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No Stalled Revolution: The Closing Gender Gap in Early Careers in Europe and the United States

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Abstract: Women have surpassed men in higher education, yet their labor market progress relative to men is widely seen as stalled. We address this apparent contradiction by adopting a cohort perspective—since gender convergence is driven by cohort replacement rather than period effects—and focusing on early careers (ages 25–34), before parenthood widens the gender gap. Drawing on large-scale national data spanning several decades, we analyze single-year birth cohorts from 1960 to 1998 in France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States across multiple labor market outcomes. Our results show that gender gaps in employment, working hours, and occupational attainment have narrowed substantially in all countries studied. Most importantly, young women have made up considerable ground in total labor income: the gender gap has more than halved between the 1965 and 1995 birth cohorts. Although young women still lag behind young men, particularly mothers, our findings show steady convergence and challenge the narrative of stalled progress.

Keywords: gender gap; labor market; cohort analysis; income; Europe

Reproducibility Package: The statistical code, documentation, and instructions needed to reproduce all the empirical results reported in this article are publicly available at https://osf.io/ks4qj. As our analyses rely on restricted-access microdata, which we are not legally permitted to redistribute, the package contains the full code and step-by-step documentation of how each dataset can be obtained from the respective statistical agencies and data archives (see the Data availability section).

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THE massive expansion of tertiary education is one of the most notable social changes of the past five decades. This expansion has been accompanied by a dramatic reversal of the gender gap in education. In the mid-1980s, young men were more likely than young women to hold a tertiary degree in most Western countries. However, by the mid-2020s, the gap had completely reversed, with young women being more likely to hold a tertiary degree in all 38 OECD countries (OECD 2024a). In the European Union, for example, 52 percent of women aged 25–29 held a tertiary degree compared with 37 percent of men by 2024 (OECD 2024a).

Women's progress in educational attainment is possibly one of the most significant achievements in gender equality of the past half-century (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013). However, scholars have repeatedly expressed concern that these educational achievements have not led to greater success in the labor market (Bar-Haim et al. 2023; Bobbitt-Zeher 2007; van Hek et al. 2016; Vincent-Lancrin 2008). Consequently, gender disparities in the labor market are seen as highly persistent,

as England, Levine, and Mishel (2020:6,993) assert that "women's progress relative to men has slowed, and in some cases progress has stalled entirely."

The stalled convergence of men and women in the labor market is puzzling from a human capital perspective. This perspective assumes that workers seek jobs that maximize the return on their education, and that employers select the most productive workers, with productivity being driven by human capital (Becker 1994). This stall is also puzzling for credentialist and signaling theories, which hold that credentials are the primary currency of occupational entry. These theories expect women's rising education levels to translate into better labor market outcomes.

We shed light on this contradiction by analyzing several measures of labor market outcomes across six countries, adopting a cohort perspective focused on the early stages of careers. Our central question is whether the gender gap in labor market outcomes has narrowed across cohorts. Our focus on cohorts and early careers provides a stronger test of gender convergence for two reasons. First, distinguishing cohorts makes it possible to separate birth years with different educational levels. Today's gender gaps in the labor market among older workers are the result of educational choices made several decades ago. Pooling the entire workforce together therefore conflates older cohorts, where men are more educated, with younger cohorts, where women are more educated.

Second, education is most consequential for labor market outcomes in early careers. As the years pass after graduation, education becomes less important and work experience more important. By focusing on early careers, we can observe labor market outcomes before the birth of children leads to diverging work trajectories for mothers and fathers (Cortés and Pan 2023).

Our analysis of gender convergence in the labor market extends previous analyses focusing on single countries (Goldin 2021) by comparing France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Moreover, we present additional results for eight other European countries. Large-scale national data over several decades allow us to analyze single-year birth cohorts from 1960 to 1998, providing very granular cohort data. Our analysis does not examine returns to education, but rather analyzes the evolution of the gap between young men and women, aged 25–34, in employment, working hours, occupational attainment, and—most importantly—total labor income. Total individual labor income includes all earnings, including zero earnings of the economically inactive, and thus provides a more comprehensive measure than the commonly used gender pay gap. It is unaffected by differential selection into employment by men and women and summarizes disparities in employment, working hours, and hourly earnings in a single indicator.

We find a substantial narrowing of the gender gap across cohorts. Rather than stalled progress, our analysis over almost 40 birth years shows that young women are gradually catching up with young men in terms of employment, working hours, occupational attainment, and labor income. This is particularly evident when comparing childless men and women. The gap also narrows among young men and women with children, but it remains very large.

Theoretical Framework

Over the last half-century, one of the most consistent global trends in education has been the reversal of the gender gap in educational attainment (Bailey and DiPrete 2016; Katròák, Blossfeld, and Dosedìl 2025). This shift in the education system of Western countries has taken many by surprise: "Nobody predicted that women would overtake men so rapidly, so comprehensively, or so consistently around the world" (Reeves 2022:13).

However, the paradox of women's academic progress is that its impact on the labor market is supposedly limited. Although women have made progress in terms of employment (Mariscal-de-Gante et al. 2023; Olivetti and Petrongolo 2016), occupational attainment (Goldin 2021; Nennstiel and Becker 2025; Triventi et al. 2015), and earnings (Blau and Kahn 2017; Seehuus and Strømme 2024), they still work fewer hours, are less likely to be employed in the most prestigious occupations, and earn less than men (OECD 2018). The apparent contradiction between women's educational success and their subordinate labor market position has led Bar-Haim and colleagues (2023:835) to conclude that "education and earnings are two relatively independent dimensions of gender inequality."

However, most studies analyze gender gaps in the labor market over calendar years. This implicitly assumes that these gaps are driven by period effects, such as anti-discrimination laws or changing social norms, which benefit all women regardless of their age. Yet the gender gap in education has not been reversed due to a period effect, but rather due to a cohort effect. In Germany or the United States in 2020, older men were more educated than older women, but younger women were more educated than younger men. Consequently, as Campbell and Pearlman (2013) showed for the United States using the Current Population Survey, the decline in the gender wage gap between 1975 and 2009 owed very little to period effects. Instead, it was driven by cohort replacement: as younger (and more educated) cohorts of women replaced older (and less educated) cohorts of women, their wages became increasingly similar to those of men.

Such an analysis additionally benefits from focusing on early careers. Education is valuable in the labor market because it provides workers with skills and knowledge—or human capital—that allow them to be more productive in their jobs and earn higher wages. However, as workers grow older and their careers extend, the role of formal education in shaping human capital decreases, with other factors such as work experience, on-the-job training, and job-specific skills becoming more important (Cha and Weeden 2014; Goldin 2014; Polavieja 2012; Triventi et al. 2015). Although women increasingly start their careers on an equal footing with men, their labor market trajectories diverge once they become parents. Women who become mothers tend to reduce working hours or temporarily opt out of the workforce, whereas men who become fathers tend to increase their labor market attachment. As a result, women's careers are, on average across OECD countries, one-third shorter than men's (OECD 2018:212). This means that education is more tightly linked to labor market outcomes for women and men in their early careers, before parenthood leads to a gendered division of labor (Gangl and Ziefle 2009).

Although several factors contribute to gender inequality in the labor market—notably, segregated fields of study (Barone 2011; Kriesi and Imdorf 2019; Triventi 2013), occupational segregation (Murphy and Oesch 2016), and discrimination (Auspurg, Hinz and Sauer 2017)—parenthood has emerged as the key determinant in the past two decades (Kleven, Landais, and Leite-Mariante 2025). Empirical analyses suggest that more than two-thirds of the gender wage gap in Europe (Kleven et al. 2019) and the United States (Cortés and Pan 2023) is due to the differential impact that children have on the careers of men and women. For this reason, our analysis of gender convergence in the labor market focuses on the early careers of successive birth cohorts. Although the focus on the 25–34 age range does not exclude the years of parenthood, it provides an observation period during which many men and women in the countries studied do not yet have children.

Data and Methods

Country Selection

As the gender gap in education has been reversed across the Western world, we expect to see gender convergence in labor market outcomes across geographically and institutionally diverse countries. We have therefore selected six countries that differ in how they organize their labor markets and welfare states, and for which high-quality income data are available for the last three to four decades. Our selection yields France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Although we focus on these six countries, we also present summary results for eight additional European countries with consistent labor force data over the last three decades: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, and Spain.

Data

For each country, we select a national large-scale, individual-level dataset that spans at least three decades and provides detailed annual labor market information. For France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, this is the National Labor Force Survey (*Enquête Emploi* 1990–2023, SAKE/ESPA 1991–2024, and UK-LFS 1993–2024, respectively), whereas for the United States, it is the Current Population Survey (CPS 1962–2024). Labor income data for Sweden are obtained from national tax register data (1968–2021). Labor income data for Germany are obtained from a 2 percent random sample of German workers registered with the social security system (the Sample of Integrated Labor Market Biographies [SIAB], 1992–2021).

For Germany and Sweden, we examine the evolution of employment, working hours, and occupational attainment using the European Labor Force Survey (EU-LFS, 1992–2023). We also rely on the EU-LFS for occupations in France and the United Kingdom because the EU-LFS uses the common ISCO classification. We apply individual survey weights to the national surveys and the EU-LFS, whereas weights are not required for the DE-SIAB data, a random 2 percent subsample from the German employment register, and Sweden's register data, which cover the entire population.

Measures

Our analysis examines the following four outcomes that reflect labor market success in terms of being in (substantial) employment, attaining a given occupation, and earning a given labor income:

1. *Employment* is a binary measure that distinguishes between individuals in paid employment (as employees, employers, or self-employed) and individuals who are unemployed or economically inactive (e.g., students and caretakers).

2. *Working hours* are calculated as weekly working hours spent in gainful employment for all individuals, including those not in employment, by assigning them a value of zero hours.

3. *Occupational attainment* is measured using the indicator of Occupational Earning Potential (OEP). OEP expresses the median earnings of occupations as percentiles of the overall earnings structure, with values ranging between 11 and 91 (Oesch et al. 2026).[1] As OEP can only be assigned to individuals with information about their occupation (past or present), the size of this analytical sample is smaller than that of the others.

4. *Total labor income* measures the individual labor income for all respondents, including zero labor income of the unemployed and economically inactive individuals. It thus provides a broader picture of the gender gap in the labor market than the conventional gender wage gap, which excludes the economically inactive and thereby ignores gender-differential selection into employment. In countries with lower female employment, such as those in Southern Europe, working women tend to be more positively selected on potential wages than in countries with higher female employment, such as the United States. In these cases, comparing only men's and women's wages underestimates the real extent of the gender wage gap (Olivetti and Petrongolo 2008, 2016).

We imputed missing variables for education, OEP, working hours, and income in the CPS and the labor force surveys using sequential linear regressions. Swedish register and DE-SIAB income data required no imputation. We adjusted labor income for inflation and set values above the 99th percentile within a birth year to that percentile, thereby top-coding income. In Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States, labor income includes both employees and the self-employed. In France and the United Kingdom, the labor force surveys do not report self-employment income. We use CPS data to compare the evolution of gender income gaps with and without self-employment income for the United States (see Fig. A.1 in the online supplement). The results are virtually identical, suggesting that excluding self-employment income in France and the United Kingdom should not affect our conclusions.

In Germany, we use the SIAB database for the years 1992–2021, covering East and West Germany. SIAB only includes social security-registered employees, not the entire population. It thus excludes civil servants and the self-employed, who make up a steady 17–18 percent of the labor force over the last three decades, as

well as the economically inactive. Although our German measure of the income gap is fully consistent over time, it resembles the gender wage gap, and its level is therefore not comparable with the gap in total labor income used for the other five countries.

In further analyses, we distinguish parents from nonparents. We define individuals as parents if they live with at least one child of their own, aged less than 18 in the United States or less than 15 in Switzerland. For France and the United Kingdom, the variable does not specify whether these children are the respondents' own offspring. To avoid misclassifying younger siblings or cohabitants, we set a minimum age gap of 19 years between the respondent and the child if the age of the children is available. Information on children in the household is not available in the German SIAB data. Table A.1 in the online supplement shows the descriptive statistics for our analysis.

Model

Our main analysis is based on the following model:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{it} = {} & \alpha + \beta_1 \, \text{Female}_i \\ & + \beta_{2a} \, \text{BirthYear}_i + \beta_{3a}(\text{Female}_i \times \text{BirthYear}_i) + \beta_{4b} \, \text{Age}_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}, \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where Y is the labor market outcome for individual i at time t, Female_i is a binary indicator of sex, BirthYear_i is a categorical variable of the birth year, varying for each year between 1960 and 1998 (i.e., a $\in \{ 1960, \ldots, 1998 \}$), and $\text{Female}_i \times \text{BirthYear}_i$ is the interaction term between sex and birth year. This interaction tells us whether women in younger birth cohorts have caught up with men in terms of employment, working hours, occupational attainment, and income. The only additional control variable we include is Age_{it} (in years, represented by dummies, i.e., b $\in \{ 25, \ldots, 34 \}$), which accounts for differences in age composition within the 25–34 age range.

We estimate the model separately for each country using linear regressions, which pool all available annual surveys or registers from the past three to four decades. For robustness, we include only birth years observed at least at two different ages (except in Sweden, where full population data are available). For example, since the American CPS data end in 2024, we restrict our analysis to cohorts born up to 1998, observed at ages 25 and 26 in 2023 and 2024. We also require at least 600 observations per birth year to ensure stable estimates, though most cohorts far exceed this threshold. When pooled together, our analytical samples of 25–34-year-olds range from 218,770 (Switzerland) to 40,458,317 (Sweden—see Table A.1 in the online supplement). All results are presented graphically as predicted margins. Tables A.2–A.9 in the online supplement show all the predicted margins and confidence intervals for the 1965 and 1995 birth cohorts.

Our main model does not control for children because decisions about the timing and number of children depend on changing educational and employment prospects across cohorts. To the extent that educational expansion has improved women's labor market outcomes, motherhood has been postponed. Children are

therefore a post-treatment variable. However, in additional analyses, we document the gender income gap for individuals with and without children.

Results

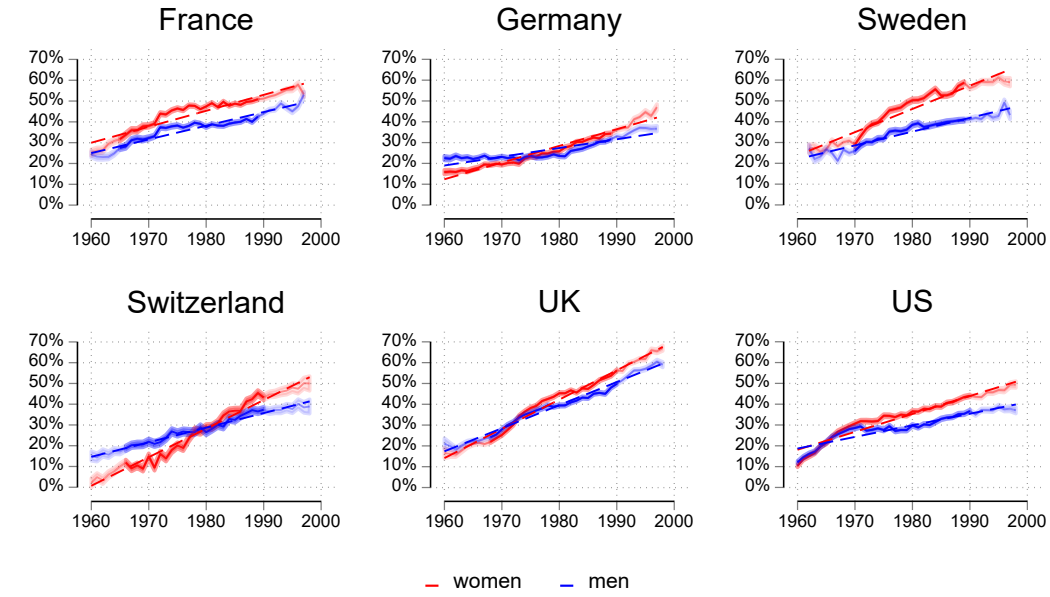
Trends over Time

Before examining labor market outcomes, Figure 1 shows the reversal in education by plotting the proportion of men and women aged 25–34 with a tertiary qualification by year of birth (showing the predicted margins based on equation [1]). Although the timing differs by country, the trend is very similar. In France and Sweden, women began to outperform men in higher education already in cohorts born in the 1960s. In the United States, this occurred in the 1970 birth cohort, in the United Kingdom and Germany in the mid-1970s cohorts, and in Switzerland in the early 1980s cohorts. In the 1995 birth cohort, which graduated around the year 2020, the gender gap in tertiary education was largest in Sweden and smallest in the United Kingdom, with the other four countries falling in between.

We move on to labor market outcomes by briefly discussing the gender gap in employment (see Fig. A.2 in the online supplement). Among the 1965 birth cohort, young women's employment rates were almost 20 percentage points lower than those of young men in France, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The gap was somewhat smaller in the United States (around 15 percentage points) and, above all, in Sweden (7 percentage points). Across subsequent cohorts, the employment rate of women increased everywhere. Consequently, in the 1995 birth cohort, young women had almost caught up with young men in all six countries, with the gender gap in employment shrinking to between 3 and 6 percentage points.

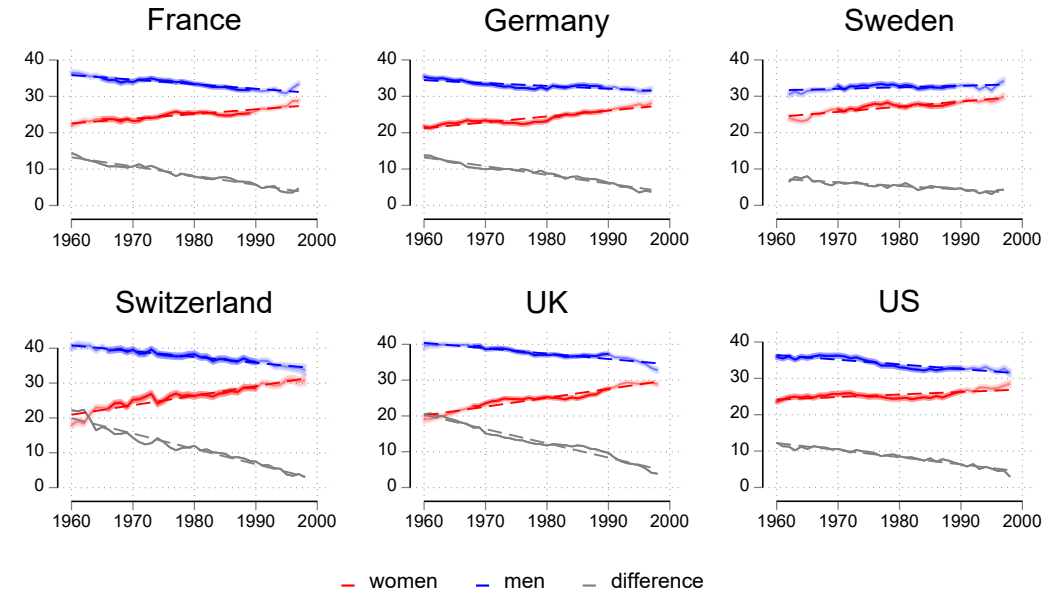
However, employment rates may overestimate gender convergence if women are more likely to work part-time and men are more likely to work long hours. For this reason, we use paid weekly working hours—including zero hours for nonemployed individuals—as a more accurate measure of labor market participation. Figure 2 shows that men's weekly hours declined by at least 3 h between the 1965 and 1995 birth cohorts in all countries except Sweden, where male hours were lower to begin with. In contrast, women's weekly hours rose substantially across the same cohorts—by 8 h in Switzerland and the United Kingdom, 5 h in Germany and Sweden, and 2–3 h in France and the United States. Among the 1995 cohort, men worked on average 30–35 h per week, and women 26–31 h. As a result, the gender gap narrowed to less than 4 h in France, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland, to 5 h in the United States, and to 6 h in the United Kingdom, down from a gender gap of more than 10 h in the 1965 cohort.

Shifting the focus from the quantity to the quality of work, Figure 3 shows that OEP has risen across successive birth cohorts for both young men and women in all six countries, reflecting an overall upgrading of the occupational structure. In the 1965 cohort, averaged across countries, young men had an OEP of 48 and young women 40. This means that men worked in occupations with median earnings that exceeded those of 48 percent of the labor force, compared with 40 percent for young women. Since then, women's occupational attainment has improved faster, but men in recent cohorts still work in slightly higher-paying occupations. In the 1995 birth



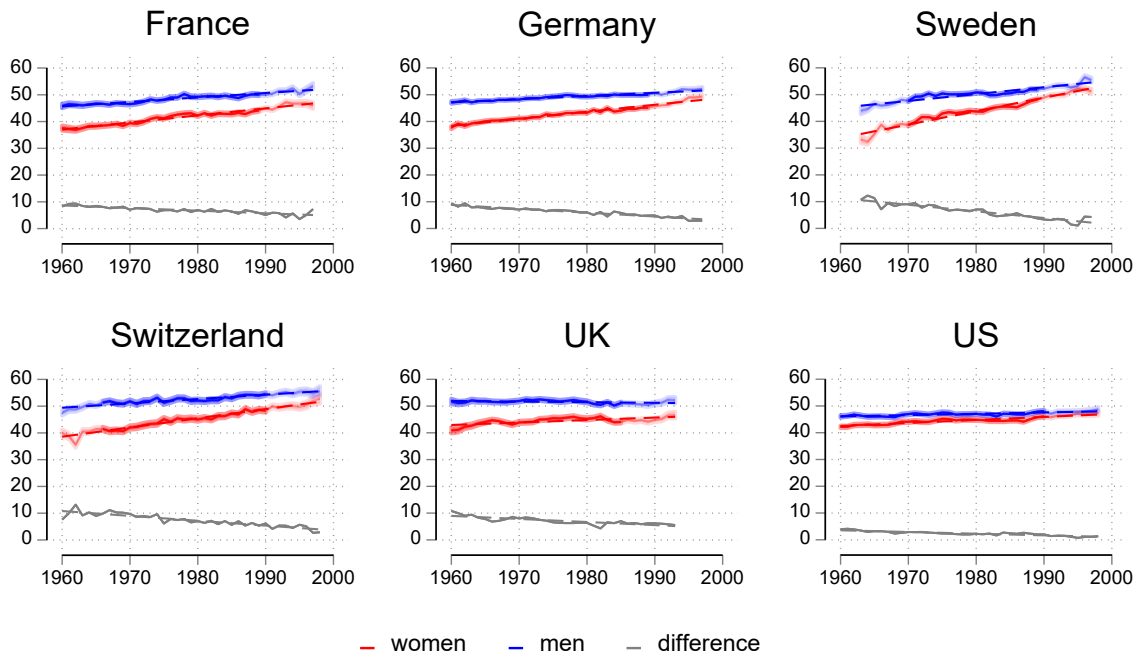
x-axis: birth year
Data: National LFS (FR,CH,UK); EU-LFS (DE,SE); CPS (US)
Transparent (opaque) lines: 2 to 9 (all 10) of ages 25-34 observed per birth year.

Figure 1: Share of men and women aged 25–34 with a tertiary degree by birth year.



x-axis: birth year
Data: National LFS (FR,CH,UK); EU-LFS (DE,SE); CPS (US)
Transparent (opaque) lines: 2 to 9 (all 10) of ages 25-34 observed per birth year.

Figure 2: Weekly working hours (including zero hours) aged 25–34, by birth year.



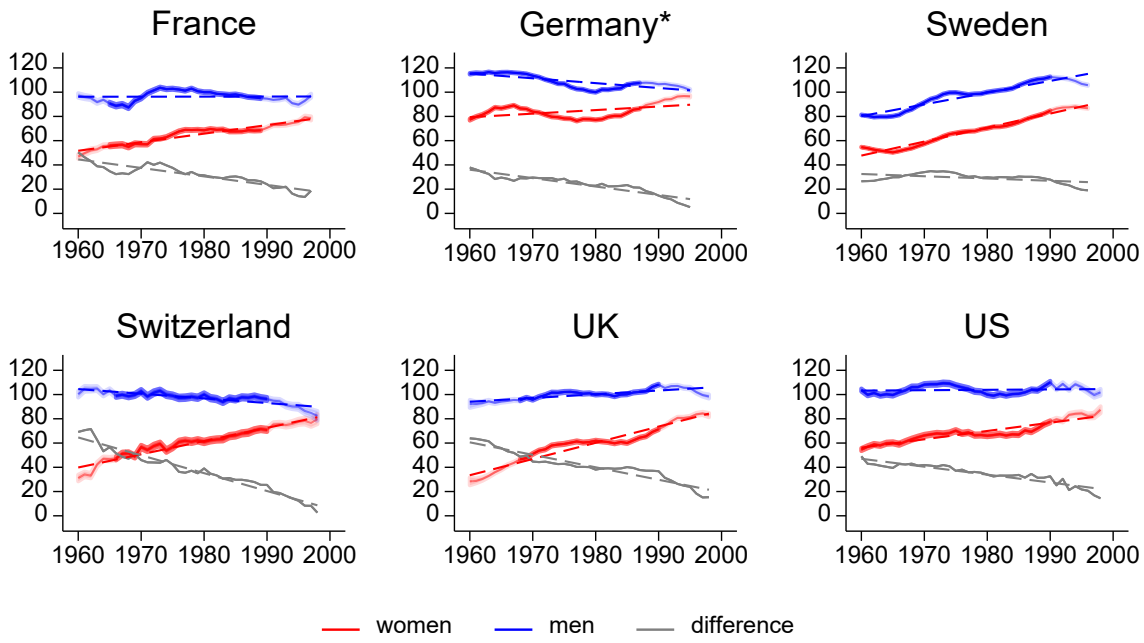
x-axis: birth year
Data: National LFS (CH); EU-LFS (FR,DE,SE,UK); CPS (US)
Transparent (opaque) lines: 2 to 9 (all 10) of ages 25-34 observed per birth year.

Figure 3: Occupational earning potential (OEP) of men and women aged 25–34 by birth year.

cohort, the average OEP was 50 for young men and 47 for young women. Across the six countries, the gender gap in OEP therefore fell from 7.9 to 3.3 percentile points between the 1965 and 1995 cohorts.

The disparity in employment, working hours, and occupational attainment can be summarized by the gender gap in total labor income, including zero income (see Fig. 4). In the 1965 cohort, women's labor income was 55 –60 percent less than men's in the United Kingdom and Switzerland, and about 40 percent less in France, Sweden, and the United States. The trend was similar across cohorts and countries, with women's incomes rising considerably. In the 1995 birth cohorts, the gender gap in labor income had fallen to between 14 percent (Switzerland) and 23 percent (United Kingdom) in all countries. The convergence of male and female incomes was particularly rapid in Switzerland, where the confidence intervals overlap for the labor market entrants in the 1998 birth cohort. To ensure that this convergence is not an artifact of the Swiss Labor Force Survey, we replicate the analysis on individual labor income using a different data source, the Swiss Household Panel (SHP, 1999–2024). This analysis confirms that labor incomes for young men and women born in 1995 and 1996, observed when aged 25– 29, did not differ in Switzerland (see Fig. A.3 in the online supplement).

As noted earlier, the gender gap in Germany is not directly comparable to that in the other five countries, as the German sample excludes the economically inactive. This makes it more akin to a gender wage gap measure. Nonetheless, the indicator is fully consistent over time and shows a marked decline in men's wage advantage



x-axis: birth year
Data: National LFS (FR,CH,UK); SIAB(DE)*; CPS (US); tax register (SE)
Transparent (opaque) lines: 2 to 9 (all 10) of ages 25-34 observed per birth year.
* Only includes gainfully employed workers

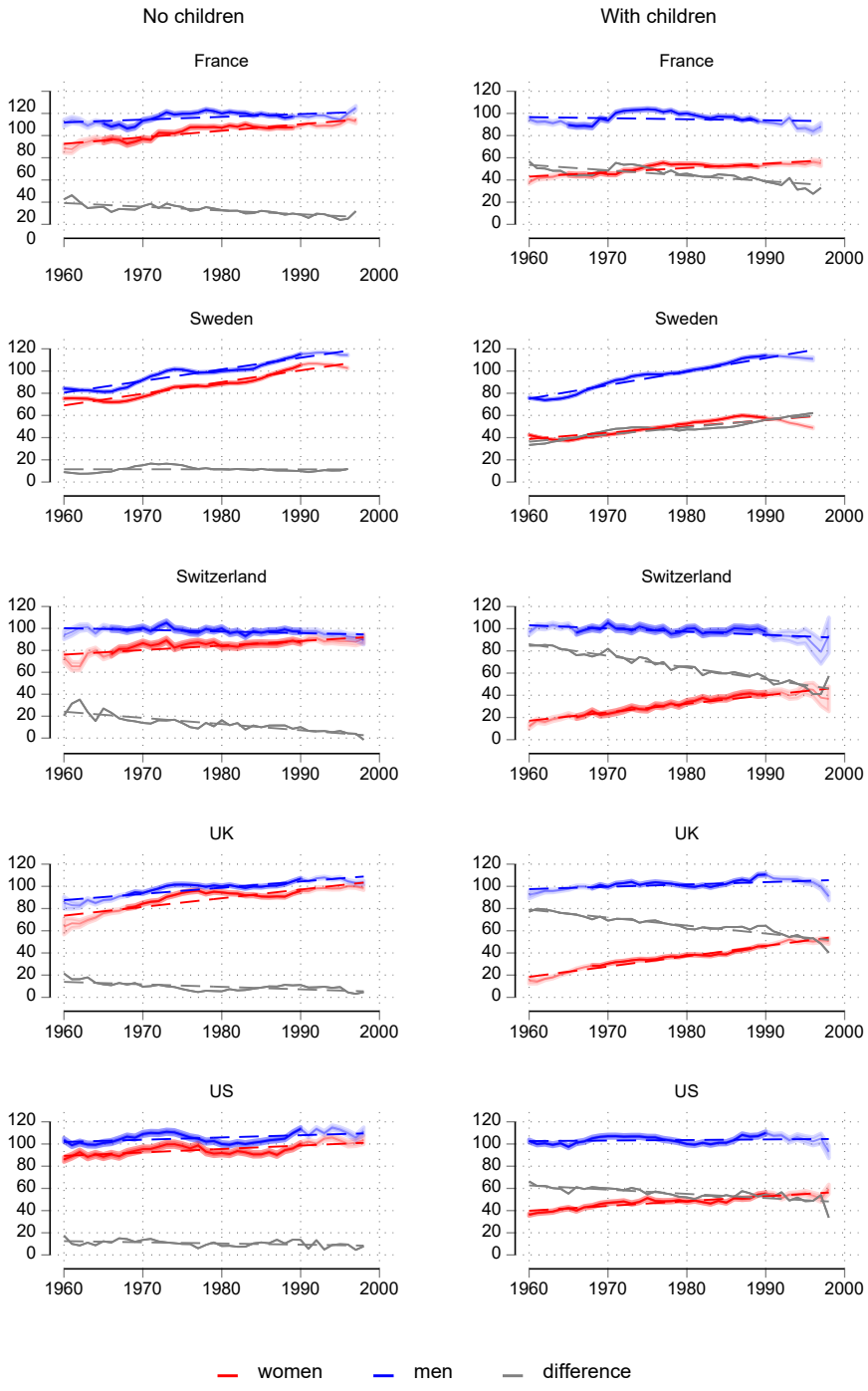
Figure 4: Labor income (including zero income), aged 25–34, by birth year (indexed to men born in 1980 = 100).

across cohorts: from 25 percent in the 1965 birth cohort to 5 percent in the 1995 birth cohort.

The gender gap in labor income differs sharply by parenthood status. Figure 5 shows that the gap in labor income was already comparatively small among childless young adults in the 1965 cohort: 27 percent in Switzerland, 18 percent in France, 14 percent in the United Kingdom, 12 percent in the United States, and 11 percent in Sweden. By contrast, the gap was far larger among parents, amounting to about 50 percent in France and Sweden, 55 percent in the United States, and 75 percent in Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Across cohorts, the gender gap in labor income decreased for both parents and nonparents. Among nonparents in the 1995 cohort, the gap had fallen to between 7 percent and 9 percent in Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and even to 4 percent in France. The gap also narrowed substantially among parents. The fact that gender convergence occurred in a similar way among nonparents and parents (except in Sweden) suggests that the decline in fertility and the delay in the timing of first births are unlikely to be the main causes of gender convergence in Western countries.

Sweden is an exception. The labor incomes of men and women with children stagnated and even widened slightly across the 1965–1995 birth cohorts. One potential explanation is that men and women having children in their twenties and early thirties have become a more selective group of the population over time.



x-axis: birth year
Data: National LFS (FR,CH,UK); CPS (US); tax register (SE)
Children under 18 in household (CH: under 15)
Transparent (opaque) lines: 2 to 9 (all 10) of ages 25-34 observed per birth year.

Figure 5: Total labor income, aged 25–34, with and without children by birth year (indexed to men born in 1980 = 100).

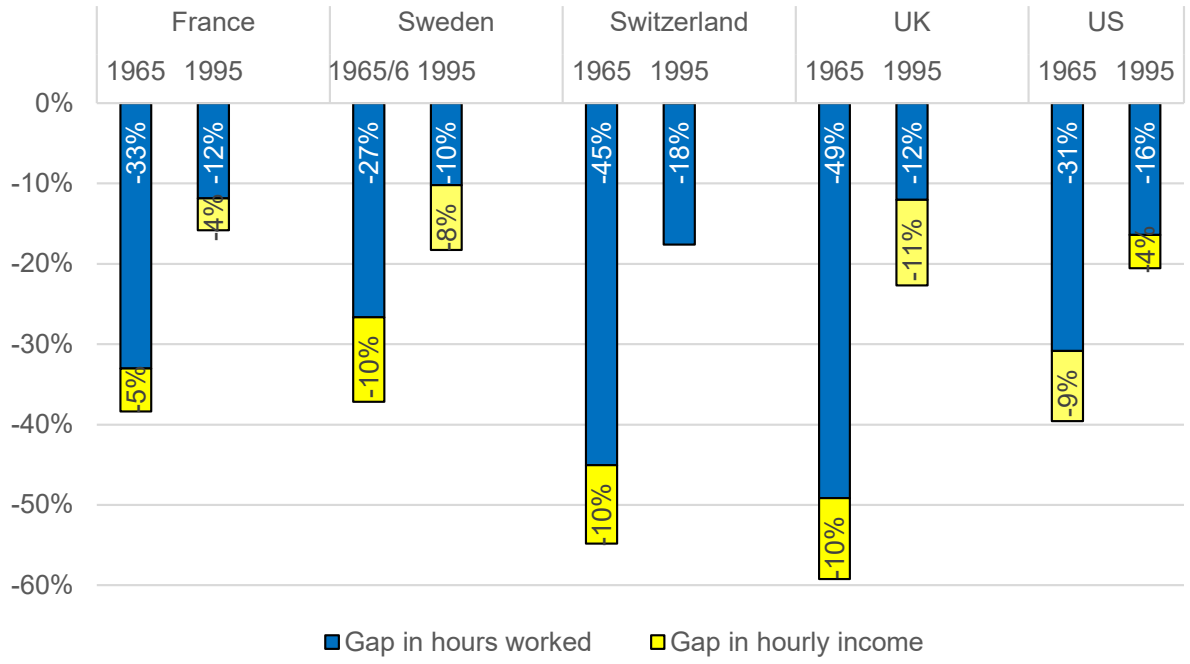


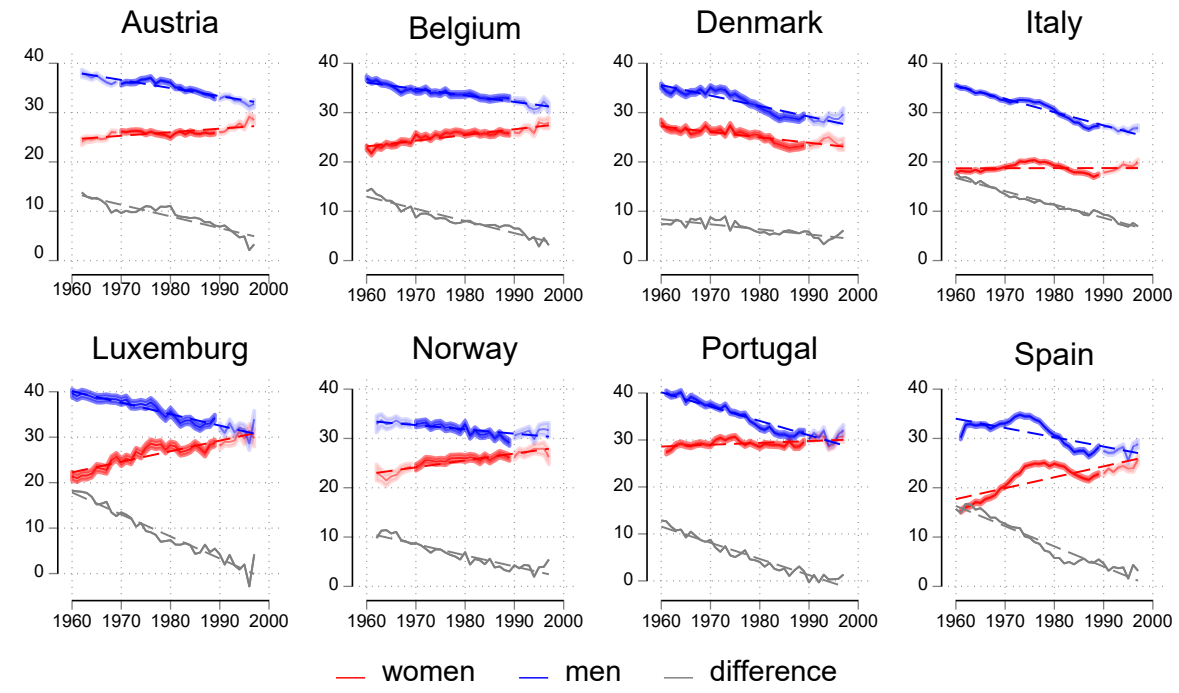
Figure 6: Decomposing the gender gap in labor income into hours worked and hourly income by birth year.

Another explanation is that gendered parenthood leave mechanically widens labor-income gaps among parents, since paid leave received by mothers is not counted as labor income. Because leave entitlements and actual take-up are longer for mothers than for fathers, births tend to widen the *labor income* gap between parents more than the total *disposable income* gap (which includes benefits). Sweden's leave entitlements are considerably more generous than those in France, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and, especially, the United States.[2] Although generous leave may explain why Swedish parents show a large labor income gap among parents, it does not explain why this gap failed to narrow across cohorts—unlike in other countries, where leave policies also exist, but convergence has continued.

Decomposition of the Time Trend

Is the convergence of labor incomes driven by an increase in women's labor market participation or their higher hourly earnings? Labor income is the product of hours worked multiplied by hourly earnings. Since we observe labor income and hours worked directly in our data, we can derive hourly income, decomposing the gender gap in labor income into the parts due to hours worked and hourly income (see online supplement B for the equation).[3]

Figure 6 shows the decomposition results for the 1965 and 1995 birth cohorts. In all countries, the gender income gap is primarily due to differences in hours worked, accounting for around three-quarters of the total gap, with hourly income differences accounting for the remaining quarter. Sweden's and the United Kingdom's 1995 cohorts are an exception, with hourly income contributing almost as



x-axis: birth year
Data: EU-LFS
Transparent (opaque) lines: 2 to 9 (all 10) of ages 25-34 observed per birth year.

Figure 7: Working hours, aged 25–34, by birth year—eight additional countries.

much to the gender gap as hours worked. Over time, gender convergence was mainly driven by falling differences in hours worked in France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. However, in Switzerland and the United States, a declining gap in hourly income also made a substantial contribution.

This decomposition analysis captures the gender gap in hourly income for the full population. Figure C.1 (in online supplement C) shows the gap in hourly income for *employed* men and women—the traditional gender wage gap—in the four countries, where income and hours are recorded in the same dataset. The hourly gap in labor income between young men and women also narrows between the 1965 and 1995 cohorts: from 8 percent to 5 percent in France, 18 percent to 4 percent in Switzerland, 15 percent to 8 percent in the United Kingdom, and 14 percent to 7 percent in the United States.

The Gender Gap in Eight More Countries

Do our findings of a closing gender gap in labor market outcomes hold beyond the six countries studied? We replicate our analysis for eight more European countries for which the EU-LFS provides consistent annual employment and occupation data spanning at least three decades.

Figure 7 shows how working hours (including zero hours) evolved across cohorts of young men and women born from the early 1960s to the late 1990s. In

these countries as well, the gender gap in paid hours has narrowed substantially. In Belgium, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Spain, the gap shrank from 10–15 weekly hours in the 1965 birth cohort to 3 h or less in the 1995 cohort. Starting from similar levels in the 1965 cohort, the gap decreased in the 1995 cohort to 4–5 h in Austria, Denmark, and Norway. Interestingly, Denmark was a forerunner in the 1965 cohort (among young men and women whom we observe in the 1990s), but no longer in the 1995 cohort (observed in the 2020s). Finally, Italy had the largest gender gap in the 1995 cohort, at 7 h. However, even the Italian gender gap in working time was more than halved relative to the 1965 cohort.

The EU-LFS has no detailed information on income (only on income deciles starting in 2009), but it includes occupation data. This allows us to compare the evolution of OEP for young men and women across cohorts. Figure A.4 in the online supplement shows strong convergence in occupational attainment for Denmark and Norway: in the 1965 cohort, young men worked in occupations that were 11 percentile points higher in the earnings structure than women's occupations. In the 1995 cohort, the male advantage in OEP had fallen to 3 percentile points in both countries. In Luxembourg, the gender gap in OEP decreased even more between cohorts, from 7 to 1 percentile point. The occupational attainment gap also narrowed substantially in Austria, but only modestly in Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. However, the gap was already smaller in the 1965 cohort in these countries because the young women working there in the 1990s (born in 1965) were a smaller—and thus probably more selective—group than the women working in the early 2020s (born in 1995).

Conclusion

This article began with an apparent contradiction: women have made remarkable educational gains over recent decades, yet their labor market progress relative to men is widely seen as having stalled. Rather than analyzing the link between education and employment, our article has tested the stalled-progress hypothesis in the labor market along five dimensions: (1) adopting a cohort perspective, since gender convergence is driven by cohort replacement rather than period effects; (2) focusing on early careers, before parenthood widens the gender gap; (3) using single-year birth cohorts, made possible by pooling large annual samples over several decades; (4) analyzing the gender gap in total labor income, which avoids the problem of differential selection into employment; and (5) comparing the evolution of gender gaps across 14 Western countries.

Once we adopt a cohort perspective and focus on ages 25–34, we find steady labor market gains for women across birth cohorts over the past four decades. To begin with, the employment gap has narrowed substantially in all countries studied. In the cohorts born in the early 1960s, young women's employment rates lagged behind young men's by 20 percentage points across France, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. By the 1995 cohort, the gender gap had shrunk to just 3–6 percentile points.

Strong convergence is also evident in working hours. Across birth cohorts, young women have steadily increased their weekly working hours, whereas young

men have decreased theirs. Consequently, the gender gap has narrowed to less than 4 h in France, Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland, 5 h in the United States, and 6 h in the United Kingdom, down from 10 h and more in the 1965 cohort. Further analysis shows that the gender gap in weekly hours has almost disappeared in the 1995 birth cohort in Luxembourg and Portugal. Young women also narrowed the disparity in occupational attainment: the gender gap in OEP halved between the cohorts born in 1965 and 1995.

We also observe a narrowing gap in labor income, our preferred indicator of gender inequality in the labor market. Standing at a third (France, Sweden, and the United States) and half (Switzerland and the United Kingdom) for the 1965 cohort, this gap has fallen to 20 percent and less in the cohorts born in the late 1990s. In Germany, where only employees are observed, the gender wage gap narrowed substantially from 25 percent to 5 percent. Our decomposition analysis shows that the convergence of the gender gap in labor income across countries was primarily driven by an increase in women's working hours, though the gap in hourly incomes also decreased.

The sociological literature places great emphasis on status-based devaluation of female-dominated jobs. If evaluative discrimination were the dominant mechanism sustaining gender gaps, we would expect those gaps to be more stable across cohorts than our results show. Consistent with this interpretation, two recent survey experiments find that the status-based penalty associated with female occupations is real but modest in magnitude.[4]

The sociological literature also strongly highlights differences in fields of study and occupations when explaining gender gaps in the labor market. Yet our analysis of men's and women's OEP over time suggests that these differences are becoming less central. Although the earning potential of occupations has risen for both sexes, women's gains have outpaced men's. Consequently, the gender gap in occupational attainment decreased substantially across birth cohorts.

Parenthood, by contrast, remains a major fracture line, with young fathers earning substantially more than young mothers. By restricting our analysis to the observation window of early careers—when many people are still childless—we may therefore paint an overly rosy picture of gender equality. Nevertheless, our results show that the gender gap has not only narrowed considerably among childless men and women but also among parents in four out of five countries over time, with Sweden the exception. Although the level of labor market inequality remains much larger for parents than for nonparents, the trend toward narrowing gaps over time is similar for both groups. Whether this trend will continue as the 1990 birth cohorts—currently in their late 20s and early 30s—enter middle adulthood is an open question.

Women's catch-up has been stronger in France, the United Kingdom, and, above all, Switzerland than in the United States and Sweden. In terms of the working hours gap, the continental countries Germany, France, and Switzerland—as well as Belgium and Luxembourg—have caught up with Sweden and overtaken the United States, featuring a smaller gap in the 1995 birth cohort. Likewise, the labor income gap between young men and women has shrunk more quickly and to a lower level in France and Switzerland than in Sweden or the United States.

The slow-down in gender convergence in Sweden—echoed by results for Denmark—and, to a lesser extent, in the United States, is striking. As Sweden and the United States have gone from frontrunners to followers, we observe very similar labor market gaps among young men and women born in the 1990s across a dozen Western countries. The comparative literature on the gender revolution often focuses on institutional differences in welfare states and family policy. However, the secular trend of educational expansion may be underappreciated as a common force that makes young women's labor market careers increasingly similar to those of young men.

In sum, our cohort analysis reveals broad convergence, contradicting the narrative of a stalled gender revolution. Cohorts in France, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom born in the 1990s show much smaller gender gaps in employment, working hours, occupational attainment, and labor income than cohorts born in the 1980s, who in turn show smaller gaps than those born in the 1970s and 1960s. Progress in the United States and, above all, Sweden is less dramatic but nonetheless evident. Although current labor markets still favor men, the underlying trajectory favors women: the gender revolution remains incomplete (Esping-Andersen 2009), but it is still very much under way.

Data Availability

Our analyses are based on the following microdata sources. With the exception of the Current Population Survey, the datasets we used cannot be redistributed by the authors, but they are available to researchers from the statistical agencies and data archives listed as follows.

France. French Labor Force Survey (Enquête Emploi), 1990–2023, collected by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE, https://www.insee.fr). The microdata are available to researchers through the Progedo–ADISP data archive (https://data.progedo.fr).

Germany. Sample of Integrated Labor Market Biographies (SIAB), a 2 percent random sample of workers registered with the German social security system; we use the Scientific Use File of the SIAB Regional File (SIAB-R 7521), covering the years 1992–2021. The data are available to researchers from the Research Data Centre (FDZ) of the Federal Employment Agency at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB, https://fdz.iab.de).

Sweden. Swedish tax register data covering the entire population, 1968–2021, provided by Statistics Sweden (SCB). As a researcher, you must be associated with a Swedish organization in order to access the registers through SCB's remote access system MONA (https://www.scb.se/en/services/ordering-data-and-statistics/microdata/).

Switzerland. Swiss Labor Force Survey (SAKE/ESPA), 1991–2024, conducted by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO); the microdata are available for research purposes under a data protection contract (https://www.bfs.admin.ch). For robustness analyses, we additionally use the Swiss Household Panel (SHP),

1999–2024, run by FORS and distributed to researchers free of charge via SWISSUbase (https://www.swissubase.ch).

United Kingdom. United Kingdom Labor Force Survey (UK-LFS), 1993–2024, produced by the Office for National Statistics and distributed by the United Kingdom Data Service. Access to the UK-LFS microdata requires registration with the United Kingdom Data Service (https://ukdataservice.ac.uk).

United States. Current Population Survey (CPS), 1962–2024. We use the harmonized microdata provided by IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota (https://cps.ipums.org).

Eight additional European countries. European Labor Force Survey (EU-LFS), 1992–2023, provided by Eurostat; the scientific-use files are available to researchers at recognized research institutions upon application (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-labor-force-survey).

Notes

1 For example, if engineers have an OEP of 80 and secretaries an OEP of 35, this indicates that their median earnings exceed those of 80 and 35 percent of the workforce, respectively. The OEP scale is based on labor market data from Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, averaged over 2000–2021 (Oesch et al. 2026).

2 In 2023 full-rate equivalents, the paid leave entitlements in weeks were for mothers/fathers: France 19.7/8.7 weeks; Germany 42.6/5.7; Sweden 34.4/10.8; Switzerland 7.8/1.1; United Kingdom 11.7/0.4; and United States 0/0 (OECD 2024b).

3 The decomposition analysis captures the gender gap in hourly income for the full population. Online supplement C also shows the gap in hourly income for employed men and women—the traditional gender wage gap.

4 In a survey experiment in the United States, occupations with 65% women were assigned a 1.5% lower wage than those with 25% women (Taylor et al. 2026:9). In a survey experiment in Germany, feminine occupational titles received 0.5 prestige points less (on a 0–100 scale) than masculine ones (Hamjediers et al. 2026:11).

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