



Bringing Policy Innovation Through Gender Research in the Social Sciences

EDITORIAL

ALMUDENA SEVILLA 



ABSTRACT

Gender inequality remains one of the most persistent and pressing economic challenges today. However, policymakers often address gender inequality through fragmented measures that focus on individual choices rather than the structural constraints driving economic disparities. This issue portrays how recent academic research increasingly supports this shift toward a multidisciplinary and overarching approach, highlighting the structural and cultural forces that sustain inequality. Gender inequality is not an isolated issue and gender disparities persist not because of a lack of talent or ambition among women but because of economic, legal, cultural, and institutional constraints that systematically disadvantage them. Whether in labour markets, workplace discrimination, health inequalities, or media narratives, gender gaps are reinforced through overlapping systems of exclusion. This recognition has profound policy implications: traditional, piecemeal interventions – such as work-family policies – are necessary but insufficient on their own. Addressing gender inequality requires a shift toward integrated, structural reforms that target the underlying constraints shaping women's economic opportunities. Policies that promote financial inclusion, strengthen legal protections, enforce workplace rights, and challenge entrenched cultural norms must work in tandem. By linking individual-level gender penalties to systemic labour market inequalities, workplace policies, and institutional barriers within academia and policymaking, this issue underscores the urgent need for a more integrated approach to gender research and policy innovation.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Almudena Sevilla

Department of Social Policy,
London School of Economics
and Political Science, UK

a.sevilla@lse.ac.uk

KEYWORDS:

gender inequality; gender
research; policy innovation

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Sevilla A. Bringing Policy
Innovation Through Gender
Research in the Social Sciences.
LSE Public Policy Review. 2025;
3(4): 1, pp. 1–5. DOI: [https://
doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.123](https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.123)

Gender inequality remains one of the most persistent and pressing economic challenges today. Gender inequality is not just a matter of fairness – it is a fundamental economic issue with broad implications for growth, productivity, and social stability. Despite major advancements in women’s education and labour force participation, significant gender gaps in wages and career advancement hold on, particularly after childbirth. Women remain underrepresented in high-paying, ‘greedy’ jobs – those that disproportionately reward long, inflexible hours – pointing out that structural barriers, not just individual choices, drive these disparities (1). While the 20th century saw rapid convergence in gender labour market outcomes, progress has slowed down considerably since 2000, indicating that remaining inequalities are deeply entrenched (2).

The urgency of addressing gender inequality stems from its direct impact on economic growth, labour market efficiency, and long-term sustainability. With aging populations and slowing productivity growth in many advanced economies, fully utilizing female talent has become an economic necessity rather than just a fairness issue (3). The persistence of gender gaps means that economies are operating below their potential, holding back innovation, and reducing overall output (4). Moreover, the rise of automation and Artificial Intelligence threatens to widen existing inequalities and hinder productivity growth if policies do not actively support women’s participation in high-growth sectors. The cost of inaction is high – delaying progress risks, deepening existing inequalities, and slowing down economic recovery from recent global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately impacted women’s employment (5). Without targeted reforms, gender disparities will continue to reinforce economic inefficiencies, making it harder to sustain long-term growth, especially as global labour markets go through rapid transformation. Addressing these gaps now is essential to ensuring inclusive and resilient economies in the face of future disruptions.

Policymakers often address gender inequality through fragmented measures that focus on individual choices rather than the structural constraints driving economic disparities. While initiatives like childcare subsidies and parental leave acknowledge gender gaps, they fail to tackle deeper biases in wage-setting, promotion structures, and workplace flexibility. Gender inequality extends beyond the labour market, embedded in economic, social, and cultural systems. Framing disparities as personal choices covers up systemic barriers such as workplace discrimination, legal constraints, and entrenched gender norms. Cultural expectations around caregiving, work, and leadership continue to hold back women’s opportunities, reinforcing traditional roles. To create more equitable labour markets, policies must move beyond work-family balance and take on legal protections, financial inclusion, workplace regulations, and cultural shifts. Recognizing the intersections between employment, health, the media, and policy frameworks is essential for breaking down root causes rather than treating gender inequality as an isolated issue.

This issue portrays how recent academic research increasingly supports this shift toward a multidisciplinary and overarching approach, highlighting the structural and cultural forces that sustain inequality. By reframing gender inequality as a structural issue, policymakers can lay out long-term strategies that promote inclusive growth and a more resilient workforce. The papers explore a wide range of topics, from global development to public health, workplace practices, and gender inequalities in the labour market. Additionally, the issue engages with legal concepts and media representations of women and work, illustrating how structural and cultural factors shape gender disparities. Rather than offering a comprehensive overview, this collection highlights key aspects of gender inequality and demonstrates how different disciplinary approaches contribute to a deeper understanding of these challenges. The volume moves through multiple layers of analysis – beginning with the ways gender penalties emerge at the individual level, uncovering their deep structural roots, examining firm behaviour, and concluding with broader institutional and policy challenges. This progression highlights that gender inequality is not simply a matter of individual choices or employer practices but a deeply embedded structural issue that demands coordinated, multi-faceted interventions. By integrating insights from these disciplines, the volume challenges long-standing paradigms of gender roles and relationships while shaking up policy debates.

The first paper by Gabriel Leite-Mariante, Sveva Manfredi and Camille Landais sets up the foundation by examining gender inequality in labour markets, focusing on the child and marriage penalties – two major contributors to women’s lower labour force participation and persistent wage gaps. The child penalty refers to the decline in women’s employment and earnings after having children, while the marriage penalty captures the negative impact of

marriage on women's labour force participation, even before they have children. Drawing on data from the Child Penalty Atlas, which quantifies child penalties across 134 countries covering 95% of the world's population, the study works around key data limitations by employing a novel methodology using pseudo-event studies to estimate penalties in low- and middle-income countries. A key contribution is the introduction of the Control Index, a new measure of patriarchal control that captures women's autonomy in areas such as mobility, financial independence, and marital choices. The findings reveal a strong correlation between higher patriarchal control and larger marriage and child penalties, particularly in contexts where women have restricted financial autonomy and limited decision-making power in marriage.

Leite-Mariante et al. lay the groundwork for understanding how gender disparities in employment are shaped by norms, institutional constraints, and economic development, setting the stage for a broader discussion on the structural forces that sustain inequality. The motherhood penalty is central to understanding gender disparities, as it disproportionately affects women while men's employment remains largely unchanged. Sarah Trotter looks at the structural and institutional constraints that shape gender roles and inequalities in the labour market and beyond. The paper highlights how legal and social definitions of parenthood reinforce traditional gender norms, which in turn influence workplace expectations, caregiving responsibilities, and economic opportunities for different genders. The paper asks how legal motherhood is constructed and whether the traditional definitions of 'mother' and 'father' in family law should be reconsidered. It examines whether the legal definition of motherhood – historically tied to the person who gives birth – should remain fixed, or if a more flexible, gender-neutral approach to legal parenthood is necessary. A gender-neutral approach to legal parenthood could reduce the child and marriage penalties by challenging traditional caregiving roles and redistributing responsibilities more equitably. Removing gendered classifications like 'mother' and 'father' may weaken cultural and institutional expectations that tie women to caregiving and men to breadwinning, encouraging more balanced workplace policies. A takeaway is that for this shift to meaningfully reduce gender disparities, it must be paired with broader reforms – equal parental leave, workplace protections, and affordable childcare – to ensure caregiving is legally and practically shared.

Building on this foundation, the paper by Shani Orgad examines how these disparities are reinforced through media and policy narratives that frame women's workforce disengagement as a personal choice rather than a structural issue. This paper analyses how discussions around motherhood and menopause bring about the idea that women's employment decisions are dictated by biology rather than workplace and caregiving inequalities. It highlights a recurring pattern in which mothers are depicted as "opting out" to prioritize family, while menopausal women are portrayed as leaving due to personal struggles. These narratives cover up the structural barriers, inflexible workplaces, and lack of institutional support that often drive these exits. Unlike previous literature, this study calls out how media representations reinforce gendered expectations, disproportionately focusing on professional women while overlooking the experiences of low-paid and informal workers.

The reconceptualization of workforce disengagement in Orgad's paper naturally leads to a broader discussion of how systemic barriers – such as workplace discrimination, inadequate labour protections, and caregiving responsibilities – contribute to economic gender gaps beyond employment. Genevieve Jeffrey extends this argument by exploring the gender health gap, demonstrating how inequalities in health policy intersect with labour market outcomes, caregiving responsibilities, and economic costs. The study examines disparities in healthcare access and outcomes in the UK, highlighting the persistent gender health gap – systematic differences in morbidity, diagnosis, and treatment between men and women. It identifies how male-centric medical research, diagnostic delays, financial constraints, and caregiving responsibilities create significant barriers to women's healthcare access, leading to unmet medical needs and reinforcing economic inequalities. Using historical and contemporary data, the study evaluates these barriers alongside workplace policies and regional disparities, showing how they contribute to broader labour market inefficiencies.

Having laid out individual-level constraints and societal narratives, the issue turns to the demand side of the labour market, examining how firms play into gender wage gaps. Understanding the role of firms in bringing about gender disparities is critical for designing policies that set up equal opportunities, labour market efficiency, and economic growth. The paper by Alessandra Casarico and Salvatore Lattanzio looks into how firms contribute to gender pay inequality and how they

react to public policies aimed at reducing it. Using matched employer-employee data across multiple countries, the authors analyse wage-setting practices, sorting mechanisms, and firm-level responses to childbirth and parental leave policies. They find that firms end up reinforcing gender pay disparities, particularly as women tend to move into lower-paying firms after childbirth. While some policies designed to support parenthood help cut down on inequality, others bring about unintended consequences, such as statistical discrimination against women. The findings emphasize that addressing gender wage gaps requires policies that go beyond individual workers to account for firm behaviour, ensuring that interventions do not inadvertently keep up disparities.

This discussion naturally leads into a broader examination of workplace policies and employer practices, particularly in how they can either prop up or challenge gender inequalities. One critical but often overlooked dimension is workplace harassment – not just a social issue but a major distortion in labour market participation and career advancement. The paper by Caroline Coly and Margaux Suteau draws attention to this issue, demonstrating how workplace harassment holds back economic equality and contributes to the exclusion of women from leadership and high-paying roles. Using data from the UK, France, and the US, the authors highlight challenges in keeping track of harassment due to chronic underreporting and the limitations of existing legal frameworks. Empirical studies show that workplace harassment negatively affects job mobility, wages, firm productivity, and labour force participation. The paper assesses key policy responses, including anti-harassment training, legal enforcement mechanisms, and diversity initiatives. It finds that voluntary corporate initiatives, such as workplace training programs, often fall short of meaningfully changing behaviour.

The failures of voluntary corporate measures and weak enforcement build up to the final discussion: the broader challenge of translating gender research into effective policy action. The concluding paper by Gloria Novovic critically examines how academic and institutional frameworks often focus on short-term, measurable impact rather than driving systemic change. For example, a gender scholar researching why so many women drop out of the workforce during menopause may find out that the issue is not simply biological but rooted in inflexible workplaces, lack of medical support, and deeply ingrained biases. Their work calls into question mainstream narratives that frame menopause as a private issue rather than a structural one. However, the academic publishing system creates a Catch-22: if scholars stick to publishing in elite academic journals, their findings may never get across to policymakers or businesses that could implement real change; if they reach out to activism and public engagement, they risk being perceived as less ‘serious’ scholars, which could hold back their career advancement.

This paper dives into the dilemma faced by gender scholars working on gender, race, colonialism, and social justice, arguing that they must take on a ‘triple burden’: 1) co-creating knowledge with marginalized communities, 2) translating research into language that mainstream academics and policymakers accept, and 3) mobilizing their findings to bring about real-world change. However, academic institutions often stick with research that reinforces existing systems rather than fundamentally challenging them. Using a case study of Indigenous women in Guatemala resisting large-scale mining, the author illustrates how mainstream academic and policy frameworks fail to take into account the complexity and long-term nature of gender-focused research. The paper calls for a re-evaluation of how research excellence is measured, contending that scholars should not have to choose between career advancement and making a meaningful impact on gender equality. This final paper brings together the key insights from the volume, arguing that addressing gender inequality requires sustained interdisciplinary collaboration and long-term structural policy shifts.

CONCLUSION

The papers in this volume underscore that gender inequality is not an isolated issue, but a structural challenge embedded in economic, legal, and cultural systems. Across labour markets, health policies, and workplace practices, persistent gender disparities are shaped by institutional constraints and entrenched norms rather than individual choices. The research highlights how child and marriage penalties limit women’s career progression, how media narratives reinforce outdated gender roles, and how inadequate caregiving infrastructure pushes women out of the workforce. Addressing these inequalities requires moving beyond fragmented policies toward integrated solutions that combine financial inclusion, legal protections, and employer incentives to support women’s long-term participation in the labour market.

Employer practices play a crucial role in sustaining or reducing gender disparities. The findings reveal that wage gaps persist due to biased promotion structures, workplace discrimination, and firm-level sorting mechanisms, particularly after childbirth. Policy responses should prioritize pay transparency, regulatory oversight, and workplace reforms that prevent firms from reinforcing existing inequalities. Similarly, workplace harassment remains a major barrier to gender equity, distorting labour market outcomes and limiting women's job mobility and earnings. Voluntary corporate initiatives have proven insufficient, underscoring the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms, such as mandatory reporting, financial penalties, and cultural shifts that foster safer, more equitable work environments.


A key takeaway from these studies is that gender disparities persist not because of a lack of talent or ambition among women but because of economic, legal, cultural, and institutional constraints that systematically disadvantage them. Whether in labour markets, workplace discrimination, health inequalities, or media narratives, gender gaps are reinforced through overlapping systems of exclusion. This recognition has profound policy implications: traditional, piecemeal interventions – such as work-family policies – are necessary but insufficient on their own. Addressing gender inequality requires a shift toward integrated, structural reforms that target the underlying constraints shaping women's economic opportunities. Policies that promote financial inclusion, strengthen legal protections, enforce workplace rights, and challenge entrenched cultural norms must work in tandem.

Ultimately, the research papers in this volume underscore the disconnect between gender scholarship and policy action, reinforcing the central argument of this issue: fragmented approaches that focus on individual choices overlook the structural constraints shaping gender disparities. The persistence of inequality is not just a labour market failure but a broader reflection of how gender research is conducted and applied. Without a shift toward systemic policy responses that tackle wage-setting biases, workplace discrimination, and entrenched gender norms, existing interventions risk maintaining rather than dismantling inequality. The findings emphasize the need for a coordinated, interdisciplinary framework that bridges labour, health, media, and legal policies with broader economic reforms. By linking individual-level gender penalties to systemic labour market inequalities, workplace policies, and institutional barriers within academia and policymaking, this issue underscores the urgent need for a more integrated approach to gender research and policy innovation. Only through such structural transformations can policymakers break away from piecemeal solutions and implement lasting changes that fully support women's participation, mobility, and advancement across all sectors of the economy and society.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Almudena Sevilla  orcid.org/0000-0001-6143-5903
Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

REFERENCES

1. **Goldin C.** A grand gender convergence: Its last chapter. *American Economic Review*. 2014; 104(4):1091–1119. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.104.4.1091>
2. **Blau FD, Kahn LM.** The gender wage gap: Extent, trends, and explanations. *Journal of Economic Literature*. 2017; 55(3):789–865. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20160995>
3. **Goldin C.** *Career and Family: Women's Century-Long Journey Toward Equity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691226736>
4. **Hsieh C, Hurst E, Jones CI, Klenow, PJ.** The allocation of talent and US economic growth. *Econometrica*. 2019; 87(5):1439–1474. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3982/ECTA11427>
5. **Alon T, Coskun S, Doepke M, Koll D, Tertilt M.** *From mancession to shecession: Women's employment in regular and pandemic recessions*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research; 2021 April (Working paper 28632). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3386/w28632>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Sevilla A. Bringing Policy Innovation Through Gender Research in the Social Sciences. *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2025; 3(4): 1, pp. 1–5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.123>

Submitted: 18 February 2025

Accepted: 24 February 2025

Published: 14 March 2025

COPYRIGHT:

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

LSE Public Policy Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.