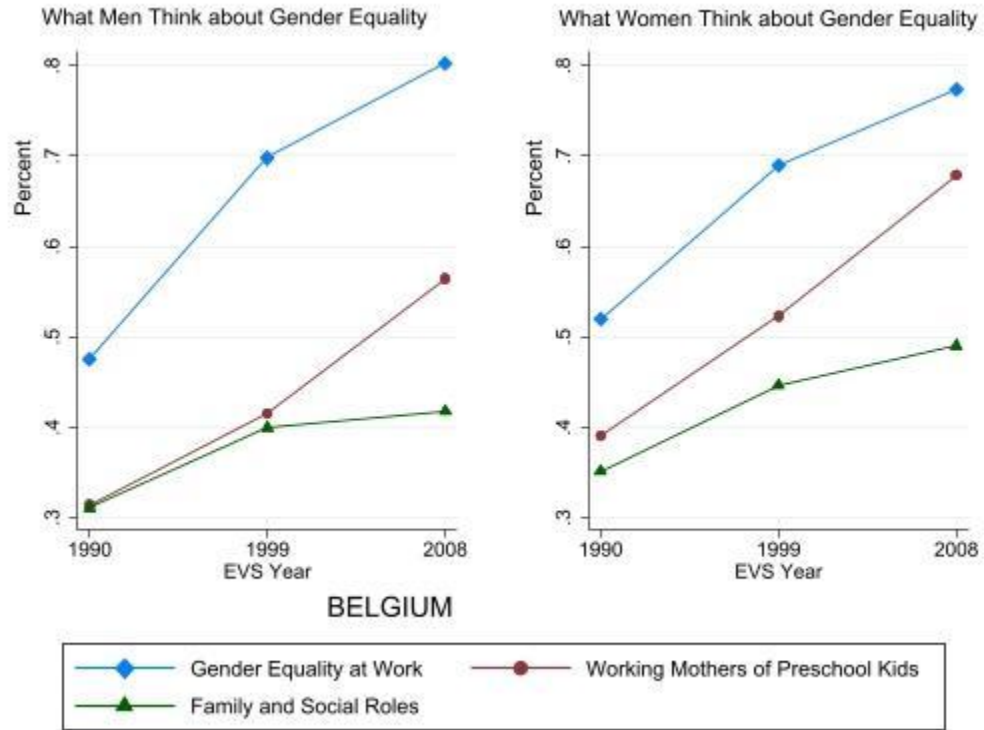
Nevertheless, gender differences are clearly visible when looking at other aspects of gender equality: as a matter of fact, especially regarding men - but also for women - there is a strong gap between the strong support for gender equality at work and people's views on working mothers and the role of women, which instead record much lower percentage. This could be related to working hour preferences, part-time working hours (Lewis et al., 2008) and broader cultural and structural factors (Pollman-Schultz, 2016). However, in other countries these dimensions have seen major changes in the last decade: for Belgium, data are not available. It is quite possible that the situation has changed dramatically in recent years. Nevertheless, more recent data, provided by the institute for the equality of women and men, suggests Belgium has not made many improvements on the discrepancy between their views and actual deeds. In 2020, 43% of the women work part time whereas only 13% of the men do<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> See: [https://iqvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/activiteiten/arbeid/combinatie\\_werk\\_priveteven/stand\\_van\\_zaken\\_in\\_belgie](https://iqvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/activiteiten/arbeid/combinatie_werk_priveteven/stand_van_zaken_in_belgie).



Figure 2. The historical trend of Belgian men's and women's attitudes toward three different dimensions of gender equality.



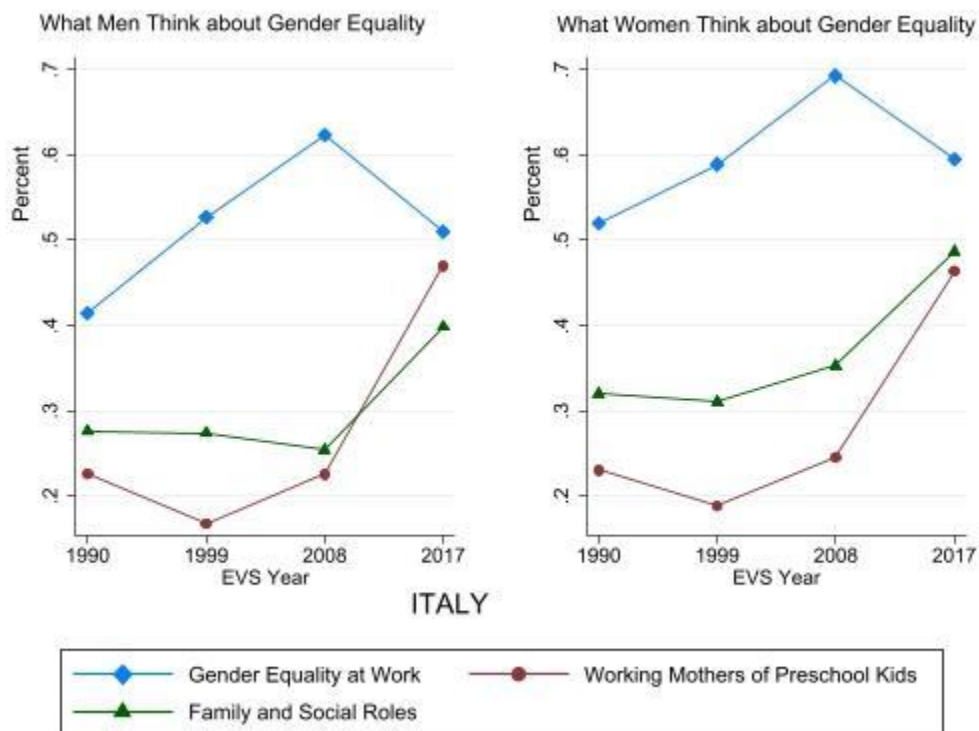
Source: EVS, years 1990-2017. Author's data elaboration. Sample weights applied. N=6,213.

## ITALY

Italy is perhaps the country with the most fluctuating and least regular growth in the level of support for gender equality among the European countries considered. In 1990, the percentage who identified themselves as in favour of gender equality was relatively high compared to other states, such as Poland. In 1990, there were 4 out of 10 men in favour of equality at work, a figure similar to that of Belgium, the country with the most pro-gender empowerment views. However, in Italy we see a trend of moderate growth for gender-equality support. The difference between the percentages recorded from 1990 to 2017 is the smallest in Europe. In 2017, Italy, along with Poland, had the lowest share of support toward women empowerment among the states considered.

In the past decade, from 2008 to 2017, support toward equality in the workplace has even decreased, both for men and women. This is the only country where we see a declining trend: it is more than 10 percentage points less between the last two waves. However, again looking at the last decade, we see a very positive increase in support for working mothers and women's roles- prior to 2017, growth for these dimensions was uneven and, altogether, marginal. The increase is seen for both genders.

Figure 3. The historical trend of Italian men's and women's attitudes toward three different dimensions of gender equality.



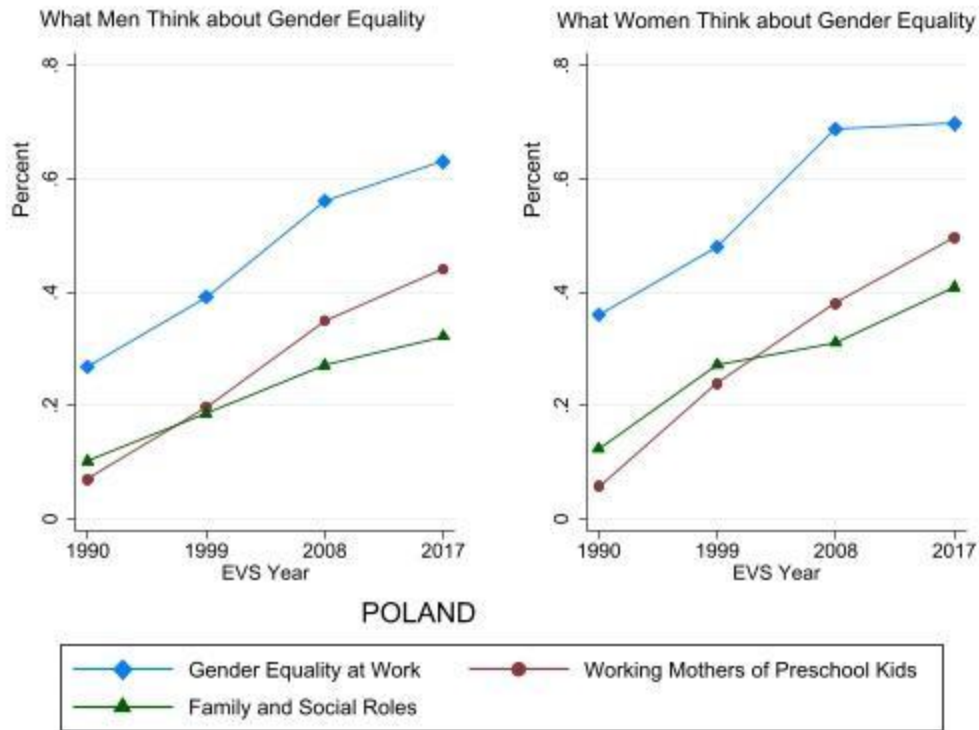
Source: EVS, years 1990-2017. Author's data elaboration. Sample weights applied. N=7,814.

## POLAND

Poland was the European country with the lowest rates of support toward gender equality in 1990. For instance, less than 6 out of every 100 women thought that a working mother could establish a positive relationship with her preschool children. In 2017, that percentage rose to half of the sample: one in every two women. For men, the trend was similar, though less strong. The growth in support toward gender equality has been steady and sustained throughout the years under consideration, with no reversals or interruptions. In 2017 Poland remains a country with a population with a generally low degree of support for gender empowerment, yet the change in values over the past 30 years has been one of the strongest among the countries considered.

Even in this national context, there are significant differences between attitudes toward gender equality at work - with higher levels of support - and the other dimensions - whose percentages are lower. This is true for both men and women.

Figure 4. The historical trend of Polish men's and women's attitudes toward three different dimensions of gender equality.



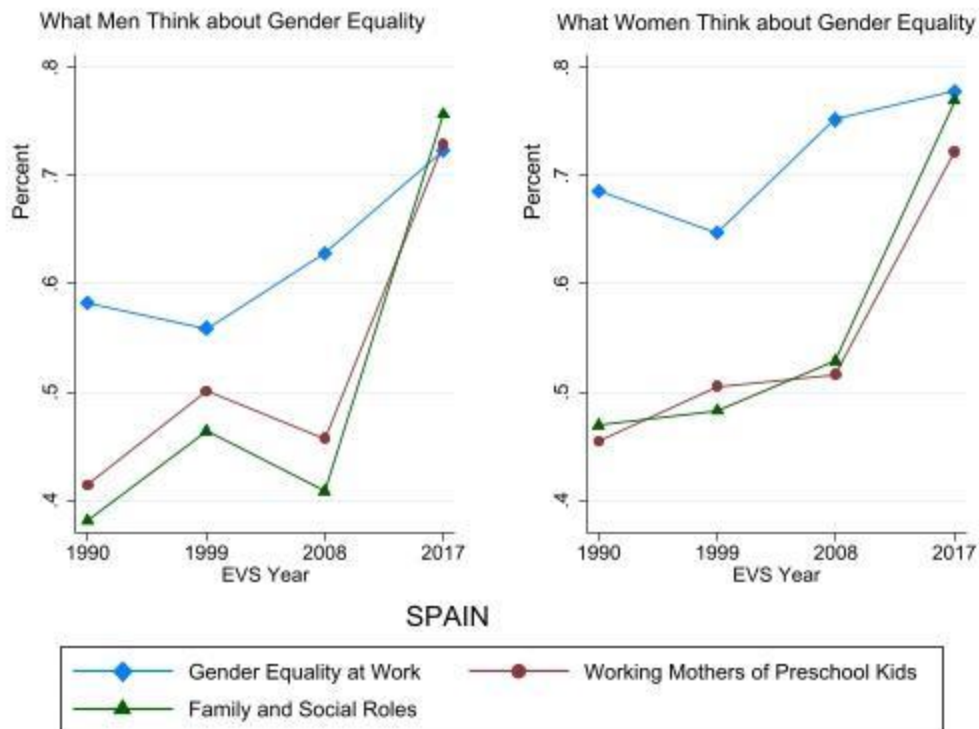
Source: EVS, years 1990-2017. Author's data elaboration. Sample weights applied. N=4,939.

## SPAIN

In Spain, the growth of support toward gender equality has been uneven, with some years of growth followed by years of decline or stagnation, until the decade 2008-2017, when the situation drastically changed. During this time, there was a surge in the share of people with positive attitudes toward women empowerment. What rose most of all was support for working mothers and an equal role for women in society –equality at work was already higher. For women, the share of people with a positive attitude toward working mothers grew by 20 percentage points in less than 10 years. For men, the gap is even stronger, about 25 percentage points.

Overall, in 2017 Spain was the country where not only women, but also men, had the most pro-gender equality attitudes. The change in values has been a recent and very rapid one. In addition, there is no substantial difference between what men think about gender equality and what women think: women are slightly more in favour, but there is no major gap, as the one registered in other contexts.

Figure 5. The historical trend of Spanish men's and women's attitudes toward three different dimensions of gender equality.



Source: EVS, years 1990-2017. Author's data elaboration. Sample weights applied. N=6,546.

## WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The changes in women's socioeconomic conditions over the years are more limited than those found in attitudes toward gender equality. However, for reasons of data availability, the analysis of socioeconomic indicators looks at a smaller period - i.e., from 2002 to 2018: 16 years vs. the 27 studied by values. If this discrepancy is kept in mind, the changes in women's employment, higher education and unpaid care work rates also appear far from marginal. Considering the specifics of each European population, in general, the trends in women's socioeconomic conditions are similar to the changes found in gender equality attitudes, outlining a consistent picture of the state of gender empowerment by country.

Regarding work, the share of women who have ever worked is systematically lower than that of men. However, in the years considered - though not for all countries - there has been an increase in the presence of women in the labour market. For men, the percentages are more stable, with no general differences between the beginning and the end of the time frame. The comparison between genders shows that the increase in the percentage of individuals working is not a population-wide phenomenon but a female trend. As mentioned, the presence of a control group makes it possible to distinguish global changes, perhaps dictated by the circumstances of economic cycles, from those specifically affecting women's empowerment - possibly triggered, among other things, by binding EU-level gender equality laws in the early 2000s.

There are, however, significant cross-country differences: while in Spain the percentage of working women has increased by 30 percentage points in just over a decade, for Italy it has even, albeit slightly, decreased from 2002 to 2018. If we go back to the change in values in the two countries mentioned above, we can see that the trends are somewhat similar: Spain and Italy started from somewhat alike situations but saw changes of very different scale. For instance, Italy in recent years has seen a decline in support for gender equality in the workplace, which seems to be accompanied by stalled female employment rates. Cross-national differences will be described in detail in the following paragraphs; however, even if women's employment has generally risen, as of 2018 it remains lower than men's in all European countries.

In 2002, the percentage of women with higher education was lower than that of men. In 2018, the situation was reversed in all countries. The rate of highly educated individuals generally increased over the period; however, the rise for women was stronger than for men. This is a common trend, with no major exceptions. However, there are cross-country differences: while in Italy about 15% of women attended university, for Belgium the figure rises to 40% - more than double. A similar gap is found for men, showing highly variable education rates between countries (see also Francesconi & Parey, 2018) .

As for unpaid care work, the picture in Europe appears multifaceted. In general, the share of women engaged in unpaid care work in 2002 was much higher than that of men. For example, in Italy

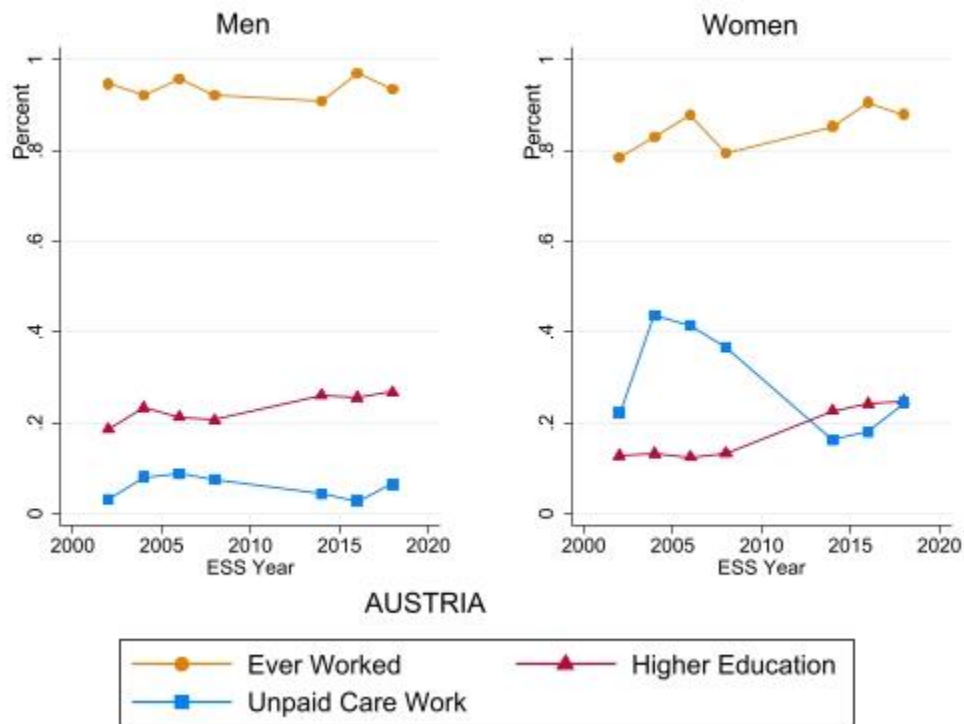
one in four women claimed to have done unpaid care work in the last week, while men were only 3%. The pattern was similar for all countries. A shift is seen over the years for women, who tend to do less unpaid care work. The rapidity in the decrease changes depending on the national context: in Spain and Poland the percentage of women doing unpaid care work has decreased the most - they were the countries where the percentages were highest in 2002. For men, the picture is more complex: while in Belgium males tend to do more unpaid care work, in other states the situation has remained unchanged and with very low figures - such as in Austria and Italy. In summary, women still do more unpaid care work than men in 2018, but the gap has systematically narrowed, mainly as a result of the fall in the percentages for women.

## AUSTRIA

In Austria there was an increase in both women in the labour market and women with higher education. In terms of employment, in 2018 the percentages of the populations for both genders who reported having had a paid job are similar, and it is notable that working women account for as many as 9 out of 10 women<sup>7</sup>. The number of highly educated women rose steadily and at a faster rate than men. Finally, women involved in unpaid care work have decreased, while there are no substantial differences for men.

Looking at the situation of gender equality in Austria from both a socioeconomic and values perspective, it appears that the country is generally moving in a direction of greater women empowerment. However, Austria is somewhere in an intermediate position between countries with very positive figures - such as Belgium and Spain - and countries where there are indicators of deficiencies for what regards gender equality - such as Italy and Poland.

Figure 6. Historical trends in the socioeconomic conditions of Austrian women compared with those of men.



Source: ESS, years 2002-2018. Author's data elaboration. Sample weights applied. N=13,232.

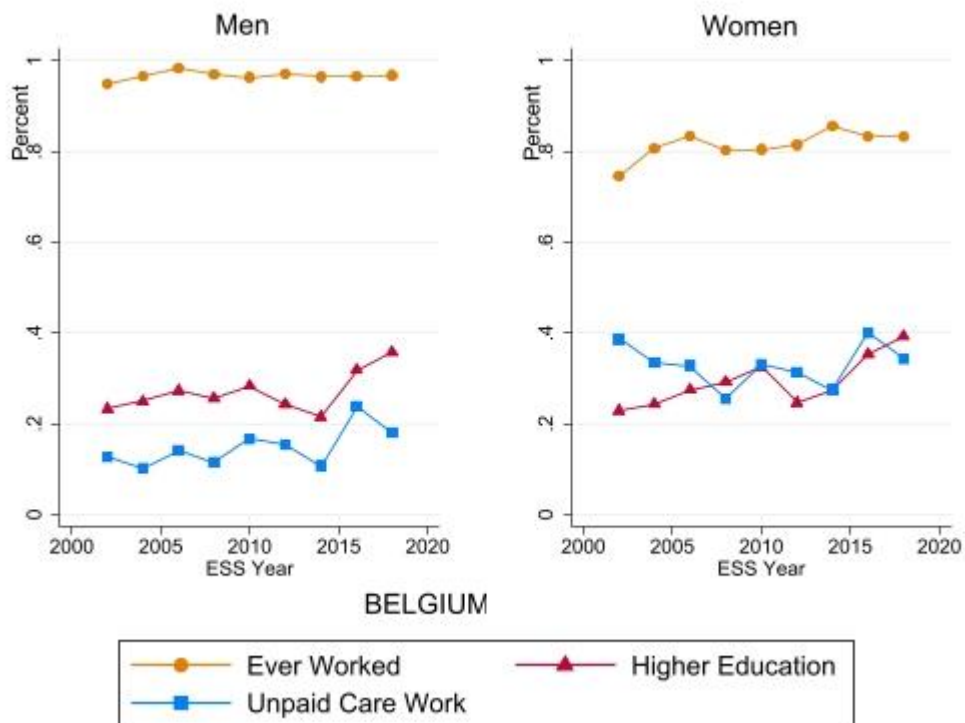
<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that the gender pay gap in Austria remains one of the highest in Europe, that part-time work among women is widespread, and that the labour market is segregated, with women working in lower-paid sectors than men. See: [https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/en/agenda/women-and-equality/gender\\_equality\\_in\\_the\\_labour\\_market](https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/en/agenda/women-and-equality/gender_equality_in_the_labour_market)

## BELGIUM

In both 2002, the first year of analysis, and 2018, the last year, Belgium had the highest percentage of women with higher education. The share of working women is also relatively high and steadily increasing. In 2018, it is about 7 out of 10 women, while for men it is 8 out of 10. However, recent figures by the EIGE<sup>8</sup>, for example, show that people employed in education, human health and social work activities are 39% female versus 11% male. Regarding taking up these more “caring” jobs, Belgium scores higher than the European average. A picture of increasing equality and sharing of care responsibilities seems to be emerging about unpaid care work: while the share of women who say they have done domestic chores in the last week has decreased, the percentage of men has risen - the only country in Europe with a converging trend, and arguably greater balancing of roles within the home.

As also revealed by the analysis of gender equality attitudes, Belgium proves to be a country with a generally positive picture with respect to gender empowerment when compared with other European states.

Figure 7. Historical trends in the socioeconomic conditions of Belgian women compared with those of men.



Source: ESS, years 2002-2018. Author's data elaboration. Sample weights applied. N=13,265.

<sup>8</sup> Source: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/domain/work/BE>.



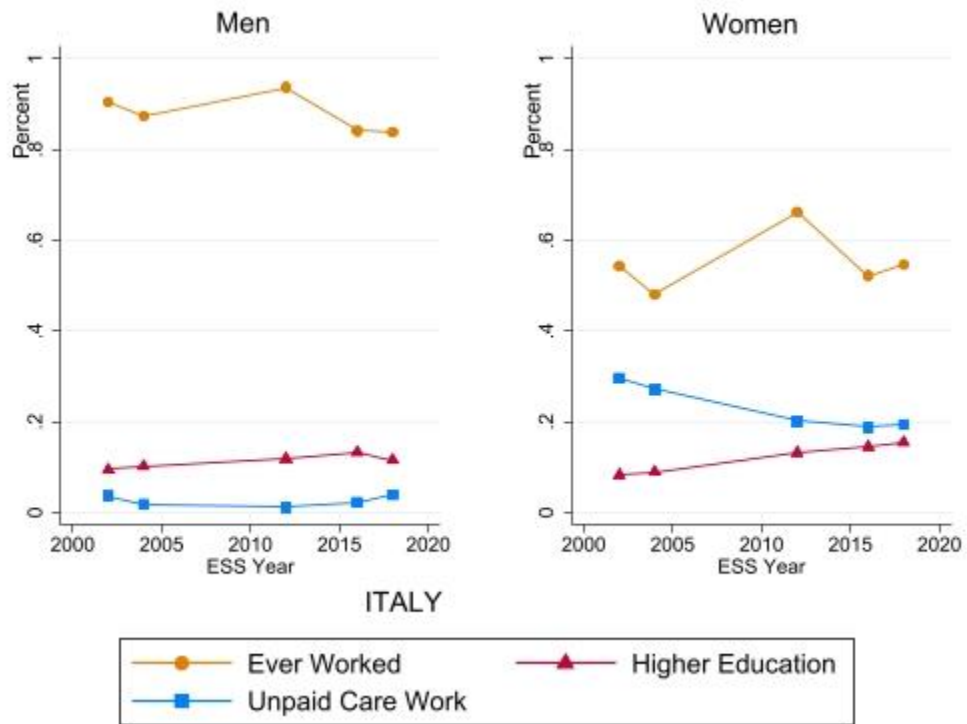
## **ITALY**

Few women were working in Italy in 2002, and few still do in 2018: they are just over half of the sample for both years - the lowest figure in Europe. However, it is significant how the share of working men has also declined over time. It is particularly important here, therefore, to distinguish between a possibly contextual component, i.e., related to, for example, the economic cycle or demographic changes in the country, and the element specific to women empowerment. Looking at the difference between the percentages of men and women doing paid work in 2002 and 2018, it appears that the decrease in employment is smaller for women than for men, indicating a less negative picture of gender equality than it might have seemed at first glance. However, we do not consider gender differences in wages, nor the strong presence of women in precarious or part-time jobs, etc. These elements - especially important in a period of economic crisis such as the one under consideration - may result in women being at a significant disadvantage compared to men overall.

Despite this, in the latest year considered, the percentage of working men remained as much as 20 percentage points higher than for women. Equally disheartening is the situation for education: although the number of females who have attended university has increased over the years and is higher than that of men, Italy remained the country with the lowest percentage of highly educated women. Finally, it is worth noticing the very low share of men doing unpaid care work: it is less than 4 per 100 people, with percentages almost unchanged over the period considered.

Compared with other European countries, Italy presents the least favourable picture of women's socioeconomic conditions. Moreover, sadly, it is a context that has not seen important improvements over time, as has happened, for example, in Spain. The socioeconomic picture is consistent with the trend in values, where growth in support for gender equality has been moderate (and even reversed) over the years.

Figure 8. Historical trends in the socioeconomic conditions of Italian women compared with those of men.



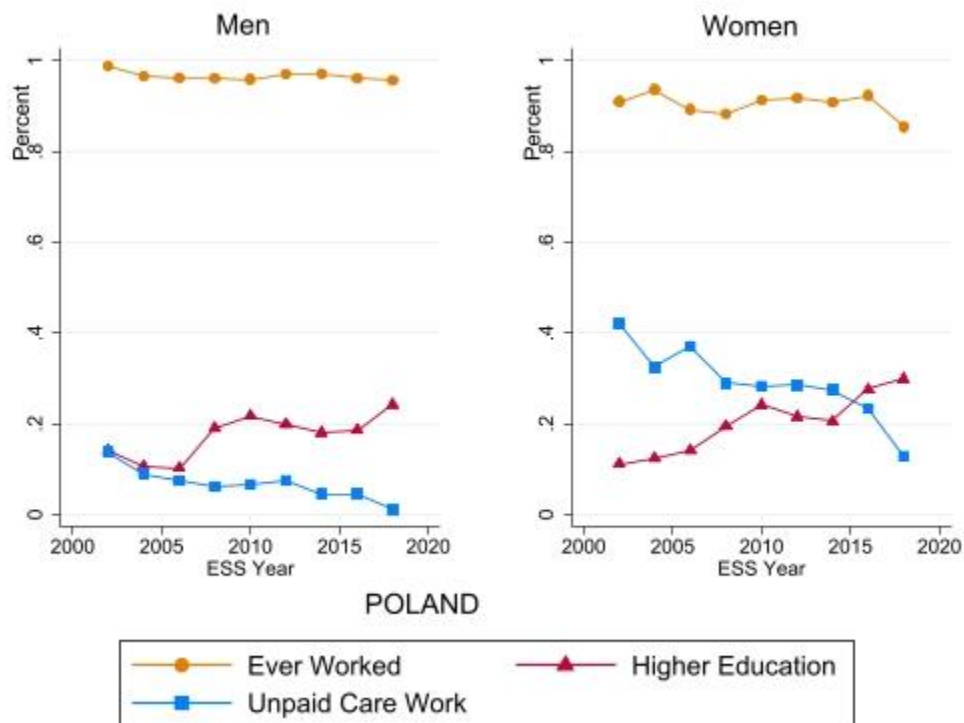
Source: ESS, years 2002-2018. Author's data elaboration. Sample weights applied. N=14,736.

## POLAND

In Poland, since 2002, the percentage of working women has always been very high - 9 out of 10: numbers exceeding those recorded in Belgium or Austria. This figure is somewhat surprising considering the stark contrast with attitudes supporting gender equality in the labour market, which in the early 2000s had very low levels - less than half of the sample was in favour. In terms of education, Poland also shows a steadily improving picture: women attending university has almost tripled in just over 15 years. The percentage of highly educated men has also increased, but the progress has not been as astounding. Finally, the share of women involved in unpaid care work has decreased sharply. A reduction is also seen for men, even if weaker - it could thus be a general effect of technology or the hiring of professional help rather than an indication of sharing of household tasks.

As with attitudes toward gender equality, Poland started in 2002 from a position of relative disadvantage in terms of female empowerment, with low higher education rates and high figures for unpaid care work. However, similarly, to the public opinion's trend, it is a country where the situation has rapidly changed over the past 15 years - although significant steps toward increasingly effective gender empowerment remain to be taken.

Figure 9. Historical trends in the socioeconomic conditions of Polish women compared with those of men.



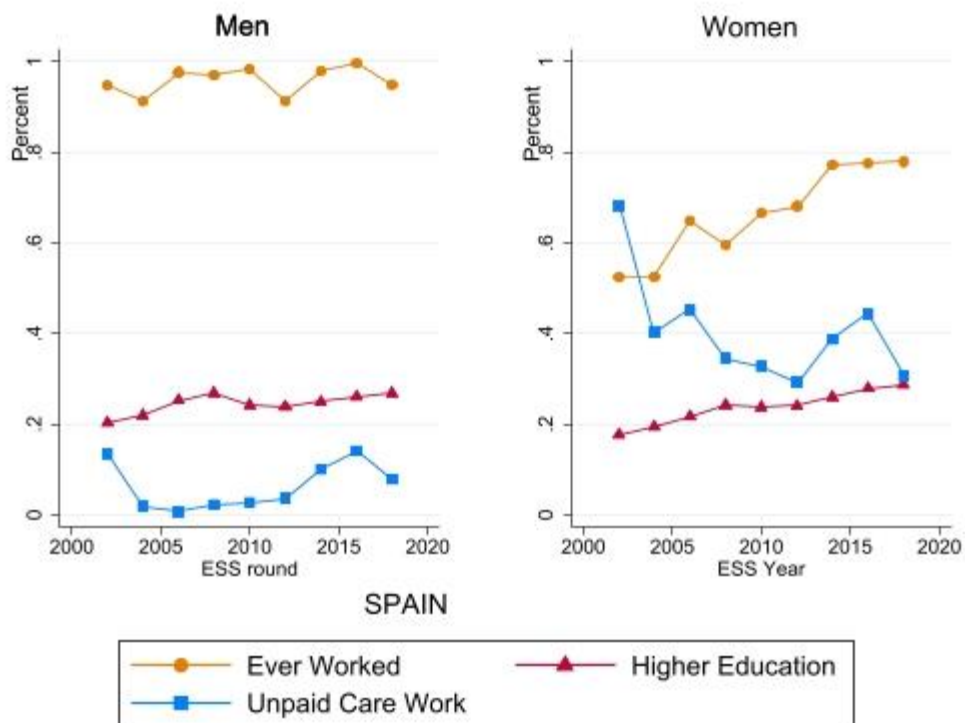
Source: ESS, years 2002-2018. Author's data elaboration. Sample weights applied. N=7,784.

## SPAIN

Spain is arguably the country that, in recent years, has seen the most abrupt changes in gender equality. If we look at the share of working women and women doing unpaid care work, we see two opposite trends: the former rising very sharply and the latter falling dramatically. These are changes of nearly 30 percentage points. Given the short period under consideration, the numbers are striking and unmatched by other countries. Moreover, for men the same percentages are much more stable, indicating a phenomenon related specifically to women empowerment rather than a country-wide trend. For higher education, the percentages are rising for both genders, but especially for women, as has already been seen in other country contexts.

Once again, the change in women's socioeconomic status is consistent with the shift in values. While in 2002 Spain was a country with low gender equality, in 2018 the situation has improved for all aspects, leading the country to the highest levels of women empowerment in Europe, along with Belgium.

Figure 10. Historical trends in the socioeconomic conditions of Spanish women compared with those of men.



Source: ESS, years 2002-2018. Author's data elaboration. Sample weights applied. N=12,562.

## CONCLUSIONS

This report aimed to describe the state of gender equality in Europe during the past decades. The analysis of historical change considered two aspects of the multifaceted concept of gender equality: on the one hand, the attitudes and values of the population on women's presence in the labour market and sexual work division, and on the other hand women's rates of higher education, paid work and unpaid care work. In addition to the time axis, the present report was structured in comparative terms, looking simultaneously at five European countries - Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Spain. The resulting image is of some common historical trends, but also important cross-country differences, which highlight the specificities of individual national experiences. The analysis consisted in an historical description using two large datasets, namely EVS for the study of public opinion and ESS for socioeconomic indicators. For EVS, the period from 1990 to 2017 was considered, while for ESS the period from 2002 to 2018. Important to note for the interpretation of the findings that we applied a rather restrictive criterion to those who support women empowerment: excluding those with an undecided position and seeing them as not supportive of a fair sharing of economic and caregiving responsibilities.

For all European countries, the general trend has been one of improvement in gender equality over time. In some countries there was a real 'revolution' in what people think about gender roles, with increases of up to 40 percentage points in support toward gender equality. Importantly, the changes have not only been in women's attitudes, but also in men's - which nonetheless register lower percentages of support.

In addition, women increasingly have paid jobs, are better educated, and are less engaged in unpaid care work. Regarding women's socioeconomic conditions, making a comparison with men allowed us to distinguish the changes common to the entire population from those specifically related to gender empowerment. The percentage of women with higher education and working women has increased at a faster rate than for men. Today, in contrast to 2002, the female population is generally more educated than the male population. At the individual country level, the trend regarding public opinion and the trend for women's socioeconomic indicators follow similar patterns, returning an overall consistent picture of the specific histories of different European societies.

Looking at the data, it is possible to distinguish the countries into three macro-groups - internally very different yet with some common characteristics. Other authors (e.g., Lewis et al., 2008) have previously divided European countries between north-western Europe, with a more equal pattern of sexual division of labour, and the less egalitarian southern Europe: to some extent this research confirms this distinction - except for Spain, which in recent years has become increasingly similar to the northern Europe. In our analysis, the first group consists of Belgium and Spain. These were the states with the

most favourable attitudes toward gender equality in 2017. Also, in both countries in 2018, the percentage of working women and women with higher education was high. In general, these two countries appear to be at the forefront of gender equality. However, while Belgium has been relatively supportive of gender equality from the beginning of the period under consideration, Spain started as lagging behind but has seen a dramatic and unparalleled improvement in the last decade on all dimensions taken into account.

The second group is represented by Austria. The latest available data show that there is a growing supportive attitude toward gender equality in the country, and the socioeconomic conditions of women are relatively favourable. However, the country does not record the high figures of Belgium and Spain, and the increase in the levels of gender equality over the years has been steady but more moderate.

Finally, in the third group are Italy and Poland. These are the countries where the lowest level of gender equality was recorded in 2017 out of all the European states considered. As a matter of fact, the two populations have the most conservative attitudes toward gender roles; moreover, there have been no significant changes in the percentage of working women over time. However, in contrast to Italy, in Poland things have considerably improved through the years - this can clearly be seen in the Polish population's values, which have seen stable and important growth in support for gender equality, starting from a low level. Italy, on the other hand, has not seen significant improvements and in some respects seems to be at a standstill - despite starting in 1990 from a situation of relatively egalitarian attitudes.

The measures of women's socioeconomic conditions have limitations that deserve some reflection. First, the analysis of the percentages of the female population in paid employment does not consider whether women have a full-time or part-time job, or a precarious job - migrant women, for instance, often work in very precarious conditions, where paid work does not indicate a significant improvement in their living standards. Therefore, the rise of working women, especially in the period following the economic recession, should be studied in more detail to understand what *kind* of work has increased and fully assess the consequences for gender equality. Similarly, the share of women with higher education does not give us any information about the field of study: women are better educated but their presence, for example, in the STEM field of specialization, remains limited. Finally, we do not know how much time women and men devote to unpaid care work; nor whether there are any discrepancies between self-reported and actual unpaid care work performed - i.e., what if men had the perception that they help more in the household than what women think? All these questions remain to be answered and would need information that is currently unavailable in the datasets considered by this report.

In conclusion, the data tell a story of growing gender equality in Europe, yet one in which there is still much progress to be made – the results are in line with the findings of other surveys (UN Women, 2022). Women are, even today, less likely to have paid jobs than men and conversely are more often involved in unpaid care work. Moreover, a significant portion of the European population is still not in

favour of gender equality, especially when looking at attitudes toward working mothers and the role of women in the family and society. In addition, the literature points out that, although the female population is generally better educated than the male population (e.g., Van Houtte, 2004; Hadjar & Buchmann, 2016), working women are still facing important disadvantages in terms of career advancement and remuneration (Ridgeway, 2011). These aspects were not considered by this report but need to be kept in mind to understand gender inequality in Europe and around the world. Furthermore, as also shown in D2.1, all these differences are supported by distinct policies, both gender-specific and universal policies that impact gender equality. Both trends in views and attitudes, as well as policies, are important to consider as they further interact with each other and impact each other. Gender mainstreaming policies - especially if accompanied by clearly defined gender equality policy objectives - could have impacted on these trends (see also Meier & Celis, 2011). Finally, in this report, little consideration could be given to how gender intersects with ethnicity, race, migrant status, and migration background, due to the relatively low representation of migrant and minoritised groups in both the ESS and EVS.

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