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What five editions of the gender and economics workshop in Luxembourg reveal for policy

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Research presented across five editions of the Gender and Economics Workshop shows why formal equality does not always produce equal outcomes. Gender gaps accumulate through unequal care responsibilities, workplace organisation, social norms, insecure environments, biased evaluation and differences in wealth. Policies should therefore address the mechanisms behind these gaps rather than measure outcomes alone. Five priorities emerge: invest in accessible childcare and well-designed parental leave; engage men in sharing care; protect women's long-term economic independence; ensure safety and fair evaluation; and monitor the institutional conditions that shape opportunities. Effective equality requires changing the environments in which women and men make decisions.

Why this brief

The Gender and Economics Workshop at the University of Luxembourg has grown from a small initiative in 2019 into an international forum for research on gender equality and economics. Across five editions, the workshop has followed the evolution of the field itself. The economics of gender continues to study visible gaps in pay, employment, occupational choices, wealth, and representation. But the field has moved further. It increasingly identifies the (in)visible reasons why these gaps persist, despite the fact that women's education and participation in the labour market have improved remarkably.

This brief draws on the themes, papers, and keynote lectures presented across five editions of the Workshop. From a policy perspective, we argue that currently gender equality research suggests moving from formal equality to effective equality policy. Equal rights and anti-discrimination rules remain essential, but they do not automatically change how childcare is divided, how careers are organised, or how women are judged when they take positions traditionally held by men.

From measuring gaps to understanding mechanisms

A first finding from research on the economics of gender is that gaps are cumulative. Pay, employment, and wealth gaps are not produced only at the moment of hiring, promotion, or wage negotiation. They are the cumulative result of earlier choices, family responsibilities, workplace incentives and social norms that operate over the life cycle.

Comparative evidence shows that gender gaps have narrowed substantially over time, but that convergence has slowed where family responsibilities and the organisation of work continue to affect women and men differently. The question is no longer only whether women enter education or employment. It is whether institutions allow women and men to progress under comparable conditions.

One of the most important mechanisms behind persistent gender gaps in the labour market in OECD countries is the asymmetric burden of parenthood. Evidence on child penalties shows that parenthood has large and persistent effects on women's labour-market trajectories relative to men's (Kleven et al., 2019).

Recent cross-country evidence confirms that these penalties are widespread, although their size differs across countries and contexts. Because childcare still falls disproportionately on women, mothers are more likely to reduce working hours, choose more flexible but lower-paid jobs, avoid jobs requiring long hours. These choices ultimately have impacts over their careers and thus on the leadership positions held by women. In fact, contributions presented across the Workshop editions suggest that child penalties should be understood broadly. They do not concern only current wages or employment. Contributions presented at the Workshop in 2019 and 2023–2025 study pension caregiver credits, parental leave and pension wealth, child penalties in labour-market skills, child penalties across sectors, retirement savings, work from home, and child penalties in the extended family. This points to a cumulative mechanism: parenthood affects time, career choices, skills, earnings, savings and pensions. Gender gaps later in life are therefore partly produced by unequal constraints much earlier in the life cycle.

This mechanism is also visible in academia. Childcare and fathers' involvement affect productivity and career progression (Cairo et al., 2026). Parenthood marks a sharp divergence in academic careers: one in three women exits academia after motherhood. Men also experience a decline in academic employment after fatherhood, but the effects are substantially smaller. This contributes to the under-representation of women among full professors.

A second recurrent finding in gender research concerns the role of policy design. This issue was central to Libertad González's keynote on labour-market gender gaps at the Workshop in 2024. Her work on paternity leave and family-friendly policies shows that fathers' involvement does not increase automatically because a right exists on paper. It depends on how leave is designed, whether fathers are financially able to take it, and whether workplaces make it acceptable to use it. Evidence from Spain shows that policy design can increase fathers' leave-taking, but also that workplace flexibility and income-related constraints shape how fathers use that time (Farré et al., 2025). Related work argues that more generous paternity leave can contribute to gender equality within households by changing the incentives facing couples (González & Zoabi, 2021). Reducing motherhood penalties therefore requires changing the choices available to fathers, families and in workplaces.

The design of care policies therefore matters because households respond to incentives and norms. Papers on shared parental leave, parental part-time work, and family-friendly jobs all point in the same direction. Policies do not operate in a vacuum. Their effects depend on whether fathers can and do take leave, whether employers support care-compatible careers, and whether care is treated as a shared responsibility rather than as a maternal adjustment.

The third main research finding impacting gender gaps is the organisation of work. Claudia Goldin's work on the 'last chapter of gender convergence' shows that remaining gender gaps are closely linked to the structure of jobs, especially the high returns to long hours and limited flexibility (Goldin, 2014). Evidence from young professionals in business and finance similarly shows that gender gaps can emerge even among highly educated men and women with similar starting points, as careers evolve differently with hours, flexibility and family formation. In such settings, the problem is not only whether women participate in the labour market. It is also how high-status and high-paid careers are designed.

A related theme is that care constraints interact with the organisation of work. Research shows this is the case for smart working, work from home, family-friendly jobs, long hours, public services and women's time use. These topics show that flexibility is not automatically equalising. It can reduce constraints only if it remains compatible with promotion and responsibility. Otherwise, flexible work may simply become another channel through which women are sorted into lower-return career paths.

In addition, norms shape how households and workplaces respond to policy. Research on gender identity within households shows that labour supply, housework and marital outcomes are affected when women's income challenges traditional male-breadwinner norms (Bertrand et al., 2015). This helps explain why formal opportunities alone may not be enough: choices are made inside social environments that attach meaning to care, work and income. The role of men is therefore central. Gender equality cannot be achieved only by helping women adapt to unequal structures. Men are fathers, partners, colleagues, PhD supervisors, managers and policymakers. Their behaviour affects how childcare is divided at home and how work is organised at the workplace. Fathers' acceptance of childcare responsibilities and men's support for career-compatible flexibility are part of the economic architecture of gender equality.

Finally, a further lesson from the Workshop contributions is that gender inequalities are shaped by institutions that extend beyond the workplace and the household. Research presented on gender-based taxation, inheritance rights, access to education, public transport, and the consequences of economic and environmental shocks illustrates the range of institutional factors that can influence women's opportunities. These factors may affect labour supply, occupational choices, mobility, and the accumulation of human and financial capital. Their relevance also varies across countries and socioeconomic groups. This broader perspective suggests that gender equality policies should consider how different institutional arrangements interact, rather than treating employment, family, taxation, and social protection policies as separate domains.

Safety and evaluation as economic issues

A more recent theme in research is that gender equality cannot be separated from safety and the conditions under which choices are made. Economic analysis often begins from the assumption that individuals choose among available alternatives. Yet violence, harassment and the threat of violence alter that choice set itself. They can affect whether women enter particular occupations, remain in certain workplaces, pursue academic careers, travel, work late hours, participate in professional networks or accept positions involving greater visibility and responsibility. In this sense, insecurity is not only a welfare loss, but also an economic constraint that can distort career investment and the allocation of talent.

This is why research on gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, victim-blaming norms and workplace harassment has become increasingly relevant to gender economics. Such experiences can produce direct costs through poorer health and lower productivity, but also indirect and potentially long-lasting costs through interrupted careers, occupational sorting, reduced investment in human capital and withdrawal from professional environments (Folke & Rickne, 2023). Johanna Rickne's keynote, in 2026, on sexual harassment and women's academic careers illustrates this mechanism clearly. Harassment is not only an individual harm occurring within a workplace; it can alter

career trajectories, affect retention and progression, and contribute to the unequal distribution of women across positions of influence and seniority (Rickne et al., 2026). From this perspective, workplace safety is part of the institutional infrastructure that determines who can participate fully in economic life.

A related issue concerns how women are evaluated once they enter spaces in which they were previously under-represented. Increasing female representation changes who is present, but it does not necessarily change the standards, expectations or social perceptions through which performance is assessed. Formal access and numerical representation may therefore coexist with unequal recognition.

Evidence from the film industry, presented in the Workshop, illustrates this point. Litina, Mavropoulos and Zanaj study more than 5,000 films and show that audience ratings decline as the number of female leading actors increases, while professional awards move in the opposite direction. The negative audience-rating effect is primarily driven by male viewers (Litina et al., 2026). This suggests that visibility can trigger biased evaluation: women may be present, but their work may still be judged through gendered expectations.

The film-industry evidence is specific, but it raises a broader question for labour markets in which ratings and evaluations affect promotion, funding and reputation. If these evaluations contain systematic gender differences unrelated to productivity or quality, they can affect wages, promotion, funding, reputation and ultimately career choices. Bias in evaluation can therefore become self-reinforcing: unequal assessments today influence who remains in the pipeline, who accumulates experience and visibility, and who reaches senior positions tomorrow. Representation alone is consequently unlikely to eliminate inequality if the mechanisms through which merit is recognised remain unchanged.

These mechanisms are particularly relevant within academia and economics itself. Sierminska & Oaxaca (2021) show that women and men entering PhD careers in economics sort differently across fields, with women under-represented in several highly visible or policy-influential specialisations. Such differences may emerge well before final career outcomes are observed. They can reflect preferences, but also expectations about belonging, mentorship, professional opportunities and anticipated returns to investing in particular fields. What looks at first sight like an individual specialisation choice may therefore partly reflect the institutional and social environment in which that choice is made.

This brings a further dimension into the analysis: preferences and identities themselves are socially formed. Research presented at the workshop shows that gendered choices cannot always be understood as fixed individual preferences. Families, peers and the social norms they hold influence what individuals perceive as desirable or appropriate. Eleonora Patacchini, a keynote speaker in 2019, has shown that mothers and peers shape gender-role identity, illustrating how attitudes and choices are transmitted through social interactions (Olivetti et al., 2020). These mechanisms help explain why gender inequalities can persist even after formal barriers have disappeared: expectations are reproduced through social environments and may affect educational choices, labour-market behaviour and the division of responsibilities within households.

The same logic applies to questions of identity, institutions and education. Uljarević and Zanaj study restrictions on religious symbols in Flemish public schools and show how a formally neutral rule can generate unequal consequences for specific groups of girls. The findings presented at the workshop indicate no effect on standardised test scores, but a decline in self-reported emotional well-being (Uljarević & Zanaj, 2026). Hence, a policy may appear neutral when judged only through observable performance outcomes and yet still affect the conditions under which individuals participate in education.

Taken together, these strands of research broaden the economic understanding of gender (in)equality. Equal opportunity is not secured solely by removing formal barriers or increasing representation. It also depends on whether individuals can participate safely and whether their performance is evaluated fairly. It also requires institutional environments that allow them to participate without disproportionate costs to identity, well-being or career prospects. Safety, evaluation and belonging are therefore not peripheral social concerns, because they shape important economic decisions like human-capital accumulation and the allocation of talent. They are consequently central to the economics of gender inequality.

Gender, culture and economics

The special issue titled Gender, Culture and Economics in the Journal of Demographic Economics will bring together papers from the Workshop and beyond, highlights a central message of the literature. Gender inequalities are shaped not only by labour markets, but also by culture, religion, shocks and public policy. The accepted papers show how gender outcomes are embedded in wider social settings, where norms about family, sexuality, health and violence influence the choices available to women and men. In this sense, the special issue moves the discussion from visible gender gaps to the deeper cultural and institutional mechanisms that produce them.

The contribution by Sascha O. Becker, a keynote speaker in 2025, together with Jeanet Sinding Bentzen and Chun Chee Kok, 'Gender and Religion: a Survey' (Becker et al., 2026) provides a conceptual anchor for the special issue. The paper reviews two interconnected questions: why women tend to report higher religiosity than men, and how religion shapes gender-related economic and social outcomes. The survey covers gender norms and attitudes, education, labour-market participation, fertility, health, legal institutions, reforms and discrimination, while distinguishing between the effects of individual religiosity and those of religious denomination. The survey's main message is that religious teachings and participation may reinforce traditional gender roles, affecting women's education and labour supply, but the effects vary across contexts and can be altered by secular reforms or religious movements. The authors stress that rigorous causal evidence remains limited, leaving substantial room for new empirical work.

Economic independence, wealth, and financial security

An important dimension of gender inequality concerns the accumulation and control of economic resources over the life course. While labour-market inequalities have received considerable attention, differences in earnings do not fully capture disparities in economic well-being. Wealth provides financial security, facilitates investments, and offers protection against economic shocks. Gender differences in asset ownership, savings, and access to financial resources may therefore reinforce inequalities beyond those observed in employment and wages.

Research presented across the Workshop editions has increasingly addressed these issues (e.g. Bartels et al. (2025)). Contributions have examined gender wealth gaps across the wealth distribution and age groups, the role of inheritance and wealth accumulation, women's economic independence within and beyond households, and the relationship between intra-household bargaining power and financial market participation. More recent contributions have extended this perspective to financial literacy, pension investment decisions, and the long-term consequences of unequal access to assets. Together, these studies highlight the importance of looking beyond household-level resources to understand women's individual economic security.

Family formation and dissolution introduce another important dimension. Economic decisions within couples, including the division of paid and unpaid work, affect individual earnings, savings, and asset accumulation. These decisions can have consequences that become particularly visible following separation or divorce. Workshop contributions on divorce expectations, financial well-being following divorce, and gender differences in retirement savings point to the importance of considering how household arrangements and family transitions shape economic outcomes over time.

These issues have direct implications for public policy. Policies aimed at reducing gender inequality should consider not only employment and earnings but also the distribution of assets, individual pension entitlements, and access to financial resources. Pension systems, taxation, inheritance regulations, and family policies can influence how economic resources are accumulated and distributed within and across households. Addressing gender inequality therefore requires greater attention to the institutions that shape financial independence and economic security throughout the life course.

Insights for policy

The five editions of the Workshop illustrate the breadth of the research agenda, from labour-market inequalities to the cultural, institutional and economic mechanisms shaping gender outcomes. Table 1 summarises the keynote speakers and key topics of each edition. Across these diverse contributions, five policy priorities emerge.

Table 1 – Five editions of the Gender and Economics Workshop: keynote speakers and key topics

Edition	Keynote speakers	Key topics
2019	Naci Mocan; Eleonora Patacchini	Social interactions and gendered behaviour; women's political engagement, financial literacy, robots and the gender pay gap, gender norms and smart working
2023	Enrico Spolaore; Hillel Rapoport; Conchita D'Ambrosio	Culture, migration and diffusion of gender norms; fertility, inequality; effects of shocks such as COVID-19 on well-being
2024	Libertad González; James Fenske	Labour-market gender gaps, family-friendly policies, motherhood penalty, conflict and gender norms
2025	Mariapia Mendola; Sascha O. Becker	Diversity, inclusive culture, stereotypes among young people, gender and religion
2026	Klaus Desmet; Johanna Rickne	Preferences, the gender equality paradox, sexual harassment and women's academic careers, religiosity, minority groups

Note: topics summarise themes from each edition and are not necessarily the subjects of the keynote lectures.

Source: Gender and Economics Workshop programmes, 2019–2026.

First, treat childcare as economic and research infrastructure. Affordable and accessible childcare and well-designed parental leave affect employment, working hours, career continuity and the accumulation of human capital. In universities and research institutions, they also shape conference participation, mobility, research productivity and visibility. Policy design must account for eligibility, affordability and incentives for both parents to participate.

Second, make men central to institutional equality policies. Fathers' take-up of leave and men's behaviour as partners, supervisors and decision-makers influence whether care becomes a shared responsibility. Supporting mothers without addressing workplace expectations and care norms may alleviate immediate constraints while leaving motherhood penalties largely intact. Effective policy must address the incentives and norms shaping men's participation in care.

Third, strengthen women's economic independence and long-term financial security. Earnings and employment gaps capture only part of economic inequality. Differences in savings, asset ownership and pension entitlements accumulate over the life course and can become especially consequential following divorce or single parenthood. Pension credits for caregiving, taxation, inheritance rules and social protection should therefore be assessed for their effects on individuals' financial security, not only household resources.

Fourth, treat safety and fair evaluation as conditions for economic equality. Violence and harassment restrict mobility, career investment and professional participation, while biased assessments can impede progression even when women's representation increases. Prevention, institutional accountability and transparent evaluation procedures are therefore essential to ensuring that formal opportunities translate into effective ones.

Finally, measure mechanisms, not only outcomes. Pay, employment and leadership gaps should be monitored alongside parental leave take-up, unpaid care, career interruptions, safety, evaluation practices, well-being and individual financial security. Policies concerning taxation, education, transport and social protection should also be evaluated in light of their interactions with family responsibilities and social norms. Without such evidence, policymakers risk observing persistent gaps without identifying where intervention is needed.

The central lesson from five editions of the Gender and Economics Workshop is not simply that gender gaps persist, but that their underlying mechanisms are increasingly understood. The challenge is to translate this evidence into institutional change. Formal equality is essential, but effective equality also requires care to be shared more equally, workplaces to be safe, contributions to be evaluated fairly and economic independence to be sustained throughout the life course.

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