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EQUAL WORK, UNEQUAL PAY: UNDERSTANDING THE GENDER PAY GAP IN THE EU AND TÜRKİYE

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Gender inequality remains a persistent global challenge. No country has yet fully achieved gender equality. Disparities are observable across all facets of daily life, including political participation, the labour market, and access to healthcare. Women continue to bear the brunt of these inequalities.

According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2025, Iceland ranks first with a score of 92.6%, making it the only country to have exceeded the 90% threshold in closing the gender gap.[1] An analysis across income levels reveals that high-income countries (74.3%) have made greater progress in narrowing the gender gap compared to upper-middle-income (69.6%), lower-middle-income (66.0%), and low-income countries (66.4%). These figures underscore the fact that achieving gender equality remains a complex and ongoing process, even for nations currently demonstrating relatively strong performance.

The workplace can be highly discriminatory based on gender. Women often face a range of challenges, including discrimination related to marital or maternal status, undervaluation of their performance, and biased hiring practices that disadvantage them solely because of their gender. One of the most pressing issues is the gender pay gap, which women frequently encounter throughout their professional lives.

While the EU has made notable progress in narrowing the gender pay gap through policy measures such as the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy, substantial disparities persist among Member States. In contrast, Türkiye confronts its own set of challenges, including a more pronounced gender pay gap, shaped by socio-cultural norms, labour market structures, and broader economic conditions.

These brief analyses the structural and policy-related factors underpinning gender-based wage disparities in both the EU and Türkiye, with the aim of assessing the relative effectiveness of current measures in mitigating these inequalities.

Gender Pay Gap

Employees can act in a discriminatory way without even understanding how the act can discriminate against workers based on their gender. There are various examples of discrimination, and the gender pay gap is one of them. Gender pay gap results from a myriad of reasons. Gender discrimination in hiring and workplace policies, lost earnings potential due to leaving the job market to care for children, and inadequate worker protection laws all contribute to this.[2] The European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) defines gender gap as:[3]

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[1] World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap 2025", 11.06.2025, https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2025/digest/

[2] Oxfam America, "What is the gender pay gap?", *OXFAM*, 24.03.2025, https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/stories/what-is-the-gender-pay-gap/

[3] EIGE, "gender pay gap", N.D., https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1098?language_content_entity=en

"Percentage of men's earnings represents the difference between the average gross hourly earnings of female and male employees."

EIGE adds that as impacting elements on the gender pay gap -such as diversity in education, labour market experience, working hours, type of job- are not usually considered, the EU officially finds the gender pay gap as "unadjusted gender pay gap".[4]

The gender pay gap predominantly stems from traditional gender roles, according to which women are associated with the private sphere. At the same time men are positioned within the public sphere, where they are expected to work and provide for their families. Although such perceptions may appear outdated, they continue to reflect the prevailing reality in many countries, including those considered highly developed. The persistence of the gender pay gap cannot be attributed to a single cause; rather, it is the outcome of multiple, interrelated factors, such as:[5]

- Both conscious and unconscious forms of discrimination and bias influence recruitment processes and pay-related decisions.
- Occupational segregation persists, with women and men employed in different sectors and roles, and female-dominated fields typically are associated with lower wages.
- Limited workplace flexibility to balance caregiving and other responsibilities—particularly in higher-level positions—constrains women's career advancement.
- Women are more likely to engage in part-time employment, which reduces overall earnings and career prospects.
- Extended career breaks taken by women for caregiving responsibilities negatively affect their professional progression and access to opportunities.
- Women continue to bear a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and caregiving work, further reinforcing gender inequalities in the labour market.

Fresh graduates enter the labour market equally, without significant gender-based disparities. However, within approximately a decade, the gender pay gap begins to widen, largely because of life-course factors such as employment in different firms or sectors, parental status, and marital status.[6]

The gender pay gap among OECD members was 11.3% in 2023. To put it into perspective, this means that for every dollar a man earns, a woman earns 88 cents. The gap was even wider in 2010, at 14%.[7] In almost 15 years, the elimination of the gender pay gap was very slow and to a small degree. According to the ILO, since 1991, the difference between men and women's employment gap rates decreased from 27.1 to 23.1. However, working-age women's employment rates (46.1%) are still under the number of working men (69.5%).[8]

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[4] EIGE, "gender pay gap", N.D., https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1098?language_content_entity=en

[5] Australian Government Workplace Gender Equality Agency, "What is the gender pay gap?", N.D., https://www.wgea.gov.au/the-gender-pay-gap

[6] Claudia Goldin, "Gender pay gap? Culprit is 'greedy work'", *The Harvard Gazette*, 17.10.2023, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2023/10/excerpt-from-career-and-family-by-claudia-goldin/

[7] OECD, "Gender equality and work", N.D., https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/gender-equality-and-work.html ,

[8] ILO, "Achieving gender equality in employment rates would take almost two centuries", 06.03.2025, https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/achieving-gender-equality-employment-rates-would-take-almost-two-centuries

Although younger women have improved toward wage equality, the gender pay gap tends to grow as they get older, particularly between ages 35 and 44, often linked to parenting responsibilities. Mothers typically work fewer hours and earn less compared to fathers, who often benefit from a "fatherhood wage premium." While education reduces the gap, women still earn less than men with similar educational backgrounds. Additionally, racial and ethnic differences contribute to larger pay disparities for Black and Hispanic women. Economic shifts and events like the COVID-19 pandemic have slowed wage progress. Further reducing the gap will require changes in societal attitudes, more flexible work environments, and tackling persistent discrimination.[9]

Table 1. Perceived gender pay gap[10]

Individual Factors	Organizational Factors	Societal Dimensions
Pay expectations	Gender composition of employment sector	Welfare state regime
Gender role orientation	Occupational status	Public awareness
Perceived pay fairness		
Gender, age, marital status, education		

Resource: *Violetta Khoreva*

The perception of the gender pay gap can be examined across three interrelated categories: individual factors, organizational dynamics, and broader societal dimensions. Individual factors include pay expectations, gender role orientation, perceived pay fairness, as well as gender, age, marital status, and education. Pay expectations relate to whether a person believes they have equal opportunities compared to their colleagues. Lower pay expectations lead to a lower perception of the gender pay gap compared to individuals with higher pay expectations. Gender role orientation is another important element to consider. Individuals with an egalitarian gender role orientation are more likely to perceive the existence of a gender pay gap than those with a traditional gender role orientation. Regarding perceived pay fairness, people who believe their pay is fair are less likely to perceive a gender pay gap than those who view their pay as unfair. When it comes to individual factors, women, younger individuals, unmarried individuals, and those with higher education tend to perceive the gender pay gap more.[11]

Organizational factors include two elements, which are the gender composition of the employment sector and occupational status. People working in female-dominated sectors are less likely to perceive the gender pay gap than those working in male-dominated sectors. Secondly, people in low-status jobs are less likely to perceive the gender pay gap compared to those in moderate- and high-status occupations.[12]

Societal dimensions are the last category, which consists of the welfare state regime and public awareness elements. People living in "liberal" and "social democratic" welfare states are more likely to perceive the gender pay gap than those living in "corporatist" welfare states. On the other side, individuals who participate in various campaigns are

[9] Rakesh Kochhar, "The Enduring Grip of the Gender Pay Gap", *Pew Research Center*, 01.03.2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/03/01/the-enduring-grip-of-the-gender-pay-gap/
[10] Violetta Khoreva, "Gender pay gap and its perceptions", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 2011, http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/02610151111124969
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

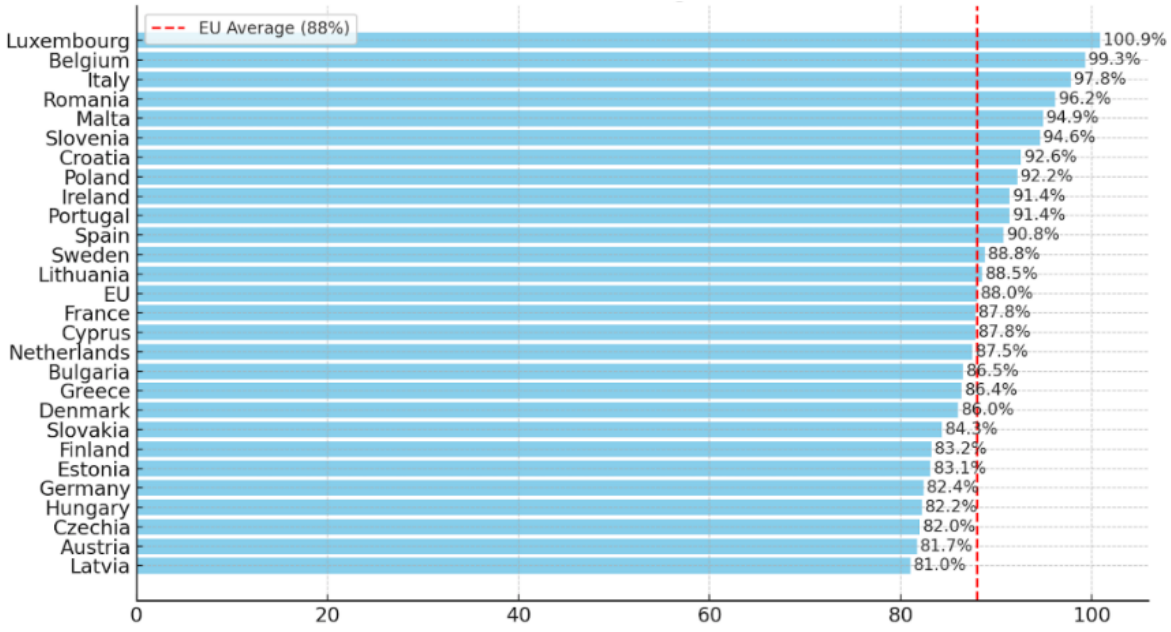
more likely to perceive the existence of the gender pay gap than those who do not take part in such events.[13]

Today, women continue to face gender-based discrimination, with the gender pay gap remaining one of the most pressing challenges among many others. Both international organizations and states actively pursue efforts to eliminate such discrimination. The European Union provides a notable example, consistently advancing policies to achieve gender equality. Accordingly, the following section of this brief will examine the EU's approach to addressing the gender pay gap.

Gender Pay Gap in the EU

The idea of "equal pay for equal work" lies in the Treaty of Rome 1954.[14] Since that day, the EU has tried to create an equal system first inside the EU and its member states, and then it works on spreading gender equality towards third countries. According to EIGE's Gender Equality Index 2024, EU took 71 points out of 100. This means that EU has improved 0.8 points compared to 2023 and a rise of 7.9 points in total compared to 2010.[15] However, it does not indicate that EU has reached gender equality, there is still a long way to go. In 2023, women in the EU earned on average 12% less per hour than men. The largest pay gap was in Latvia, where women's hourly wages were 19% lower than men's. In contrast, the gap was under 4% in Romania (3.8%), Italy (2.2%), and Belgium (0.7%). Luxembourg was the only country where women earned slightly more than men, with a 0.9% higher average hourly wage.[16]

Table 2. What does a woman earn compared to a man? (2023)[17]



Resource: *Eurostat.*

[13] Ibid.

[14] European Parliament, "Treaty of Rome", N.D., https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-rome

[15] EIGE, "Gender Equality Index", 2024, https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024

[16] Eurostat, "Key figures on Europe – 2025 edition", 09.07.2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-key-figures/w/ks-01-25-003

[17] Eurostat, "Gender pay gap statistics", March 2025, index.php

The gender pay gap extends beyond disparities in paychecks, encompassing inequalities in access to employment, career progression, and rewards. Sectoral segregation remains a key factor, with women overrepresented in comparatively low-paying sectors such as care, health, and education—fields that are often undervalued. Women also shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid work, in addition to longer total working hours, which can influence career trajectories. The glass ceiling further reinforces inequality: fewer than 10% of CEOs in top companies are women, and the largest gender pay gap in the EU is found in management, where women earn 23% less than men. Direct pay discrimination persists despite Article 157 TFEU's guarantee of equal pay for equal work, with documented cases of women earning less than men for identical roles.[18] The pay gap tends to widen with age, as women are more likely to leave or scale back their careers, resulting in a higher risk of poverty in old age. In the EU, women over the age of 65 receive, on average, 28.3% less pension income than men.[19] The root causes of these disparities remain only partially understood, but greater pay transparency could be instrumental in identifying and addressing them.

The EU is taking action to close the gender pay gap. Both the European Parliament and the European Commission are working to eliminate it. In 2022, Members of the European Parliament reached an agreement on binding pay-transparency measures. Under these rules, EU companies will be obliged to disclose salary information to make pay comparisons easier and expose gender pay gaps. Pay structures must be based on gender-neutral criteria, and recruitment processes must be non-discriminatory. Key measures include a ban on pay secrecy, the right to pay information, and a shift in the burden of proof. The first means that workers have the right to share or seek information about pay. In addition, workers and their representatives must be allowed to request data on individual and average pay by gender. Lastly, in discrimination cases, employers must prove that no inequality has occurred. If a pay report reveals a gender pay gap of 5% or more, employers must conduct a joint pay assessment with workers' representatives, and member states must apply effective and dissuasive penalties.[20] EP adopted mentioned rules on binding-pay transparency measures in March 2023.[21]

The EU's "Women on Boards" Directive requires that by July 2026, at least 40% of non-executive director posts (or 33% of all director posts) in large publicly listed companies be held by the under-represented sex. The rules mandate transparent recruitment procedures with merit as the key criterion. Companies must report annually on board gender representation and plans to meet targets if unmet. Small and medium-sized enterprises (under 250 employees) are exempt. Member states must enforce dissuasive penalties, including fines, and may allow judicial annulment of boards violating the directive.[22]

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[18] European Commission, "The gender pay gap situation in the EU", N.D., gender-pay-gap-situation-eu_en

[19] European Parliament, "Understanding the gender pay gap: definition, facts and causes, 18.03.2025,understanding-the-gender-pay-gap-definition-facts-and-causes

[20] European Parliament, "Gender pay gap: deal reached on binding pay-transparency measures", 15.12.2022, gender-pay-gap-deal-reached-on-binding-pay-transparency-measures

[21] European Parliament, "Gender pay gap: Parliament adopts new rules on binding pay-transparency measures", 30.03.2023, gender-pay-gap-parliament-adopts-new-rules-on-binding-pay-transparency-measures

[22] European Parliament, "Parliament approves landmark rules to boost gender equality on corporate boards", 22.11.2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20221118IPR55706/parliament-approves-landmark-rules-to-boost-gender-equality-on-corporate-boards

The EU's Work-life Balance Initiative, launched under the European Pillar of Social Rights, seeks to help parents and carers better reconcile work and family duties, encourage equal caregiving between genders, and strengthen women's role in the workforce. Adopted in 2019, the Directive introduced 10 days of paid paternity leave, two non-transferable months of paid parental leave per parent, five annual days of carers' leave, and broader access to flexible working options for parents of young children and carers. Supporting policies include protections against discrimination, promotion of equal leave-sharing, expanded childcare and long-term care services, and removal of tax or benefit disincentives for second earners. Expected outcomes include improved work-life balance, higher female employment, increased productivity for businesses, and long-term demographic and fiscal benefits.[23]

The European Care Strategy supports the European Pillar of Social Rights, especially principles on gender equality, work-life balance, and long-term care. It also contributes to the EU's 2030 targets on employment, skills, and poverty reduction, and complements other initiatives under the Gender Equality Strategy, the Rights of the Child, and the European Child Guarantee. Efforts include a campaign to challenge gender stereotypes in childcare, monitoring of the 2019 Work-life Balance Directive, and a June 2023 seminar with EQUINET to address discrimination against workers taking family leave. The Directive's provisions on non-transferable paternity and parental leave aim to reduce the gender care gap.[24]

Recently the EU introduced The EU Roadmap for Women's Right in 2025 with a goal of a push for gender equality.[25] The Roadmap includes eight long-term policy objectives: freedom from gender-based violence; the highest standards of health; equal pay and economic empowerment; work-life balance and care; equal employment opportunities and adequate working conditions; quality and inclusive education; political participation and equal representation; institutional mechanisms that deliver on women's rights.

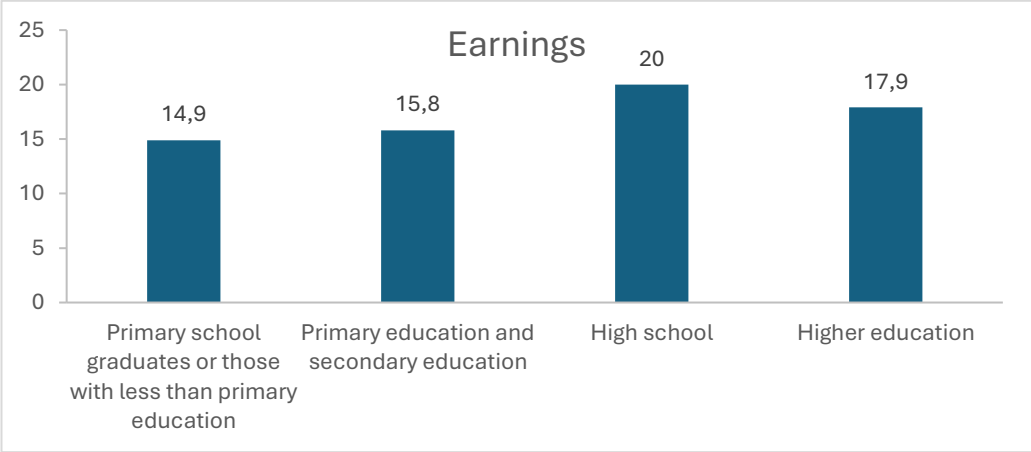
Gender Pay Gap in Türkiye

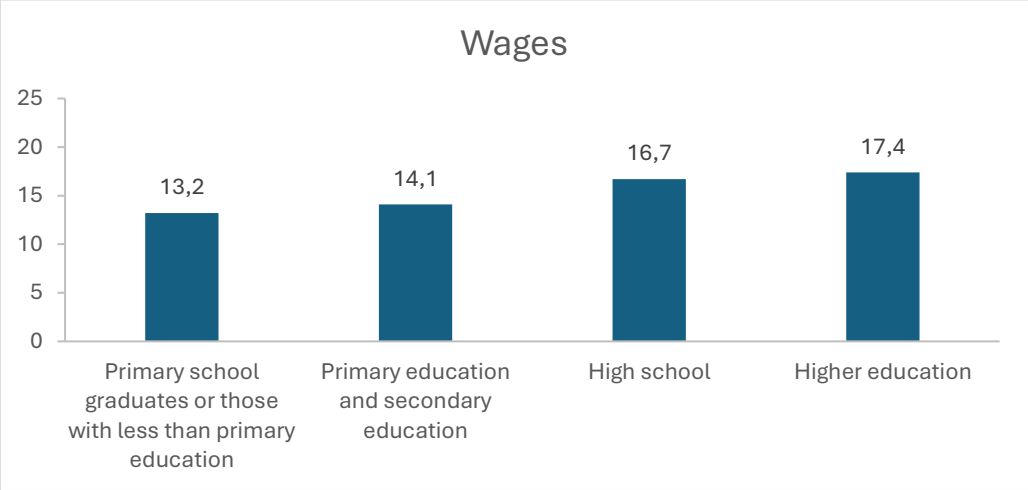
According to the Global Gender Gap Index 2025, Türkiye ranks 135th, having closed only 68.8% of its overall gender gap.[26] Achieving full gender equality will therefore require a considerable amount of time and sustained policy efforts. Furthermore, the gender pay gap remains a significant aspect of gender inequality that needs to be addressed. According to the latest statistics in 2023 the highest gender pay gap in annual average gross wages among higher education graduates is 17.4%, while the lowest is observed among primary school graduates or those with less than primary education, at 13.2%. In terms of annual average gross earnings, the highest gender pay gap is found among high school graduates (14.9%), whereas the lowest is again among primary school graduates

[23] European Commission, "Work-life balance", N.D., work-life-balance_en
[24] European Commission, "European care strategy - One year after the adoption", 07.09.2023, european-care-strategy-one-year-after-adoption-2023-09-07_en
[25] European Commission, "The EU Roadmap for Women's Rights: a renewed push for gender equality", 07.03.2025, https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/eu-roadmap-womens-rights-renewed-push-gender-equality-2025-03-07_en
[26] World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap 2025", 11.06.2025, https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2025/digest/

or those with less than primary education.[27] The significant point is that in all levels of education the gender pay gap is most felt by females.

Table 3 and 4. Gender Pay Gap by Educational Level, 2023





Resource: *TurkStat.*

There are several explanations for the persistence of the gender pay gap in Türkiye. The first relates to shifts in women's employment sectors. A considerable number of women have left the agricultural sector and sought employment in other sectors. However, although their educational attainment has increased, job market opportunities have not kept pace, resulting in inequalities in both employment and remuneration. Secondly, while it might be expected that higher levels of education would reduce the gender pay gap, in practice the gap remains largely unchanged. Thirdly, women's marital and parental status also play a significant role in perpetuating pay disparities, reflecting the influence of traditional values in Türkiye. Many employers still hold the view that men, as heads of households, should provide for their families, while women should prioritize domestic responsibilities. Such beliefs contribute to unequal treatment and wage differences for individuals occupying the same work positions.[28]

[27] TurkStat, "Women in Statistics, 2024", 06.03.2025, https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Istatistiklerle-Kadin-2024-54076

[28] Esra Durceylan Kaygusuz, Alpay Filiztekin and Zeynep Gülru Göker, "Türkiye'de Kadınların İşgücüne Katılımı: Genel Eğilimler, Bölgesel ve Demografik Farklar, Tutumlar", *Kadın Girişimcilerimizle Güçlü*

The Equal Remuneration Convention established the standard of "equal pay for equal work" in 1951, and Türkiye ratified it in 1967. In addition, Türkiye's Labour Law stipulates that no one can be discriminated against or paid less based on gender when performing work of equal value.[29] Türkiye ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 24 July 1985. The Convention establishes "the right to equal remuneration, including benefits, and to equal treatment in respect of work of equal value, as well as equality of treatment in the evaluation of the quality of work." Furthermore, in 1995, Türkiye endorsed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which identified Women and the Economy as one of twelve critical areas. This framework advocates for women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, decent working conditions, and control over economic resources.[30]

To strengthen the socio-economic status of women, ensure gender equality in social life, and achieve the goal of sustainable economic growth and equal pay for equal work, the Prime Ministry Circular No. 2010/14 on "Increasing Women's Employment and Ensuring Equal Opportunities" was published in the Official Gazette on 25 May 2010 and entered into force.[31] Moreover, in 2011, public institutions began implementing the principle of "equal pay for equal work," which aims to ensure that individuals in the same position receive equal remuneration.[32]

In January 2025, Türkiye joined the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC), which was established in 2017 and is administered by the ILO, UN Women, and the OECD with the aim of eliminating the gender pay gap. By joining the coalition, Türkiye reaffirmed its commitment to achieving pay equity and promoting economic inclusivity. Through EPIC, Türkiye has signalled its intention to work towards goals such as advocacy, policy development, and international cooperation. The coalition supports governments, employers, workers, and civil society in taking concrete actions to close the gender pay gap.[33]

Türkiye's latest Women's Empowerment Strategy Document and Action Plan 2024-2028 (*Kadının Güçlenmesi Strateji Belgesi ve Eylem Planı 2024-2028*) includes goals related to

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Yarınlara, 2023, https://kadingirisimci.gov.tr/media/ffvjlczc/8-türkiye-de-kadınların-işgücüne-katılımı.pdf

[29] Şemsa Özar and Emel Memiş, "Eşit işe eşit ücret Yasalarda var, uygulamada yok!", Columbia Global Centers, N.D., https://globalcenters.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/istanbul/Publications/Esit_Ise_Esit_Ucret_Yasalarda_Var_Uygula%20%281%29.pdf

[30] United Nations Türkiye, ""Equal pay for equal work" should be the guiding principle as we build back better", 18.09.2020, https://turkiye.un.org/en/91588-equal-pay-equal-work-should-be-guiding-principle-we-build-back-better

[31] T.C. AİLE VE SOSYAL HİZMETLER BAKANLIĞI, "TÜRKİYE'DE KADIN", July 2023, https://www.aile.gov.tr/media/142379/tu-rkiye-de-kadin-temmuz-23.pdf

[32] "Kamuda eşit işe eşit ücret", *AA*, 02.11.2011, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/kamuda-esit-ise-esit-ucret/404081

[33] Equal Pay International Coalition, "Türkiye Joins the Equal Pay International Coalition: A Bold Step Towards Pay Equity", 10.01.2025, https://www.equalpayinternationalcoalition.org/en/whats_new/turkiye-joins-equal-pay-international-coalition-bold-step-towards-pay-equity#:~:text=Building%20on%20this%2C%20the%20Turkish,equal%20opportunities%20in%20the%20workplace.

equal pay for equal work. The document aims to increase women's employment under equal pay conditions. The aims mentioned in the document:[34]

- In collaboration with central and local administrations, the private sector, and civil society organizations, alternative models for quality, affordable, and accessible care services will be developed. Following pilot implementations, these models will be scaled up to promote women's employment.
- Programs in the fields of entrepreneurship, financial and digital literacy, and cooperatives will be expanded and mainstreamed to further encourage women's participation in the labour force.
- In response to the transformations in the labour market driven by the twin transition, programs will be designed to ensure women's full, equal, secure, and effective participation. These programs will focus on equipping women with the new skills and competencies required in this evolving context.
- To address the underrepresentation of women in mathematics, science, technology, and engineering, initiatives will be undertaken to promote women's education and employment in these areas, while fostering equality and inclusiveness in both the public and private sectors.
- Tailored programs and projects encompassing production, innovative technologies, cooperation, and psychological empowerment will be implemented to support women producers and entrepreneurs affected by the earthquakes in Kahramanmaraş and Hatay, enabling their reintegration and resilience.
- Efforts will be intensified to enhance women's entrepreneurship and technology literacy in rural areas, to establish dedicated social spaces for women, to ensure the provision of quality, affordable, and accessible care services, and to formalize and secure the employment of women working as agricultural labourers.

Even though there are goals related to equal pay, they are not directly focusing on eliminating gender pay gap. The strategic plan only provides generic goals on women's empowerment in certain job sectors and increasing women's employment. However, to eliminate gender pay gap, there is a need for clear and straightforward instructions for public bodies and the private sector.

Conclusion

Gender-based discrimination permeates many aspects of women's daily lives, with the workplace being one of the most significant arenas where such disparities manifest. Women often encounter various forms of discrimination solely based on their gender, and the gender pay gap is one of the most visible outcomes of this inequity. Notably, the gender pay gap persists even in highly developed countries where gender equality has reached relatively advanced levels.

The factors contributing to the gender pay gap are largely consistent across contexts, including stereotypical gender roles, traditional societal values, and constrained life

[34] T.C. AİLE VE SOSYAL HİZMETLER BAKANLIĞI KADININ STATÜSÜ GENEL MÜDÜRLÜĞÜ, "KADININ GÜÇLENMESİ STRATEJİ BELGESİ VE EYLEM PLANI 2024-2028", 2024, https://www.aile.gov.tr/media/158302/kadinin-guclenmesi-strateji-belgesi-ve-eylem-plani-2024-2028.pdf

choices. Cultural expectations often assign women the primary responsibility for domestic work and caregiving for children and elderly family members, while men are expected to engage in paid employment and serve as the primary providers. These entrenched norms create a domino effect that adversely affects women's career trajectories.

Employers may favour male candidates based on the assumption that men will face fewer domestic responsibilities than women. Consequently, women may be offered lower salaries than their male counterparts or may encounter barriers to hiring and promotion, as it is assumed that they will prioritize family responsibilities over professional obligations.

In some cases, the gender pay gap may not be immediately apparent to those who experience it. Awareness of the gender pay gap is influenced by multiple factors, including individual factors (such as pay expectations, gender role orientation, perceived pay fairness, gender, age, marital status, and education), organizational factors (including the gender composition of the employment sector and occupational status), and broader societal dimensions (such as the welfare state regime and levels of public awareness). Therefore, raising awareness is a crucial step toward addressing and ultimately eliminating the gender pay gap.

Since the signing of the Treaty of Rome, the EU has been committed to promoting gender equality. Although the EU has made significant strides in this area, full gender equality has not yet been achieved, and continued efforts remain necessary. To address the gender pay gap, the EU has introduced various measures and initiatives, including binding pay-transparency rules, the "Women on Boards" Directive, the Work-Life Balance Initiative, the European Care Strategy, and the EU Roadmap for Women's Rights 2025.

As an EU candidate country, Türkiye is also expected to advance toward gender equality. However, achieving this goal is likely to take some time and require considerable efforts. Unlike the EU, Türkiye currently lacks current, comprehensive and effective strategies or regulations specifically aimed at eliminating the gender pay gap, with only limited initiatives addressing this issue.