

Gender equality in motion: the transformative power of new social movements in the EU and Türkiye

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Abstract

Gender equality remains an unfinished global project despite decades of policy reform and feminist activism. This article examines gender equality through the lens of new social movement theory, drawing on a qualitative integrative review of sociological, gender studies, and policy-oriented literature. The study explores how grassroots activism and institutional responses interact in shaping outcomes related to labour market inequality, wage disparities, and work–life balance. Particular attention is given to intersectionality, highlighting how contemporary movements in the European Union and Türkiye address diverse and unequal experiences among women. Rather than presenting new empirical data, the study synthesises existing research to identify key patterns, achievements, and enduring challenges. The analysis demonstrates that while significant progress has been made in areas of education and political participation, structural and cultural barriers continue to limit full equality. The article argues that gender equality should be understood not merely as a policy objective, but as an ongoing process of social transformation sustained by collective action and institutional engagement.

Keywords: European Union (EU), Türkiye, gender, equality, new social movements, activism, intersectionality, human rights

Równość płci w ruchu: transformacyjna moc nowych ruchów społecznych w UE i Turcji

Streszczenie

Równość płci pozostaje niedokończonym globalnym projektem pomimo dekad reform politycznych i aktywizmu feministycznego. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia kwestię równości płci z perspektywy nowej teorii ruchu społecznego, opierając się na jakościowym, zintegrowanym przeglądzie literatury z zakresu socjologii, *gender studies* i badań nad polityką. W badaniu przeanalizowano interakcje między oddolnym aktywizmem a polityką instytucjonalną w osiąganiu rezultatów związanych z nierównościami na rynku pracy, dysproporcjami płacowymi i równowagą między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono interseksjonalności, podkreślając, jak współczesne ruchy walczą z nierównym traktowaniem kobiet. Zamiast prezentowania nowych danych empirycznych, niniejszy artykuł syntetyzuje istniejące badania, aby zidentyfikować kluczowe wzorce, osiągnięcia i trwałe wyzwania. Analiza pokazuje, że chociaż poczyniono znaczny postęp w takich obszarach jak edukacja i uczestnictwo w życiu politycznym, to jednak bariery strukturalne i kulturowe nadal ograniczają możliwości równego traktowania kobiet i mężczyzn. W artykule autorzy twierdzą, że równość płci należy rozumieć nie tylko jako cel polityki, ale jako ciągły proces transformacji społecznej, wspierany działaniami zbiorowymi i zaangażowaniem instytucjonalnym.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska (UE), Turcja, równość płci, nowe ruchy społeczne, aktywizm, interseksjonalność, prawa człowieka

1. Introduction

Although gender equality is a core principle of modern democratic societies, it has yet to be fully implemented. Despite notable progress in women's education and employment over recent decades, persistent inequalities remain in areas such as earnings, political representation, and unpaid care work. Across the European Union, women earn on average around 16% less per hour than men, and their pensions are approximately 30% lower due to cumulative disadvantages over the life course (European Commission 2020b; EIGE 2023). Women are also more likely than men to work part-time or leave the labour market because of caring responsibilities, which slows career progression and reduces lifetime income (GEO 2019). These disparities are reinforced not only by economic structures but also by social norms and institutional practices, indicating that gender equality requires transformation at both the policy and societal levels. Despite sustained reform efforts, gender equality therefore remains an incomplete agenda and an urgent social challenge.

This article is focused on the European Union and selected European states alongside Türkiye as key analytical contexts. These cases are particularly instructive, because they combine relatively advanced gender equality policy frameworks with enduring structural and cultural inequalities. The EU represents one of the most institutionalised attempts to promote gender equality through supranational governance, while Türkiye offers a contrasting but interconnected case, in which feminist activism operates under

different political and cultural constraints. Examining these contexts together allows for a nuanced understanding of how social movements interact with policy regimes across diverse institutional settings.

New social movements have played a central role in driving social change. Unlike earlier labour movements focused on class-based economic demands, new social movements (that arose from the late 20th century onward) emphasised identity, culture, and human rights (Castells 1997). Feminist movements, in particular, have framed gender equality as a transformative social project, challenging patriarchal norms, advancing legal reforms, and reshaping public debate. In an era of globalisation and digital communication, these movements have become increasingly transnational, sharing ideas and strategies through cross-border networks. Research consistently demonstrates that sustained grassroots activism is often more effective in advancing gender equality than top-down initiatives alone. Ultimately, meaningful progress depends not only on institutional reform but also on continuous social mobilisation that confronts entrenched power relations and cultural norms.

In this context, the authors of this study consider gender equality through the analytical lens of the sociology of new social movements, informed by a comparative perspective grounded in global scholarship. **The main purpose of the research** is to examine how contemporary social movements affect progress towards gender equality in different social contexts, and what this reveals about the interaction between activism and policy. To achieve this goal, the study focuses on the following **research questions** in three aspects:

- **The impact of the movement:** How have new social movements affected progress towards gender equality in different social contexts?
- **The relationship between activism and policy:** What does the current literature reveal about the interaction between grassroots gender activism and institutional gender equality policies?
- **Theoretical insights:** How do sociological concepts – especially intersectionality, work–life balance, and reflective modernisation – illuminate current struggles and achievements in gender equality?

While the discussion is based on global literature, the comparative emphasis of the study rests on the European Union, selected European countries, and Türkiye, where the interaction between feminist movements and institutional gender policies is particularly visible.

In order to answer above-mentioned questions, a qualitative integrative literature review, which combines a wide range of academic studies and policy reports, has been adopted as the research method. This article follows a standard academic structure: it begins with a review of relevant literature and theoretical frameworks; then a methodology section, followed by the main findings, discussion, and conclusion, organised by thematic areas. A sociological perspective is maintained throughout. Gender inequality is treated as a profound social phenomenon shaped by collective action, power relations and cultural evolution, and not just a set of negative statistics to be corrected.

The literature reviewed to date highlights significant gains in women's education and labour force participation, alongside persistent inequalities in pay and leadership positions (e.g. Blau, Kahn 2017; Goldin 2014). While many studies indicate these trends, they are often focused on individual countries or isolated dimensions of inequality, offering limited synthesis. As a result, important gaps remain in understanding how different social and institutional settings shape the effectiveness of feminist activism, and how intersecting factors (such as class, race, and family norms) influence outcomes. This article seeks to address these gaps by integrating findings from multiple disciplines and contexts, combining sociological theory with empirical research to provide a more comprehensive perspective on gender equality.

The originality of the study lies in its integrative approach. By bringing together insights from gender studies, economics, and political sociology, it offers a holistic understanding of how grassroots activism and policy initiatives have evolved in tandem. Rather than treating gender equality solely as a policy outcome, the authors conceptualise it as a dynamic social transformation driven by collective action. This synthesis contributes to academic debate and practical understanding by identifying common patterns, ongoing challenges, and transferable lessons for future efforts towards gender equality.

Although the article refers extensively to global scholarship, its comparative dimension is deliberately limited. The analysis is focused primarily on the European Union, selected European countries, and Türkiye, using global literature as contextual reference rather than as the basis for a fully global comparison. This regional and cross-contextual approach allows the study to demonstrate how similar feminist demands interact with different institutional and cultural environments, while avoiding overly broad or superficial comparison.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Gender equality: global trends and challenges

Over the past half-century, notable progress has been made towards gender equality in many societies. Women's educational attainment and labour force participation have increased, and gender wage gaps have narrowed in several industrialised countries (Blau, Kahn 2017; Goldin 2014). Long-term data from the United States and other advanced economies demonstrate that wage differences declined from the 1980s to the early 2000s, largely due to women's rising work experience and stronger anti-discrimination policies (Blau, Kahn 2017). In many contexts, women now equal or surpass men in higher education and are increasingly present in previously male-dominated professions. Nonetheless, a residual pay gap persists almost everywhere, reflecting enduring structural and cultural factors rather than differences in education alone (Blau, Kahn 2017; Goldin 2014).

A key explanation for this persistence lies in workplace organisation. The economist Claudia Goldin argues that main reason for the gender pay gap is the prevalence of "nonlinear" pay structures in many high-paying occupations, where long and inflexible

working hours are disproportionately rewarded. Workers unable to meet these demands (often women with caregiving responsibilities) are penalised. However, jobs offering greater temporal flexibility or reduced working hours without serious wage loss tend to demonstrate smaller gender wage gaps (Goldin 2014). These findings have influenced policy debates by highlighting the need to rethink workplace norms through flexible hours, job sharing, and remote work arrangements.

Policy responses increasingly reflect these insights. Measures such as pay transparency, expanded parental leave, and strengthened anti-discrimination laws have been introduced across many countries. In the United Kingdom, the Government Equalities Office's *Gender Equality Roadmap* (2019) links women's concentration on part-time work and caregiving roles with slower career progression and long-term income inequality. As a solution to these problems, the roadmap and related policies advocate expanding parental leave for both sexes and increasing flexibility in the workplace (see: GEO 2019). Similarly, the European Union's *Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025* is aimed at implementing the principle of equal pay for equal work new work-life balance rules in all EU Member States, creating a "Union of Equality" (European Commission 2020a).

Despite these efforts, progress remains uneven, intersectional inequalities continue to persist. Kimberle Crenshaw's *theory of intersectionality* presents a framework for understanding how various social identities (like gender, race, class, status, disability, etc.) interact, creating unique experiences of discrimination, privilege and oppression, rather than just adding up separate forms of inequality. „Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw 1989: p. 140), analysis must take intersectionality into account to sufficiently address the particular manner of inequalities. Based on Crenshaw's framework research demonstrates that women of color, immigrant women, and women with disabilities often face larger wage gaps and greater barriers in employment and social participation. Recent policy frameworks, including the EU's *Gender Equality Strategy*, show that these problems are increasingly acknowledged: „All women are different and may face discrimination based on several personal characteristics. For instance, a migrant woman with a disability may face discrimination on three grounds. The intersectionality of gender with other grounds of discrimination will be addressed across EU policies." (European Commission 2020b: p. 3; European Commission 2020a). Overall, the literature emphasises that meaningful gender equality requires not only closing gaps, but also addressing the specific inequalities faced by marginalised groups.

2.2. New social movements and the gender equality agenda

The development of gender equality has been closely linked to the rise of new social movements. While classical social movement theory emphasised labour and class-based mobilisation, scholars from the late 20th century identified movements¹ centered on identity, autonomy, and quality-of-life issues, including feminism, civil rights, and

¹ Called as new social movements to distinguish them from earlier movements with economic goals.

environmentalism (Castells 1997). These “new social movements” focused on cultural change as much as material demands. Theorists such as Castells and Beck argued that in post-industrial or „network societies”, movements emerge from concerns about identity and self-determination (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Castells 1997). Gender equality is a central example of movement-driven social transformation.

Across its historical waves, the women’s movement has operated both outside and within formal institutions to advance gender justice. The second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s was instrumental in securing anti-discrimination laws, reproductive rights, and equal pay regulations, while also challenging traditional gender norms. These efforts placed issues such as workplace inequality and domestic violence on national policy agendas. The sociologist Ulrich Beck points out that „feminist revolution” of the late 20th century reshaped family and gender norms, enabling women’s mass entry into paid employment and accelerating broader processes of *individualisation*. Beck argues that the industrial society increases the possibilities of individual choice, and the women’s movement uses this transformation to defend the freedom of women to assume different identities and roles without being limited to the role of a housewife (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

Contemporary gender equality activism is becoming increasingly global and network-based. Castells (1997) notes that successful social movements in the information age operate through decentralised networks that transcend national boundaries. Feminist organisations have used international institutions, transnational advocacy networks², and digital platforms to pressure governments and coordinate actions translating universal claims for equality into concrete policy commitments.

Social movements also exert influence beyond formal policy by reshaping culture and everyday practices. As Taylor and Van Dyke (2004) emphasise, movements rely on cultural repertoires such as symbolism, performance, and storytelling to redefine social meanings. Feminist activism has contributed to reframing violence against women as a public issue, normalising women’s leadership, and challenging traditional models of masculinity and caregiving. These cultural shifts are visible in changing workplace norms and increased intolerance towards sexism and harassment.

Over time, feminist movements have become partially institutionalised through gender equality agencies, international conventions, and policy frameworks. Institutions such as the UK Government Equalities Office, and the European Commission’s gender strategies reflect the long-term impact of feminist advocacy on governance (e.g. GEO 2019; European Commission 2020a). However, the literature stresses that continued activism remains essential to prevent institutional responses from becoming merely symbolic and to address persistent and emerging inequalities.

Overall, research conceptualises gender equality and new social movements as mutually reinforcing. Advances in equality result from collective struggle, while legal and institutional reforms generate new spaces for activism. Influenced by Crenshaw’s

² Such as United Nations’ conferences and transnational NGOs.

(1989) concept of intersectionality, contemporary feminist movements increasingly seek inclusive coalitions across social justice causes. New social movement theory frames gender equality as part of a process of „reflexive modernisation“, in which societies actively reassess and transform their values through sustained activism and institutional engagement (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

3. Methodology and research materials

3.1. Literature search and selection

This research uses a qualitative integrative literature review method to explore and synthesise existing knowledge about gender equality in the context of new social movements. Findings obtained from academic articles, scholarly books, and reputable policy reports in sociology, gender studies, economics and related fields, were systematically examined and collected. The goal of this approach is to combine insights from different studies and contexts into a coherent academic narrative. The integrative review method was chosen, because it allows for the inclusion of various types of sources, such as theoretical and empirical studies, as well as qualitative and quantitative research. This allows for a more holistic understanding of a complex issue. Unlike a systematic review, which attempts to comprehensively scan a narrow research question, an integrative review enables literature to be synthesised in a more flexible and creative way (Snyder 2019). In this respect, it is suitable for addressing interdisciplinary and wide-ranging research questions. At the same time, the literature review process was conducted in a structured and transparent manner to ensure rigour. Recommended best practices for systematic literature reviews were employed (Xiao, Watson 2019; Snyder 2019; Page et al. 2021). Accordingly, steps such as careful planning of the study's scope and questions, development of a comprehensive search strategy, defining clear inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting sources, and detailed analysis and synthesis of the literature were followed. In addition, to increase transparency and repeatability in documenting processes (such as how studies were identified, screened, and included in the review), the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al. 2021) was applied to structure the review process.

The extensive search in multiple academic databases was conducted (e.g. *Web of Science*, *Scopus*, *Google Scholar*) using keywords such as *gender equality*, *women's movement*, *feminist activism*, *social change*, and *policy impact*. Boolean operators and advanced search techniques were used to refine results, and bibliographies of key articles were scanned for additional sources. The search was aimed to capture both foundational works and recent studies, with an emphasis on English-language publications. Initial searches yielded roughly 240 records. After removing duplicates, about 200 unique records remained for screening. Titles and abstracts were screened according to predefined inclusion criteria: studies had to address gender equality in relation to social movements or activism, provide empirical findings or substantive theoretical analysis on this topic, and be published in peer-reviewed journals or by reputable institutions. We excluded works focusing on unrelated issues or lacking content on gender and activism.

This screening left 120 articles for full-text review. Of these, 74 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the analysis.

Given the comparative focus on Türkiye and Europe, the literature search encompassed multiple regions – both developed and developing – to capture global trends as well as regional specificities. We prioritised peer-reviewed studies and widely cited works, including classic theoretical contributions (e.g. Crenshaw 1989; Castells 1997; Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 1995) as well as recent empirical analyses (for instance, economists' studies of gender gaps: Blau, Kahn 2017; Goldin, 2014). In addition, we included policy documents from reputable bodies (such as the European Commission's gender strategy and the UK Government Equalities Office's reports) to ground the academic findings in real-world data and frameworks (e.g. European Commission 2020a; GEO 2019).

3.2. Comparative analytical framework

The comparative dimension of this study is analytical rather than statistical. Instead of conducting a large-scale global comparison, the article examines patterns of feminist activism and policy interaction across two closely connected yet institutionally distinct contexts: the European Union (and selected European states) and Türkiye. These cases were analysed side by side to identify similarities and differences in how social movements influence gender equality outcomes under varying political, legal, and cultural conditions. Such methodological design allowed us to identify common themes, as well as divergent patterns across different socio-political contexts. For example, statistics on the gender pay gap or workforce participation in Türkiye were examined alongside those from various European countries, and case studies of feminist activism in Türkiye were compared with those in European contexts. By analysing these findings, the review highlights how local institutions, cultural norms, and movement strategies influence gender equality outcomes in each context. Global academic literature and international data are used to contextualise these cases, not to construct exhaustive cross-national rankings.

Methodologically, this research follows an integrative literature review design structured in line with established guidelines (Snyder 2019; Xiao, Watson 2019; Page et al. 2021). Studies from multiple disciplines (including sociology, political science, economics, gender studies, and policy research) were thematically coded and synthesised. Key themes (such as intersectionality, work–life balance, labour market inequalities, and policy impacts) were identified across sources and synthesised into a coherent narrative. Each theme was examined *comparatively*: e.g. studies on wage disparities were reviewed across multiple countries to distinguish broader patterns from context-specific dynamics. This approach can be described as a *comparative thematic analysis*, wherein we qualitatively synthesise evidence across cases and disciplines. Throughout the process, a critical lens was applied to compare findings and to highlight convergences, divergences, and debates in the literature, drawing on diverse perspectives.

The final analysis is multifaceted, evidence-based, and grounded in contemporary scholarly discussions.

4. Research results and discussion

4.1. Measurable progress and remaining gaps

The literature demonstrates that while notable progress has been made in many indicators of gender equality over recent decades, substantial inequalities persist. In education, women are accessing higher education at rates equal to or exceeding those of men in many countries today, which marks a significant transformation. In the field of employment, gender gaps in labour force participation have narrowed in some regions, and women have entered professions previously dominated by men. Nevertheless, the gender wage gap remains widespread; it only varies in size by country. For example, it is ranging between 15% and 20% in the United States and Europe, when measured directly (without considering qualifications, education or experience). Even after taking into account such factors as education, work experience, and industry, a residual gap persists, commonly attributed to discrimination, career interruptions related to motherhood, and occupational segregation (Blau, Kahn 2017; World Economic Forum 2023). Research further indicates that progress in closing the wage gap accelerated during the 1980s, but slowed from the mid-1990s onward, alongside stagnation in women's labour force participation linked to unresolved work–life balance challenges.

These inequalities extend beyond wages. Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions and overrepresented in unpaid care and domestic work, accounting for approximately 75% of such labour in the European Union (European Commission 2020b: p. 2). This unequal division of labour constrains women's economic opportunities and long-term well-being. Political representation also remains uneven: despite progress in some countries through quota systems, women continue to hold well under 30% of parliamentary seats globally. Moreover, gains in gender equality are vulnerable to external shocks. Economic crises and the COVID-19 pandemic have disproportionately affected women through job losses and increased care responsibilities, reversing or slowing earlier advances (European Commission 2020a). Overall, the evidence underscores that while progress is measurable, these advances continue to coexist with systemic inequalities. Therefore, gender equality remains incomplete, highlighting the need for sustained and comprehensive efforts.

4.2. Policy implications when movements and governments intersect

Countries with stronger gender equality policies (implemented thanks to the vigorous advocacy of women's organisations) usually have smaller gender gaps. For example, the Nordic countries, known for years of pioneering gender-oriented policies (such as universal childcare services, generous parental leave and flexible work options), consistently rank at the top of global gender equality indices. These policies did not arise spontaneously; they were implemented thanks to active women's movements and supportive social-democratic forces pushing for change as part of a broader commitment to equality. Studies demonstrate that such measures help women maintain continuous ties with the workforce and encourage a more equal sharing of family responsibilities

between women and men (Anyidoho et al. 2021; ILO 2022). For example, the UK Government Equalities Office argues that standardising and normalising flexible working environments at all levels of work and for all genders can reduce the “motherhood penalty” and help close gender-based wage gaps (GEO 2020). By contrast, in countries lacking family-friendly policies, women are often forced to choose between career and family, which leads either to low overall workforce participation by women or to women’s concentration in relatively low-paid and flexible jobs.

Legal obligations such as equal pay laws, anti-discrimination regulations, and gender quotas have produced measurable – though sometimes limited – effects on gender equality. Equal pay legislation provides women with a legal basis to challenge wage inequality, but its impact is often constrained by a lack of transparency. For this reason, measures such as mandatory wage gap reporting are being implemented in countries such as the United Kingdom, and guidelines on wage transparency are being proposed at the European Union level (European Commission 2020a).

Anti-discrimination laws have also played an important role in opening professional fields traditionally dominated by men, and prohibiting sexist practices in recruitment and promotion. Although gender quotas remain controversial, evidence from Europe and beyond suggests that these measures can rapidly increase women’s representation in politics and corporate leadership, while also generating indirect benefits such as the creation of role models and greater attention to childcare and workplace culture at senior management (European Commission 2020a).

At the same time, the literature makes clear that the effectiveness of these policies depends not only on their adoption, but also on their implementation and cultural acceptance. EU reports emphasise that work–life balance directives must be supported by practices that encourage men to take advantage of parental leave and related rights, rather than remaining symbolic commitments (e.g. European Commission 2020a). Overall, progress has been most durable where legal reforms are accompanied by sustained civil society engagement, because even the most progressive policies can be ineffective in practice without continuous social and institutional support.

4.3. Social movements as catalysts for change

A central finding in the literature is that nearly all major advances in gender equality have been initiated by social movement activism rather than purely top-down initiatives. Historical case studies demonstrate that legal and institutional reforms often follow prolonged bottom-up pressure. In the United States, for example, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, along with the establishment of supervisory institution like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, were largely responses to feminist lobbying and trade unions’ activism in the post-war period. Similarly, in Latin America, autonomous women’s movements that emerged alongside democratisation in the 1980s and 1990s played a decisive role in the creation of women’s affairs ministries and comprehensive legal reforms addressing violence against women and political representation (Anyidoho et al. 2021).

Comparative research demonstrates that countries with strong and independent feminist movements tend to adopt more robust policies against gender-based violence, regardless of their level of economic development. One of the recent studies also underline the importance of women's leadership in these movements. A systematic review by Aulia et al. (2024) demonstrates that women's leadership in gender equality movements plays a key role in promoting sustainable social change: enhance women's participation in decision-making processes, raise public awareness of gender issues, and advocate policies that promote gender equality. Even as women-leaders face significant challenges, such as gender stereotypes and institutional barriers.

Another important observation is related to the close interaction between social movements and the media. Contemporary movements effectively use traditional and digital media to amplify their messages and shape public opinion, thereby influencing political agendas. Campaigns such as UN Women's initiative *HeForShe* or the global women's marches of January 2017 helped normalise the idea that gender equality is a societal issue rather than an issue concerning only women. These examples support insights from new social movement theory, which emphasise identity, storytelling, and inclusivity: movements are more effective, when they connect personal experience with public problems and present an inclusive vision of change, i.e. frame gender equality as a collective benefit for society as a whole.

4.4. Intersectionality and inclusivity in outcomes

Another strand of the literature examines which groups of women benefit most from advances in gender equality, and which remain marginalised. Building on Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, scholars demonstrate that progress is uneven across lines of race, class, ethnicity, and migration status. Disaggregated data reveal that while certain gaps have narrowed for some women, others persist or close far more slowly. Comparable intersectional disparities are observed in Europe between native-born and migrant women, as well as in caste- or ethnicity-stratified societies in Asia and Africa. The literature attributes these layered inequalities in access to education and employment, concentration in low-paid or informal sectors, compounded discrimination, and limited access to influential social networks.

At the same time, feminist movements have faced criticism for historically prioritising the problems of relatively privileged women. This critique has contributed to a shift towards more inclusive forms of feminism that foreground diverse experiences, such as campaigns for domestic workers' rights or initiatives addressing the intersection of gender equality issues and migration. Recent research highlights the importance of incorporating the voices of underrepresented women into feminist activism. For instance, a study conducted by Ruiz-Eugenio et al. (2024) in Spain documented how women without university education or elite status have led effective community-based initiatives to prevent domestic violence, producing tangible changes in families and local communities despite their exclusion from formal decision-making structures. Such findings demonstrate that broader inclusion of all women (regardless of class, race, social status

or education) not only strengthens the social base of feminist movements, but also enhances their effectiveness by introducing new perspectives and solutions.

Policymakers have increasingly responded to these insights by designing more targeted gender equality interventions. Rather than relying on uniform solutions, some programmes are now focused on specific groups, such as entrepreneurship training for immigrant women or education in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. This approach reflects a growing recognition that different groups of women face various barriers and have specific needs (UN Women 2023). In this way, intersectionality has moved beyond theory into practice, even though assessing the long-term effectiveness of such targeted measures remains an ongoing challenge.

4.5. Cultural attitudes and reactions

The findings are incomplete without considering the cultural attitudes and periodic reactions that often accompany advances in gender equality. As gender norms shift and traditional power relations are challenged, resistance frequently emerges from those who feel threatened by these changes. The literature demonstrates that progress in women's rights can provoke reactive responses, such as the resurgence of social conservatism or the rise of movements opposing so-called "gender ideology" (Kantola, Lombardo 2023: p. 307), particularly following reforms in reproductive rights or anti-violence legislation. These reactions underscore the non-linear and controversial nature of social change: while laws and policies may evolve relatively quickly, deeply embedded beliefs about gender roles often change more slowly and may lag behind formal equality.

Even in societies with strong egalitarian frameworks, patriarchal values can persist in media publications, workplace cultures, and family expectations. Behavioural changes (such as men taking on greater caregiving responsibilities or women assuming leadership roles) may generate new tensions, leaving behind changes in attitudes. For instance, young women today are more likely to pursue public influence and professional advancement than previous generations, but they still encounter expectations to conform to norms of likability or emotional labour that can penalise assertive leadership. Social media also reflects this duality: there are platforms to challenge sexism and mobilise support, while simultaneously amplifying abusive voices that try to intimidate women in public sphere.

Scholars emphasise that sustaining momentum towards gender equality requires not only policy reform but also direct engagement with cultural resistance. This includes involving men as allies in redefining masculinity and investing in public education that confronts gender stereotypes. Research suggests that norms can be changed from generation to generation, when legal reforms are combined with awareness-raising efforts. Younger men in many societies, for example, increasingly support gender equality in relationships and participate more actively in parenting than their fathers' generation. Nevertheless, vigilance remains essential. Periodic backlashes, political discourses that undermine women's rights, and economic pressures that encourage

a re-traditionalisation of gender roles remind us that gains are never fully secured. In response, feminist movements continue to adapt by building flexible coalitions, linking gender equality to broader social justice causes, and emphasising its benefits for society as a whole. Cultural attitudes remain both a central objective and an ongoing arena of struggle, highlighting the need for continuous advocacy, dialogue, and education to embed egalitarian values more deeply in everyday life.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study considers gender equality as a structural social transformation driven by grassroots activism, progressive policy frameworks, and evolving cultural norms (Fraser 2022). Over the last two decades, many societies have moved closer to formal equality: women's legal rights have expanded, gaps in education and labour force participation have narrowed, and gender issues have gained greater visibility in public sphere. These achievements have not occurred spontaneously, but have emerged through sustained efforts by social movements working in collaboration with supportive institutions and civil society actors. Drawing on feminist research – from intersectional theory to mass mobilisation and evidence-based policymaking – the analysis demonstrates the enduring power of collective action in advancing gender justice. At the same time, the article's contribution does not rest on strict empirical comparison. Rather than systematically contrasting countries or regions, it synthesises a broad and diverse body of literature to identify recurring patterns, shared challenges, and common trajectories in struggles for gender equality. In this sense, the value of the study lies in its integrative approach, which brings fragmented debates into dialogue and offers broader sociological insights into gender equality as an ongoing process of social change.

One key insight is that gender equality should be understood as a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a one-time accomplishment. Turning points like a narrowing gender pay gap or increasing female representation are signs of progress, but they also highlight remaining obstacles. For example, narrowing pay gaps often reveal persistent "motherhood penalties" and work–family imbalances that women continue to face, suggesting that deeper structural changes in workplace culture and family policy are needed to level the playing field. Similarly, increasing the number of women in leadership positions, while a positive development, tends to indicate more subtle biases and underscores the need for inclusive organisational norms. Every obstacle overcome tends to reveal another, confirming the ongoing importance of feminist and social justice movements as new challenges emerge, such as intersectional inequalities or the gendered impacts of emerging technologies.

Seen through this lens, the findings of the study answer directly to the research questions posed at the outset. By examining how feminist activism, institutional reform, and cultural change interact across the contexts discussed in the literature, the analysis demonstrates that progress in gender equality is neither linear nor guaranteed. Instead, it is contingent on sustained collective action and responsive governance. The literature

consistently shows that where movements weaken or institutional commitment falters, gains are vulnerable to stagnation or reversal.

Another important conclusion is the interdependent nature of movements and policies. Countries that have made notable gender equality gains typically have a history of robust feminist activism and civil society engagement, which keep gender issues on the agenda and hold institutions accountable. International frameworks (such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the EU's *Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025*) illustrate how ideas prioritised by movements can be institutionalised into enduring policy commitments. Patriarchal attitudes persist, and periodic backlashes serve as reminders that no victory is permanent: rights can be rolled back if not vigilantly defended, and new gender equality challenges will continually arise. Thus, vigilance and adaptability are required from both activists and policymakers to sustain and advance the gains.

From this perspective, the strength of the study lies in its comprehensive engagement with the literature rather than in the construction of a formal comparative framework. The discussion of different national and regional experiences serves primarily as illustrative material, helping to ground theoretical arguments and policy debates rather than to establish a systematic cross-case comparison. Reflecting on the comparative scope of the study, the findings demonstrate that meaningful comparison does not require a fully global empirical design. By focusing on the European Union, selected European states, and Türkiye, the article highlights how similar feminist demands interact with different institutional frameworks and political cultures. This focused comparison allows for deeper analytical insight than a broader but shallower global survey would permit. At the same time, engagement with global literature ensures that these cases are not treated in isolation but as part of wider international debates on gender equality and social change.

In this sense, comparative analysis functions as a secondary, supportive element rather than the core analytical objective of the article. The primary aim remains to map the intellectual landscape of gender equality research and to demonstrate how insights from sociology, feminist theory, and policy studies collectively deepen our understanding of social transformation. By foregrounding synthesis over comparison, the article reinforces the importance of cumulative knowledge-building in gender studies.

This conclusion also underscores the importance of a global perspective. Learning from diverse national experiences expands the range of strategies available to both social movements and policymakers. For instance, Scandinavian achievements in work–life balance policies can inspire similar initiatives elsewhere, while the activism of women in more conservative societies can mobilise international solidarity. Local struggles increasingly resonate globally, as seen in transnational campaigns such as International Women's Day or global movements against gender-based violence. At the same time, solutions must remain context-sensitive, because activists are often best positioned to pursue rights within their own cultural and political environments.

From a sociological standpoint, this study reinforces key theoretical insights by adopting a literature-driven approach that allows patterns to emerge without forcing

rigid comparison. By integrating perspectives from social movement theory, economics, and policy research, it offers a more comprehensive understanding of gender equality as a dynamic social process. The findings also point to practical implications: policymakers should work closely with gender-focused civil society organisations, address structural barriers such as childcare and inflexible work arrangements, and actively involve men through measures like paternity leave and gender education. Media and education systems play a crucial role in promoting egalitarian norms, while an intersectional perspective remains essential to ensure inclusivity.

Overall, viewing gender equality through the lens of new social movement theory reveals it as a broader project of social change rather than a narrow technical issue. Progress to date and ongoing challenges demonstrate how human rights and dignity advance through collective action and democratic participation. Sustaining this integrative approach (linking theory, activism, and policy) will be vital, because future generations continue the pursuit of gender equality, guided by the lessons of past and present movements.

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