

Inequalities across the life-course: gender, sexuality, and work-life balance over labour market careers

The policy agenda around social inequality is multifaceted and its relevance only heightened following global crises such as the Great Recession and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic. The [Dynamics of Inequality Across the Life-course: structures and processes](#) (DIAL) research programme was designed with this policy agenda in mind – and it has also responded to the developments of the pandemic during the past 1.5 years. The way in which social inequalities develop over the life-course and across different life domains is at the core of DIAL research, and the research programme aims to contribute knowledge on how social inequality can be tackled.

One major policy agenda that DIAL research addresses is that related to gender equality, for example, the EU's Gender Equality Strategy for 2020–25 and the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs. Both of these emphasise the need to close gender gaps across the labour market, and an important group are mothers.

This is addressed, for example, in the [Human capital and inequality during adolescence and working life](#) (HuCIAW) project. Their research highlights how one reason behind the stagnating gender wage gap in the UK is the part-time work that mothers undertake, which leaves them at a disadvantage regarding earnings growth (Costa Dias et al. 2021). Yet mothers in the UK do compensate for career interruptions related to childbearing by taking up training, which could be promoted further (Blundell et al. 2020).

A counterfactual scenario is provided by Finland – a country where the institutional context regarding training and part-time work is better and which also has a range of other policies that support work-family balance and gender equality. Research from the [Inequality, early adult life courses and economic outcomes at mid-life in comparative context](#) (EQUALLIVES) project shows that earnings inequalities between genders and family types have not been eradicated in Finland (Jalovaara & Fasang 2020). The research also highlights a significant but largely overlooked social risk group of low earning never partnered childless men.

Achieving a balance between work and family

The association between labour market and family events is an important aspect of work-life balance. The way in which labour market shocks influence divorce risks (and vice versa) has been studied in the [Critical Life Events and the Dynamics of Inequality: Risk, Vulnerability, and Cumulative Disadvantage](#) (CRITEVENTS) project. The results indicate that the relationship between job loss and relationship breakdown is not a causal one, but rather linked to other factors that predispose the same individuals to both (Anderson et al. 2021). However, when it comes to actually spending time unemployed rather than losing one's job and immediately moving on to the next one, there is a greater risk of relationship breakdown.

Unemployment also has an impact on individuals' health, as indicated by further CRITEVENTS research (Tattarini & Grotti 2020). This negative impact tends to be greater

from men than for women, and the gender difference is greater in countries where gender roles are more traditional than in more egalitarian societies.

The persistence of gender roles within families has also been underscored by EQUALLIVES research during the pandemic (Sánchez et al. 2021). The lockdown in spring 2020 increased housework for parents whose children could not attend school or childcare facilities in the UK. During this time men took up a greater share of the housework than they had done previously. Yet after lockdown, couples quickly returned to their earlier patterns of gender division, particularly in families with children under five.

Both pieces of research highlight how far we are from achieving gender equality in both the labour market and within families, which would be to the benefit of both men and women.

Tackling inequalities related to sexual orientation and gender identity

The policy atmosphere for sexual and gender identity minorities has changed tremendously, which has had a significant impact on the lives of individuals identifying as LGBTQI+, as demonstrated by research in the [Comparing Intersectional Life Course Inequalities amongst LGBTQI+ Citizens in Four European Countries](#) (CILIA-LGBTQI+) project. Nevertheless, discrimination is persistent in places and can have repercussions for job satisfaction, for example. In the UK, this seems to affect bisexual men in particular (Bayrakdar & King 2021).

The CILIA-LGBTQI+ project has also produced innovative methodological tools to assess the ways different policies and cultures at both the national and workplace level influence the labour market integration of LGBTQI+ individuals, taking into account the heterogeneity of this population (Hall et al. 2021). Research from the project also emphasizes that the implementation of policies addressing LGBTQI+ inequalities at national and local levels is uneven and should be monitored and mainstreamed to a greater extent.

Gender inequalities in reaching retirement

Extending working lives and promoting active ageing have become important in the policy agendas of national governments as well as the EU. The EU's Gender Equality strategy also highlights gendered risks of old-age poverty due to accumulated earnings and employment gaps.

The [Dynamics of Accumulated Inequalities for Seniors in Employment](#) (DAISIE) project has produced a [series of reports](#) analysing the gendered impacts of extended working life policies in five European countries, the EU, and the OECD. They emphasize that greater consideration should be placed on health and the requirements of workers in physically demanding or stressful work. Moreover, older workers increasingly also have caring responsibilities and these are often greater for women than men. Flexible work options for older workers should be developed further.

References

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