

Introduction to the ESR Special Issue on “Gender, Economics and Society”

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Gender inequality is a pervasive issue affecting all areas of life. While some progress towards equality has been made in recent decades, significant gender gaps persist. Across the globe, on average, women are less likely to engage in paid work outside the home (ILOSTAT, 2024), work fewer hours (OECD, 2022) and are paid less than men (World Economic Forum, 2024). Despite the introduction of many laws to protect the rights of women, no country in the world provides equal opportunities to women; on average women are afforded two-thirds the rights of men (World Bank Group, 2024). Alarmingly, at the current rate of progress, it will take 134 years to reach gender parity across the economic, political, health, and educational dimensions (World Economic Forum, 2024). In Ireland, gender equality made significant improvements between 2010 and 2020, with particular gains in the domains of decision-making positions across spheres, and education and training. However over the past few years gender inequality has increased, primarily due to setbacks in time allocation which has accompanied increasing female labour force participation. On a daily basis, Irish men are almost 2.5 times more likely to

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engage in social activities than women, who are 1.5 times more likely to do housework and 1.3 times more likely to undertake caring activities (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). While many academic articles exist on the intersection of gender and the economy, there is a lack of studies bringing together current research in this area within an Irish context and/or by Irish-based researchers. The goal of this special issue is to present a set of papers which enrich our understanding of how gender is related to areas such as the labour market, inequality, health, firms, finance, the macro-economy, social relations and norms, education, the environment, and behaviours. This special edition brings together six papers related to gender differences in schooling, time use, consumption, administrative burdens, mental health and home working, and gender pay-gap reporting. Academic research is needed in this space to help inform the policy debate and ultimately to improve our understanding of policy options to improve and promote gender equality.

The special issue is edited by three founding executive committee members of the Irish Society for Women in Economics (ISWE). ISWE is a voluntary network created by colleagues working in economics across Ireland to address the under-representation of women in the profession, and a standing committee of the Irish Economics Association. In Ireland, women represent approximately one-third of undergraduate and postgraduate students studying economics, and account for 41 per cent of academic economists and 32 per cent of full professors (Friebel and Wilhelm, 2020). Internationally, gender is the most consistent, significant predictor of students' decisions to study economics at undergraduate level, and the proportion of women in undergraduate economics majors has remained between 30-35 per cent for several decades (Siegfried, 2018). Rates of under-representation in Ireland are similar, but unlike some other disciplines, there has been little improvement in representation over time (HEA, 2023).

Established in 2021, ISWE aims to address this documented gender inequality, by providing a public service that will impact Ireland's economic and social health by inspiring, empowering, and increasing women's visibility in economics in Ireland. Guided by the foundational principles of evidence-based impact, and collaboration and engagement, ISWE works to ensure that economists in public debate, policy decisions, education, and the private sector are more representative of Irish society. This vision is strongly aligned with the HEA's Gender Taskforce Action Plan, as well as the 2021 Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality which recommended that gender equality becomes the norm in Irish society. ISWE is based on three interconnected pillars: (1) Supporting women economists across the lifecycle of their careers; (2) Encouraging representation of women economists in public debates and policy forums; and (3) Fostering representation of women studying economics at all levels. This special issue is most closely aligned with pillar 2, which aims to increase the voice of women economists in public debates, policy decisions, and the media; all the papers in this issue are authored or

co-authored by women economists. Furthermore, this issue provides an evidence base for improving gender equality along a number of dimensions, by quantifying where gender gaps exist and offering informed potential policy solutions.

Although each of the following six papers stand on their own, we have organised the special issue into a broad thematic structure and logical ordering starting from inequalities which emerge early in life and then continue into adulthood, in both the home and the workplace.

The first paper in this issue by Devereux and Kapur (2024) investigates how teacher bias and grade inflation impacts gender grade gaps by exploring the impact of changes in the assessment of students over the COVID-19 pandemic on the distribution of grades. At the height of the pandemic (2020 and 2021), the set of final school assessments in Ireland known as the Leaving Certificate were changed from State exams which were independently graded to primarily teacher-assessed grades. As illustrated by the authors, significant grade inflation resulted from the teacher assessments, with the top grades increasing from 4 per cent in 2019, to 6 per cent and 10 per cent in the following two years. They employ a simple framework to disentangle grade inflation from potential teacher gender bias in the estimation of grades. Grades issued in 2022 were assessed by independent State exams, but at the national level all awarded grades were inflated to ensure that average grades were not lower than the previous year. Therefore, while differences in grades from 2021 to 2022 only reflect grade inflation, differences between 2019 and 2020 may include both grade inflation and teacher gender bias. The results demonstrate that while teacher bias favours girls, grade inflation explains two-thirds of the increase in female advantage in these years, while gender bias explains just one-third. The analysis also highlights the differential impacts of grade inflation across the grade distribution, with girls at the top of the distribution and boys at the bottom of the distribution benefiting. Failure to account for grade inflation leads to an overestimation of gender bias, particularly at the top of the grade distribution where girls are over-represented.

The second paper in this special issue by Elsner, Jindal, Mascherini and Nivakoski (2024) utilises panel survey data from across the EU27 countries during the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 to 2022) to explore whether school closures impacted gender gaps in time use. The results demonstrate that in most EU countries, both within and outside the pandemic period, women spent less time on paid work and considerably more time on household chores than men. Interestingly however, the analysis finds that while school closures resulted in changes in time use, with reduced time spent on paid work and increased time spent on housework and leisure, on average there were no differential responses across genders. The authors further investigate if parental gender norms play a role in time-use responses by considering the level of gender equality in a country. They define gender equality as high if the country’s unadjusted gender pay gap is below the OECD median, and low otherwise. Importantly, the analysis uncovers

significant heterogeneous time-use responses. In countries with low gender equality, men with children spend more time on leisure during school closures, while in countries with high gender equality, fathers spend more time on childcare and household chores. This paper highlights the significant impact of gendered social norms on time use and the role for policymakers in helping to shift these norms towards equality.

The third paper by O'Donoghue, Doorley and Sologon (2024) studies gender-differentiated consumption in Ireland over nearly three decades using data from the Household Budget Survey. Gender differences in consumption have important implications for public policy and economic outcomes as they influence household resource allocation. In addition, Ireland serves as an interesting case study due to its significant economic changes and evolving gender roles over the past 40 years. Existing studies in Ireland provide varied insights, but have not thoroughly examined gender-differentiated consumption patterns. This paper addresses this gap by providing new evidence on the prevalence and economic advancement of households headed by women in Ireland over the period 1987-2015, investigating how their consumption patterns differ from that of households headed by men. Some interesting patterns emerge. First, the proportion of female-headed households increased significantly over the past three decades in Ireland, rising from 21.5 per cent in 1987 to a peak of 46.4 per cent during the financial crisis of 2009/2010. At the same time, these households, often in the lower half of the income distribution, show distinct consumption patterns, allocating higher budget shares to necessities like food and heating. Male-headed households on same income distribution, on the other hand, spend more on tobacco, alcohol and motor fuels. Overall the evidence suggests that while gender differentials in consumption have decreased, significant differences persist, underscoring the importance of considering gender in economic policies and the need for targeted interventions to promote sustainable consumption and gender equity.

The fourth paper in this issue by Martin (2024) explores gender inequalities in the distribution of administrative burdens within households using unique survey data on individuals cohabiting with a partner in the UK. The author documents gender differences in administrative burdens, focusing on time-use, well-being, and self-assessed responsibility for tasks across ten policy domains. On average, both men and women report having more responsibility than their partner for administrative tasks, except for childcare, where men report lower levels of responsibility than their partner. However, women report higher levels of responsibility over all tasks. The analysis finds no gender differences in total administrative time-use, but interesting differences in responsibility across policy domains emerge. Women are more likely than men to engage with, and feel more strongly responsible for, administrative tasks relating to health, goods and services, and children. But they are less likely to engage with and feel less strongly responsible for retirement and savings. Women report lower well-being during all

tasks except childcare; the fact that they report greater subjective time pressure partly explains this gap. The study also provides important insights into gender norms and intra-household bargaining. When women are the primary earners, they report being more responsible for administrative tasks across all domains, except for care work, where women are predominantly responsible regardless of who the primary earner is.

The fifth paper, by McHugh and Walsh (2024), considers the relationship between carers and mental health in the context of COVID-19 and the rise in working from home (WFH). In particular, they explore gender differences in mental health outcomes between male and female workers who also have significant unpaid caring responsibilities. The *National Remote Work Strategy* (Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment, 2021) and the *Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Right to Disconnect* (Workplace Relations Commission, 2021), ensures that WFH is likely to remain an important facet of the labour market. Therefore, considering the gendered implications of such policies is a priority. Using data from the Healthy Ireland Survey collected between 2020-2021, they found that carers have worse mental health than non-carers, and that female carers experienced a larger decline in their mental health compared to male carers. However, there is some evidence that transitioning to WFH during the pandemic may have helped to offset some of the negative mental health consequences associated with caring. Unpaid carers, who are predominantly women, are an often-overlooked group in terms of both public discourse and government policy. Thus, this paper highlights the need to develop policies to support unpaid carers in an effort to reduce further gender inequalities.

The final paper in this special issue moves the focus away from individuals and households and on to firms. The gender pay gap is a significant issue in Ireland whereby female employees earn 90 cents to every euro earned by male employees (CSO, 2023). In 2022, the Gender Pay Gap Information Act (2021) required all firms in Ireland with more than 250 employees to report on their hourly gender pay gap. O’Sullivan (2024), using both quantitative and qualitative data emanating from the reports, critically reviews this first year of implementation. The Act requires firms to report both the hourly pay gap and a narrative explaining it, and any actions taken to remediate it. The first key finding concerns the absence of reports (26 per cent) for many eligible organisations, suggesting that compliance is an issue. Among the 578 organisations considered, male employees had higher average salaries than female employees in 88 per cent of the organisations, and the average gender pay gap was 11.82 per cent. Organisations with high pay gaps include those involved in property, financial services and professional services, while organisations with lower gaps include local government, government, and not-for-profit organisations. In general, the gap is higher in private sector organisations who offer bonus payments, but do not use pay scales, and are less likely to provide part-time employment. The narrative sections of the report often point to justifications

for the pay gap, for example, different employment patterns among men and women, rather than acknowledging or addressing the historical origins of gender inequality. The paper questions the effectiveness of the existing reporting system and suggests that a central online reporting system, with penalties for non-compliance, may be more effective. While the introduction of this legislation is welcome and may help to address the long standing gender pay gap, a significant body of work is required to ensure firms are fully compliant.

The papers in this special issue analyse societal gender inequalities within schools, homes and firms, providing important insights for policymakers. The evidence presented here suggests that while the gender bias favours girls in school, later in life – both at home and in the workplace – women are disadvantaged. Women-headed households are more likely to be at the lower end of the income distribution and spend a greater share of their income on necessities like food and fuel. In co-habiting heterosexual households, women report higher levels of responsibility for administrative tasks; and where a woman is the primary earner she takes on responsibility for even more of these tasks. Gender pay gaps are well documented, but the analysis in this issue suggests that a high number of reports are not submitted by employers, and narratives try to justify gaps rather than address them. This underlines the importance of both enforcement of reporting and action beyond documentation. Finally, this issue highlights some of the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic; women carers experienced a larger decline in their mental health than male carers, and in low gender equality countries, men with children spent more time on leisure during school closures.

To improve gender equality, policy design and implementation should always consider potential gendered effects. Closing gender pay and work gaps would go some way to promoting equality, but not if women both work more and take on more tasks at home, at the expense of their leisure time. Gender norms and culture have significant impacts on time use, mental health, and wellbeing. Policies promoting gender equality need to shift these norms, particularly in the domain of caring responsibilities. Progress towards equality has stalled, thus we need to determine the most effective way to move forward. As ever, more research is needed.

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