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THE FUTURE OF GENDER EQUALITY IN TURBULENT TIMES

Why we need a gender lens on polycrisis

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When we began this book project in mid-2022, the world was still grappling with the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the recent outbreak of the war in Ukraine. In that context, it seemed both relevant and necessary to offer a long-term examination of how a succession of crises – starting with the 2008 financial and austerity crisis and extending to more recent disruptions – had intersected with trends towards gender equality in both waged and unwaged work, following the approach of earlier related volumes (Rubery, 1988; Karamessini & Rubery, 2014). However, as the introductory chapter already explains (Rubery et al., 2026), we soon recognised the need to expand this agenda. The cost-of-living crisis was unfolding rapidly on the back of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, while debates on a global state of “permacrisis” (Brown et al., 2023) and “polycrisis” (Lawrence et al., 2024, Parnell et al., 2024) were gaining traction in political and academic circles. Moreover, the turbulence triggered by shocks – whether in the financial system, health-related or geopolitical – was clearly occurring alongside and in interaction with other concomitant transformations, such as the digital and green transitions, that were adding pressures on the employment system. These concerns led us to broaden the initial scope of the volume and bring these other processes of change and transformation into the picture.

The journey of bringing this project to completion has not only broadened the scope of the volume but, more fundamentally, prompted deeper reflection on how we conceptualise the different processes under study and their interconnections from a gender perspective. In this concluding chapter, we build on the analytical and empirical insights of the chapters in the volume to develop a broader discussion that engages with the mainstream debate on polycrisis in a timely manner. Our contribution is twofold.

First, we argue that a gender perspective needs to be conceptually woven into this debate, where it has so far been virtually absent. Accordingly, any analysis of polycrisis should incorporate the tensions at the boundaries of production and social reproduction as a core component to capture the dynamics of current turbulence. Several chapters point to the centrality of this issue (Baxter et al., 2026; Karamessini, 2026; Larsen et al., 2026; Lopezlira & Hunter, 2026; Marx et al., 2026; Plomien & Schwartz, 2026) and illustrate how it intersects with the digital and green transformations (Daly et al., 2026; Piasna, 2026; Rani et al., 2026), enriching the discussion with diverse perspectives and focuses.

Second, the contributions in this volume empirically showcase the importance of considering how gender intersects with other axes of social stratification. Authors were encouraged to adopt an intersectionally aware perspective to trace the impacts of the processes studied across gender groups. A number of chapters (Bashevskia & Dotti Sani, 2026; Figueiredo & López-Andreu, 2026; Steinmetz & Guarnerio, 2026; Torres & Warren, 2026) show that gendered outcomes are further stratified along different social divides, such as education, social class and migration status. These findings reinforce the argument that, to capture the full picture of polycrisis, it is essential to analyse not only gender differences but also who within each gender benefits or loses under turbulence. Relatedly, this concluding chapter also addresses differences in experiences of crises within genders in light of spatial variations. Although most contributions focus on the Global North, we draw on their insights to discuss how the processes under study produce unequal distributions of risks between the Global North and the Global South and their interconnections – as illustrated, for example, in Rani et al.'s (2026) chapter on platform work in the Global South.

What follows elaborates on these two contributions. We begin by outlining the theoretical reasons for introducing the gender perspective into the polycrisis debate and argue why the crisis of social reproduction should be considered an essential component of turbulence. We then discuss how the acceleration and layering of crises are linked to the systematic exposure of disadvantaged groups, while acknowledging that the political discussion of global polycrisis remains heavily influenced by views stemming from the Global North. Next, we review the empirical contributions of the different chapters in the volume against these theoretical framings, focusing on how they inform the polycrisis debate and underscore the centrality of the social reproduction crisis. These chapters also reveal how gendered outcomes intersect with other forms of social and spatial inequality, feeding into intersectional debates and opening pathways toward more inclusive and global understandings of turbulence. At the same time, the insights from these contributions are woven into the broader evidence from the literature in the field, setting the stage for the concluding discussion on what these uncertain times might herald for gender inequality in the future.

Gendering the polycrisis

The terms “permacrisis” and “polycrisis”, now widely used in academic and political debates, convey that it is no longer possible to speak of periods of crisis followed by phases of stability. Describing the current period as turbulent denotes the experience of multiple, simultaneous crises that may be interrelated – a reality better captured by the term “polycrisis” than “permacrisis”, since the latter overlooks the interlocked nature of these processes (Parnell et al., 2024). The “polycrisis” perspective emphasizes that crises unfold in a cumulative manner, interacting, exacerbating, accelerating and reshaping one another, and therefore cannot be analysed in isolation (Lawrence et al., 2022; Parnell et al., 2024). Crises may combine to worsen conditions, as seen when the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and Brexit together drove the United Kingdom’s cost-of-living crisis. Responses to one crisis may also generate adverse effects elsewhere – for example, efforts to alleviate energy poverty by returning to fuel fossils (Brown et al., 2023). Conversely, synergies are possible, as illustrated by measures addressing the care crisis that simultaneously support a low-carbon economy (Jones et al., 2024).

Scholars engaged in this debate have suggested that the stability attributed to previous periods may have been overstated. Yet, there is broad agreement that what makes the present epoch distinctive is the speed and scope of the multiple challenges we face (Henig & Knight, 2023). In a world that is more interconnected than in previous intersecting crises (Lawrence et al., 2024), what appears unprecedented is the accelerating pace, the density of the events and the thickening of the layering of crises underway (Brown et al., 2023; Henig & Knight, 2023). Together, these dynamics warrant the use of the term “polycrisis” for the current period. From a long-term perspective, today’s turbulence can also be seen as an entanglement of crises spiralling from the 2008 financial crash and, within a longer-term outlook, resulting from the post–Second World War acceleration in socioeconomic and earth system trends, exacerbated by neoliberal globalisation (Henig & Knight, 2023). The temporal frame is even more extended for other current issues, namely the environmental crisis. This prolonged state of turbulence questions the usefulness of the very definition of crises as unexpected ruptures of the normal progression of things and invites us to think of current challenges as long-term, chronic or systemic features of the economic and social system (Henig & Knight, 2023; Mrozowicki et al., 2025).

Current turbulence can also be understood as an inherent feature of capitalism, intensified in its neoliberal form, which was partially contained by the relative stability of the political world order under American hegemony during the post-Cold War period. Although that dominance is increasingly contested, it is still being reinforced in some areas – for instance, through reliance on US-owned technology firms. Yet China’s growing technological capacity is poised to challenge the United States’ power even in this domain. Overall, multiple and diverse sources

of “chronic” crises are generating turbulence across economic, social and political systems, as a realignment of the global political and economic order takes place.

The lively theoretical discussions around polycrisis have, however, been strikingly gender-blind. Focused on social rupture and unexpected events, scholarly and political attention has centred on finance, energy, war, migration and political crises. Even apparent efforts to map all sources of crises and interactions across economic, social and political domains (Tooze, 2021; Williams & Erickson, 2024) omit the crucial site for analysing the gendered impacts of polycrisis: the intersection between the spheres of production and social reproduction. In this way, the debate on polycrisis has been disconnected from a rich body of feminist scholarship that has, for over a decade, highlighted the existence of a “crisis of care” (Dowling, 2021; Hess, 2013). Earlier research already showed how households and especially women had become increasingly pressed for time, due to longer work hours and stagnant gendered labour divisions (Schor, 1991). Concepts such as the “time bind” (Hochschild, 1997) or “time squeeze” (Clarkberg & Moen, 2001) capture the consequences of insufficient changes in care arrangements to support women’s growing labour market participation. This mismatch strains social capacities to raise children, care for dependants and sustain households and broader communities. The fragility of care systems was further compounded by austerity and privatisation (Dowling, 2021) and intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic (Armstrong et al., 2024).

Following Nancy Fraser (2016), we argue that these tensions reflect not only a crisis of care but a broader crisis of social reproduction as a central and underlying cause of turbulence under advanced capitalism. The fundamental, yet invisible, reliance of the production system on social reproduction means that developments in production that undermine the sustainability of social reproduction could render the capitalist system itself unviable. Hence, a social-reproductive “crisis tendency” lies in every form of capitalist society, a contradiction that emerges not within the separate spheres of production and social reproduction but at the border of their interconnections (Fraser, 2016). In contemporary financialised neoliberal capitalism, this contradiction and the associated need for more working hours to sustain households stem from interrelated pressures across both spheres (Plomien & Schwartz, 2024). In production, wage freezes or reductions are coupled with short- and long-term threats to job security and incomes from the persistent rise of precarious jobs and the gig economy. In social reproduction, rising consumption standards and the accompanying increase in household debt converge with diminished support from public services and mounting time pressures as household members engage more in waged work.

These pressures have led to a dualisation of the organisation of social reproduction: on the one side, greater commodification of domestic work for households who can afford it; on the other, an internalisation of social reproduction within households for those who cannot, with the corresponding burden of unpaid labour mainly falling on women (Fraser, 2016; Huws, 2019). This privatisation of

responsibility pushes women, particularly when fathers are absent, to shoulder not only care work but also the financial costs of raising children (England & Folbre, 1999). This underscores the need for collective solutions – such as intergenerational investment in children through the tax system – that would in turn yield high societal returns by supporting the next generation that sustains future pensions for all (England & Folbre, 1999).

Crises in social reproduction were particularly experienced in Eastern European countries (Mrozowicki et al., 2025). One such case is analysed by Plomien and Schwartz (2026) in this volume, who expose the systemic problems following the transition from a socialist to a market economy – a process that neither recognised the dismantling of the pre-existing social reproduction system nor sought to rebuild it to ensure its viability. From a global perspective, the “care gap” that emerged from women’s increased recruitment into waged work in richer countries is often filled through the import of migrant workers, transferring traditional female responsibilities to other more vulnerable women, in never-ending “global care chains” (Bettio et al., 2006; Hochschild, 2000). This body of literature underscores both Global North–South interconnections and intersectional inequalities – dimensions largely absent from the polycrisis debate.

This perspective on social reproduction as an underlying, invisible crisis is consistent with recent scholarship that regards the care and public services crisis as chronic and unresolved tensions, as opposed to the mainstream definition of crises as sudden and shorter-term, exogenous shocks (Mrozowicki et al., 2025). This conceptualization is also compatible with Roitman’s thesis in “Anti-crisis” (2014), where she argues that the label “crisis” does not merely describe events, but actively shapes how we understand and respond to social challenges. By framing certain developments as urgent and exceptional, and thus demanding action, it curtails other interpretations. For instance, by presenting the financial crisis as a rupture, the crisis discourse contributed to obscuring the structural conditions, as in the financialisation of neoliberal capitalism, that generated it in the first place. While Roitman’s (2014) work is not directly concerned with the gendered dimensions of crises, her critique is useful for understanding why the production-social reproduction contradiction remains neglected within the polycrisis discourse. These chronic tensions rarely feature in political agendas and thus remain invisible, despite their importance for understanding the multiple and interacting pressures within economic and social systems and their gendered consequences.

On this basis, a key message from the conclusions of this volume is the need to integrate the tensions in social reproduction into the polycrisis debate as the “social” strand of a more general crisis, including other intersecting economic, ecological and political dimensions. Following Fraser (2016), its centrality means that the other strands cannot be fully understood without considering social reproduction and its gender component. Furthermore, this neglect has led to limited engagement with Polanyi’s (1944) influential double movement theory, which argues that an overextension of market relations – and the associated crises in production

and social reproduction – may eventually trigger a pushback from wider societal forces. As Ferragina (2019) argues, such social pushback (in Ferragina's case, the demand for more childcare support but financed by cuts to welfare benefits) may only partially alleviate the problem for some groups. Nevertheless, this example underscores the consequences of disregarding social reproduction in analysing forces for change.

Against this background, the collection of chapters in this volume covers different types of processes operating within the context of polycrisis – some more short-term and acute in nature, others more chronic and systemic – all of which can be understood as crises within this framework. Moreover, we follow Mrozowicki et al. (2025) in emphasizing the interconnections between both types of processes: chronic crises reflecting structural problems may be aggravated by acute shocks, as seen in Eastern Europe where the public services crisis was compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and the sudden arrival of refugees from the war in Ukraine.

Our perspective also entails a critical view of polycrisis, rejecting any pretension of its universality. Global risks are unevenly produced and distributed, and regions experience and respond to them differently, with North–South interconnections playing a crucial role in shaping their dynamics. Discussion of these issues in relation to the processes analysed in this concluding chapter may contribute to a critique of Western-centred definitions of crises as ruptures primarily affecting countries in the Global North. Such a critical view can also make more visible the structural, intersectional inequalities on which crises are grounded. Examining within-gender differences reveals not only how the acceleration and layering of crisis may be reinforcing, reshaping or reducing gender inequalities, but also how other social divides – and their interactions with gender – may be more salient or be gaining importance.

This overarching framework informs our interpretation of the processes examined in the book and their interconnections, as well as our reading of the empirical insights from the different chapters when assessing prospects for gender equality. The discussion that follows develops these points further around the three main themes that mirror the volume's structure: the labour market effects of sudden crises and their situation within broader long-term trends; the different facets of the social reproduction crisis; and the integration of a gender perspective into the digital and green transitions.

Gendered effects of crises on waged work: short-term setbacks, long-term progress – but for whom?

This section reviews the analytical and empirical contributions of the four chapters in the first part of this volume. These chapters primarily address the acute impacts on production systems stemming from those crises – from the financial and the sovereign debt crisis to the Covid-19 pandemic – that have been politically recognised and framed as shocks. While all three crises can be understood as outcomes

of systemic tensions in economic and ecological systems, the focus here is on their short-term effects and how these shocks may have disrupted, reversed or accelerated trends in women's position in the labour market. Three chapters examine gendered labour market outcomes (Bashevskva & Dotti Sani, 2026; Steinmetz & Guarnerio, 2026; Torres & Warren, 2026), while one explores the evolution of the gender pay gap in the context of changing jobs structures and wage-setting institutions (Figueiredo & López-Andreu, 2026).

A common pattern across all contributions is that shocks tended to intensify pre-existing inequalities, with gender intersecting with other dimensions of social stratification to reinforce the vulnerability of given social groups. For instance, although Bashevskva and Dotti Sani (2026, this volume) did not find evidence that the short-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic led to a generalised she-cession in Europe, the pattern was not uniform across countries, with women in Eastern European countries suffering most from employment losses. Beyond gender, other factors proved more determinant of employment outcomes, with being highly educated or employed in the public sector acting as buffers against labour market shocks.

Some parallels can be drawn with Torres and Warren's (2026) chapter, which also finds stronger impacts of crises on the most vulnerable. In examining trends in women and men's employment outcomes in the United Kingdom from the financial crisis and austerity through the cost-of-living crisis, the authors identify persistent gender gaps in working hours and wages across the different crises. However, their systematic exploration of patterns by social class within genders adds nuance to the picture. In fact, gaps widened between social classes as relative earnings worsened for the working class – particularly during the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis – for both men and women. At the same time, women remained the lowest-paid overall and were disproportionately affected by the sizable expansion of zero-hour contracts that took place in the United Kingdom particularly post-pandemic.

A similar picture also emerges from Steinmetz and Guarnerio's chapter (2026, this volume), which adopts a long-term perspective on the impact of the Great Recession and Covid-19 pandemic on employment, job quality and occupational segregation across 20 European countries, focusing on the intersection between gender and migration status. The authors show that both native men and women were least affected by crises, while it was non-EU migrants and in particular women within this group who suffered the most job losses and reductions in working hours, confirming their role as a "buffer" group absorbing economic shocks. In contrast, EU migrant women experienced some gradual improvements in job quality, signalling partial integration into more resilient labour market segments. Overall, segregation patterns remained largely stable over the period, with non-EU migrant women persistently concentrated in low-skill jobs. This enduring segregation reflects structurally entrenched patterns rather than temporary crisis effects.

A somewhat more positive picture emerges from Figueiredo and López-Andreu's examination of trends in gender pay inequity and wage-setting institutions in Southern Europe (2026). The chapter shows that during the austerity period both Portugal and Spain experienced stagnant or widening gender pay gaps. However, following new centre-left electoral victories in both countries, significant reductions in gender pay gaps were achieved in the post-austerity period, which saw partial reversals of austerity reforms, increases in minimum wages and a revival of public sector employment and pay. However, these declines were not solely driven by efforts to improve gender equality; they also reflected, first, occupational restructuring – such as the contraction of male-dominated jobs in construction and low-tech industry during the financial crisis; and, second, women's rising educational attainment, which favoured entry into expanding professional and knowledge-intensive occupations. Furthermore, in Spain, real wages declined for men throughout both the austerity and post-austerity period, particularly in high-paid jobs, while in Portugal real earnings increased across most deciles for both men and women, with women in low-paid jobs benefiting the most.

Overall, the chapters reviewed in this section underscore the importance of examining who within each gender – and across other social divides – benefits or loses during crises. This perspective makes it more difficult to provide a straightforward answer to the question of the direction of change in gender equality as a consequence of these different waves of crises. Overall, there has been no reversal of progress in women's labour market integration. While the different shocks may have represented temporary setbacks for some groups, women's increasing presence in waged work has proved resilient over the long run. In countries severely affected by recession, strong added-worker effects even led to noticeable increases in female breadwinner households (Marx et al., 2026, this volume; Vitali & Arpino, 2016). Evidence of skill upgrading and women's entry into high level jobs (Figueiredo & López-Andreu, 2026; Steinmetz & Guarnerio, 2026, this volume) also signals progress for women, reflecting longer-term trends towards increased female investment in education and indeed the reversal of the educational gap (Klesment & Van Bavel, 2017). Yet these findings also add to existing evidence that it is mainly highly educated women who are benefiting most from progress in gender equality (Stier & Herzberg-Druker, 2017; Vokić et al., 2019). Not only did the spread of teleworking during the Covid-19 pandemic act to safeguard highly educated workers from job loss (Eurofound, 2022a), but they also benefited from the employment creation concentrated in well-paid, knowledge-intensive sectors in its aftermath (Eurofound, 2022b). The counterpoint of these trends is the widening gaps within genders along class and migration lines, among others. A common pattern across the different crises is in fact the persistent and even deepening vulnerability of lower-skilled and migrant women, who remain disproportionately exposed to precarious work and crisis-sensitive jobs (Bashevskaja & Dotti Sani, 2026; Steinmetz & Guarnerio, 2026; Torres & Warren, 2026, this volume). Nevertheless, a positive policy environment can mitigate these vulnerabilities, as illustrated by

the rise in real wages for lower-skilled women in Portugal (Figueiredo & López-Andreu, 2026, this volume). In this case, minimum wages had an important and stronger impact on wages for women in Portugal than in Spain because they were set closer to the base rates in collective bargaining agreements. This demonstrates that institutions matter, and that intersectional vulnerabilities are not only shaped by structural inequalities but also by the adequacy or failure of policy responses. Ultimately, crisis effects are deeply dependent on country context, including their policy regimes, as Bashevsksa and Dotti Sani show.

Social reproduction in crisis and the need for a care transition

This section focuses on the chapters presented in the second part of the volume, which address the gendered division of waged and unwaged work at the household level (Marx et al., 2026; Baxter et al., 2026); the impact of transitions towards neoliberal market economies on social reproduction (Plomien & Schwartz, 2026); developments in social care policies (Lopezlira & Hunter, 2026; Karamessini, 2026); and support for women and carers within social protection systems (Larsen et al., 2026). As such, these contributions illuminate different facets of the underlying crisis of social reproduction as a chronic, systemic contradiction intensified under contemporary neoliberal financial capitalism. All suggest that to address this crisis there needs to be a structural transformation of the social reproduction system, including a transition to a new care system. Despite recent waves of economic downturn and associated political responses that have deepened these problems, the crisis in social reproduction has not yet been politically acknowledged as such.

Feminist scholarship on “social depletion” (Elson, 2012; Rai, 2024; Rai et al., 2013) offers a useful lens to conceptualise this crisis, as it puts the focus not only on how essential social reproduction is to the functioning of economies and societies, but also on how its costs are systematically ignored, which leads to depletion at multiple levels. Depletion can occur whenever outflows (labour, time, emotional energy) exceed the inflows (support, rest, compensation), causing harm at the level of individuals (physical and mental exhaustion), households (strained resources and time) and communities (collective support networks) (Rai et al., 2013). Under this framework, different themes covered in the chapters reviewed in this section can be seen as expressions of the tensions across the boundaries of production and reproduction potentially leading to depletion. These themes include the persistent expansion of the dual full-time earner in Europe (Marx et al., 2026), the slow progress in the gendered division of domestic labour (Baxter et al., 2026), the fragility of the social reproduction system with the transition to a new production regime in Eastern European countries (Plomien & Schwartz) and the struggles of care workers to secure their livelihoods in a context of rising costs of living (Lopezlira & Hunter, 2026).

As highlighted in the previous section, despite the notable turbulence of recent decades, one remarkably stable trend has been women’s growing integration into

waged work, even if with temporary setbacks during specific crises and national contexts. This long-term trend parallels the gradual expansion of the dual full-time earner model, which Marx and coauthors (2026) argue reflects not merely a rise in gender equality, but also a shift in households' provisioning strategies. Adopting a dual source of labour income is gradually becoming a generalised arrangement, amid growing employment insecurity and shifts in consumption standards, coupled with rising costs of living. The authors show that relying on a single (male) earner has become a less financially viable arrangement over the last two decades, as these types of households faced greater economic hardship, especially during the Great Recession, but also recovered less in its aftermath. Moreover, the vulnerability gap between male breadwinner and female breadwinner couples appears to be slowly narrowing as men's labour market position weakens. Successive crises may have temporarily stalled or reversed the upward trend towards dual full-time earners, yet in the longer run they appear to accelerate it, as this arrangement is most resilient against economic turbulence and precarious labour markets.

Overall, these household responses are a core constituent of the processes of social adjustment to polycrisis, although such efforts to stabilise income resources are unlikely in themselves to be sufficient to overcome the chronic crisis in social reproduction. A closely related issue is the slow pace of change in the gender division of unwaged work. As illustrated by Baxter et al.'s (2026) chapter on Australia, time use studies tend to find a gradual but modest convergence between genders over time, alongside short-term widening of gender gaps during the pandemic. Indeed, the authors show that although Covid-19 lockdowns temporarily exacerbated inequalities in unpaid labour, they did not reverse the long-term trend towards reduced gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work. However, and consistent with the broader literature (Sullivan et al., 2018), the gap was found to be closing mainly through women's decreased time spent in housework. While such reduction has been associated with women's higher involvement in paid work, men's increased involvement in care work, even if limited, could be considered more reflective of behavioural or normative change towards some degendering of core routine household tasks (Milkie et al., 2025).

The reorganisation of household waged and unwaged labour is critically situated at the interface of production and social reproduction and hence exposes the tensions across them that are managed mainly by women. From this perspective, the significant and sustained increase in female waged labour without a fundamental reorganisation of the reproduction side has accentuated the "time squeeze" (Clarkberg & Moen, 2001), which constitutes a manifestation of depletion at individual and household levels. This systematic exhaustion of social capabilities to ensure social reproduction is a long-term trend predating the financial crisis. However, already strained household resources and shrinking time for unpaid labour were compounded by austerity and later by the Covid-19 pandemic, reflecting the interaction between chronic processes and ruptures. Austerity policies

in Europe in response to the financial crisis led to cuts to public services in health, education and social care and to a stalling of plans to build the necessary care infrastructure to support women's growing participation in paid work. Meanwhile, in the hardest-hit countries, women faced mounting pressures: to take on additional paid work to compensate for male unemployment or reduced wages; to manage social reproduction with fewer public resources; and to accept more precarious and less rewarded work (Elson, 2012; Karamessini & Rubery, 2014). The Covid-19 pandemic further strained health and social systems already weakened by austerity and privatisation (Armstrong et al., 2024; Dowling, 2021). In this context, women's responses proved critical to societal functioning in each of the spheres most affected by the pandemic; not only operating the frontline, especially in health and care, but also holding together social reproduction by providing the bulk of care and homeschooling while increasingly engaging in remote working.

Another example of the failure of neoliberal capitalism to develop sustainable social reproduction and care systems is evidenced in the experiences of transition from state socialism to market economies of Eastern European countries. As shown in the chapter by Plomien and Schwartz (2026), the overwhelming focus of the transition was on creating markets and developing democratic institutions, with little attention to ensuring that workers and their families could survive in the new economic order. Deprived of state socialist support systems, households' only source of income became low-paid and often insecure wage employment. Much of the burden of how to secure a livelihood fell to women, who had to take up full-time work while also doing more domestic and care labour. The struggle to provide also led to large-scale migration by both men and women, creating new vulnerabilities in destination countries due to gender segregation and low pay, while the splitting of families depleted care resources in origin countries. These dynamics, as discussed in the chapter through the examples of Poland and Ukraine, offer broader lessons about the risks of major system transitions – such as those anticipated under new forms of technology – when insufficient attention is given to ensuring the sustainability of social reproduction.

The chapter by Lopezlira and Hunter (2026) provides an example of efforts to mitigate depletion impacts on women undertaking care work. The United States is perhaps the most market-driven advanced economy, with access to basic benefits and medical care tied to employment position and not universal. Furthermore, the generalisation of the dual earner model as a minimum necessary household commitment to wage employment predates the developments we have just described for Europe (Schor, 1991). This imperative has not been matched by the development of adequate support systems enabling women to remain in work when faced with competing demands on their time, particularly for childcare or elder care (Forden et al., 2023). As recounted by the authors, to solve the crisis in elderly care, California introduced the In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) programme – a social care employment system, which in practice mainly serves those caring for immediate family members (72.1% of all recipients). This is effectively

constituting proper wage employment for what in other societies would be unpaid family care work, though in some contexts subsidised through the benefit system (Offenhenden et al., 2025). In California, these jobs are rewarded through a wage structure set through collective bargaining, albeit highly fragmented due to local negotiation and funding disparities across counties. This case illustrates that the need for social support persists even in fully marketised systems, and states may find they have little option but to extend wage labour into traditionally unpaid labour territory as opting out of waged work is no longer financially possible for women.

The Californian case, along with other contributions in the volume, shows that the challenges of social reproduction are not only gendered but also shaped by class, migration and family structure. Hence, as Marx et al. (2026) argue, while dual full-time earning may to some extent reflect the professional aspirations of highly educated women, it is often driven by economic necessity for the lower skilled (see also Sánchez-Mira, 2020). In turn, relying on a second income is not possible for lone parent families, who are generally headed by women and over-represented among low-income households. They were one of the groups who suffered most from the cost-of-living crisis, given that they tend to allocate a larger share of their budget to essentials such as housing, food and energy. These goods experienced the steepest increases between 2021 and 2023, leaving these households particularly exposed to inflation (ILO, 2022; Sologon et al., 2024). Moreover, in the examples of Poland and Ukraine discussed by Plomien and Schwartz (2026), the shift from public to private provisioning and the dismantling of redistributive systems deepened class inequalities, intensifying vulnerability for low-income families. Migration may help mitigate some of that immediate hardship, but perpetuates transnational inequalities and care deficits. In fact, as shown by Lopezlira and Hunter (2026), social care occupations remain highly gendered, racialised and systematically undervalued. With wages persistently situated under a living wage standard and real incomes further eroded during high inflation, workers struggle to meet basic needs.

Overall, the commodification of social reproduction and the deepening of inequalities between households across multiple lines is closely related to the dualisation of social reproduction arrangements: between an externalisation of domestic work for those who can afford it and the internalisation through increased household (female) labour for those who cannot (Fraser, 2016; Huws, 2019). Commodification thus represents an individual solution or “mitigation” strategy (Rai et al., 2013) to alleviate the consequences of depletion and is often the most readily available strategy for households. However, inequality is built into these mitigation strategies, as they displace depletion further down the chain. For instance, women in care jobs often struggle themselves with the combined burden of paid and unpaid work. Relatedly, female migrants who move to fill “care gaps” in the Global North frequently become transnational primary breadwinners while having to navigate conservative gender expectations in their home countries

– expectations that conflict with a role mainly driven by economic need (Bastia, 2011). These dynamics reveal structural imbalances and interconnections across North-South divides, social classes, and racialized groups (Rai et al., 2013).

In contrast, collective responses to counter depletion involve “replenishment”, mainly through state or institutional support, and “transformation”, which entails structural change in gender roles and recognition of social reproduction (Rai et al., 2013). Karamessini’s chapter provides insights on these collective strategies, advocating for a “care transition” to address the insufficient development of institutional support amid women’s growing involvement in wage employment. This transition requires both a defamilialisation – shifting care provision from families to the state and/or the market—and a degenderisation of care – promoting a more equal sharing between men and women. This transition requires thus renewed state intervention, as reliance on private providers risks deepening inequalities in access and causing a trickling of the costs of social reproduction down the line. Degenderisation of care also needs renewed impulse, given the slow rhythm of gender convergence in the division of labour within households (see also Baxter et al., 2026, this volume, above).

Under this framework, Karamessini takes stock of the state of the care transition in the EU, showing that it is uneven and incomplete, particularly in elderly care and in closing gender gaps in unpaid work. Even though there has been a significant expansion of formal childcare since the 1990s, driven by the EU’s Barcelona targets, coverage for children under three years of age remains low in many countries. Moreover, reforms on elderly care have focused on cash-for-care allowances instead of universal service provision, hence favouring supported familialism and informal care arrangements that continue to rely on a migrant and racialised workforce. Austerity policies, involving cuts in childcare and elderly care services, also contributed to a temporary refamilialisation of care. After a long period of stalled development, the EU has recently taken up the baton and sought to accelerate the slow trend towards defamilialised care systems through the European Care Strategy (European Commission, 2022). This declared new turn in EU policy sets revised upward childcare targets, introduces elder care targets for the first time and calls for better working conditions in the care sector in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. There have also been moves to promote some degendering of care responsibilities through dedicated leave for fathers under the work–life balance directive (European Union, 2019). However, the prospects for realising this strategy appear increasingly uncertain in the current context of return to fiscal stringency and prioritisation of defence expenditure over social priorities.

Complementing Karamessini’s (2026) perspective, Larsen and colleagues (2026) argue in their chapter that a care transition must be accompanied by a more fundamental review of welfare state systems to uncover the different ways in which women’s presumed caring responsibilities remain deeply embedded in benefits and support systems. Without such wider transformation, even better

subsidised care provision may fail to create real equal opportunities for men and women to be both carers and workers (Fraser, 1994). The authors show that the assumption of women's primary care responsibility is still built into the social protection system across a variety of EU member states – including the Nordic economies such as Denmark, although to a lesser extent than in the other countries under scrutiny, namely the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands. Gaps in access to social protection for women and levels of benefits remain significant when faced with loss of employment during crises or in other contexts. Moreover, loss of employment may also lead to loss of access to childcare support or paid parental leave. Therefore, women are still being treated in some respects as contingent labour market participants, a condition reinforced by the assumption that they should willingly become full-time carers while searching for a new job. In this way, Larsen and colleagues (2026) reinforce Karamessini's (2026) argument that the care transition must involve not only the defamilialisation of care but also full degendering of care roles, so that women who face problems of job security are not pushed back into essentialised roles as caregivers first and members of the workforce second.

Gendering the digital and green transitions: towards new ways of working and living

Two additional major transformations currently underway are addressed in the third part of this volume. Driven by distinct forces of change, both processes are expected to reshape production systems, labour market structures and institutions and their gendered nature. The first concerns the growing diffusion of digital- and AI-enabled new forms of work, addressed by Piasna (2026) and Rani and colleagues (2026); the second relates to the transition to net-zero emissions as a response to the ecological crisis, examined by Daly et al. (2026). We discuss next their gender implications in this order.

The first challenge – the digitalisation of work – is a market-driven process of change led by large technology organisations, a new oligarchy, with minimal input from nation states, let alone citizens or workforces (Bria & Bautista, 2025). Prior to the pandemic, debates on digitalisation emphasised its potential to further fragment employment under the guise of flexibility, thereby reinforcing gender divides and worsening working conditions for women. Developments such as the platformisation of work are challenging the standard employment relationship and exerting pressure on the institutions built around it, including collective bargaining and social protection systems (De Stefano et al., 2021; Forsyth & McCrystal, 2025). Such fragmentation is likely to undermine gender equality, as the standard employment relationship remains—at least in the Global North—the key instrument for delivering women's rights, such as maternity leave and equal pay, and for providing economic security in employment.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought to the foreground another issue linked to digitalisation by accelerating the spread of digitally-enabled remote work. This diffusion disproportionately affected skilled white collar jobs and women (Eurofound, 2022a), changing the gender profile of the remote worker from male-dominated to more prevalent among women. This transformation sparked intense debate on what greater flexibility in time and location of work might mean for gender equality in highly skilled, protected occupations. This debate, however, paid little attention to other forms of distance work, particularly the rise of online platform work that enables capital in the Global North to reach educated middle class women in the Global South. Two chapters in this volume examine these developments and their broader implications for gender equality. Piasna (2026) analyses the gendered effects of remote and online platform work during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic across Europe, while Rani and colleagues (2026) look at platform work globally to challenge the dominant narrative that gig work empowers educated women in the Global South.

Piasna's (2026) chapter draws on two European surveys covering both remote platform work and remote working within employment relationships to show that, contrary to promises of levelling the playing field for men and women through improved work-family reconciliation, remote working tends to reproduce and even reinforce gender inequalities. The overarching explanation is that remote working has expanded in a context where strong gender norms and inequalities persist, in both the workplace and the household, meaning that this shift largely mirrors existing gender structures. More specifically, the apparent autonomy to shift working time and location often blurs boundaries between work and home, reinforcing the gendered division of labour. Piasna (2026) finds that mothers with young children experience the greatest increase in unpaid domestic and care work when teleworking regularly, while fathers' behaviour remains largely unchanged. These findings support existing research showing that home-based work increases pressures on women to do more housework and childcare, particularly as they are less likely to work in enclosed workspaces where clearer boundaries can be established (Chung, 2022; Kurowska, 2020). Moreover, Piasna (2026) shows that regular teleworking mothers have the worst promotion chances of all groups, while hybrid workers who telework occasionally enjoy the best pay and promotion opportunities.

Overall, research on telework and working time flexibility has shown that flexible working can have harmful effects when combined with the persistent ideal of a work-centred employee, leading to increased working time (Lott & Chung, 2016), work-to-family encroachment (Yucel et al., 2025) and digital presenteeism replacing physical presenteeism (Howcroft et al., 2024). Following Chung (2022), a renewed ideal worker linked to busyness as a sign of status has contributed to the "flexibility paradox" or the self-exploitation of those working flexibly. This tendency is exacerbated by the flexibility stigma (Williams et al., 2013) and perceptions of employment insecurity, which push workers to work harder and longer to signal productivity and commitment to the company.

All this suggests that remote work is no more a solution to gender inequalities than part-time work has proved to be. Both tend to reinforce rather than transform the gendered division of labour. In professional and high-level jobs, part-time work has confined women to limited career trajectories and stagnant earnings. Meanwhile, in-person part-time service workers often face employer-oriented flexibility, designed to cut costs through flexible scheduling to meet demand variations. Both these traits are emerging in remote and flexible working: while these arrangements allow mothers to remain employed without reducing hours (Chung & Van der Horst, 2017), they do so at the price of widening gaps in pay and opportunities. At the same time, the rise of gig work is deepening the fragmentation of employment already seen in part-time work in service jobs.

Relatedly, there are significant differences in job quality between teleworkers in a traditional employment relationship and those engaged in remote platform work, which is often precarious and poorly paid. Indeed, as Rani and colleagues (2026) show, women are disproportionately represented on platforms with the poorest working conditions, such as clickwork, and less so in professional freelance work. These patterns signal future risks if digitally-mediated tasks are increasingly automated through AI or outsourced to online platforms, stripping home-based workers of employment protections. Gendered occupational segregation may deepen if it is routine tasks that are primarily outsourced, while hybrid or office-based employees retain more skilled areas. Recent research on the potential impact of generative AI reinforces these concerns, showing that women's jobs are twice as likely to be affected by automation, particularly due to the high exposure of clerical work (Gmyrek et al., 2025).

If research on the Global North underscores the need to examine how the gendered effects of digitalisation intersect with inequalities across occupational and skill divides, the chapter by Rani and coauthors (2026) highlights the interconnections of these patterns with Global North–South dynamics. Drawing on extensive ILO surveys and qualitative research, the authors show how online platform work enables capital in the Global North to access educated middle-class women in the Global South. Contrary to narratives of empowerment, digital labour platforms tend to reproduce gender inequalities in occupational segregation and earnings: women are overrepresented in lower-paying, care-related sectors and face algorithmic bias when entering male-dominated fields such as ride-hailing. So-called flexibility comes at a high cost – unpredictable schedules, intensified time pressures, non-guaranteed income and penalties for limited availability due to care responsibilities. Beyond expanding empirical evidence on platform labour globally, the chapter exposes the gendered nature of deskilled work offered through these systems. Women working on online platforms in the Global South are not only more educated than their counterparts in the Global North, but the education gap relative to men is also larger in these regions. This pattern underscores the risk of underutilising women's skills and potential, particularly through freelance and microtask platforms that tap into a highly educated (female) workforce

worldwide. The result is a double form of exploitation: employers in the Global North pay lower rates for equivalent work to Global South workers than they offer to labour sourced locally, while simultaneously contributing to the underutilisation of women's skills and talents in their home societies. Far from empowering women, digital labour platforms foster new globalised forms of gendered exploitation and inequality.

We now turn to the second challenge: the environmental crisis, which exposes an even deeper contradiction between the economic system's infrastructural foundations and the sustainability of human and non-human life. As with the care crisis, addressing this challenge demands a transition to new ways of working and living – a shift unlikely to occur without active state intervention at both national and international levels, since markets will not pursue net-zero goals without clear incentives and limits on economic activity. Moreover, the way the transition reorganises economic processes will shape its gender effects. It is therefore crucial to make these potential impacts visible and ensure that women's voices are included in decision-making to steer transformation towards gender equality. The chapter by Daly and coauthors contributes to this debate by showing that gender mainstreaming in policy change discussions remains far from realised.

The limited discussion and awareness of both the risks and opportunities for gender equality in the shift to a net-zero economy partly reflect a dominant belief that the target can be achieved through technological fixes. As Daly et al. note, mainstream debates largely emphasise reskilling workers – primarily men in high-emission sectors – alongside transition to alternative fuel sources. This represents a narrow view of the scale of transformation required to achieve and sustain a green economy. A deeper analysis suggests that this transition could – and should – be as radical as those envisioned in the seemingly more exciting debates around the march of the robots or the replacement of humans by AI chatboxes.

The radical dimensions of a green economy agenda include whether societies should adopt a no-growth or degrowth agenda, the extent to which circular economy models must be developed, and which low-carbon activities merit what may be scarce investment (Daly et al., 2026, this volume). Each of these radical scenarios carries significant implications for the gender division of labour. For instance, both degrowth and circular economy strategies imply an expansion of unpaid labour to extend product life and offset restrictions on market-based additions to raw or basic materials. The risk is that this additional burden will fall disproportionately on women, given prevailing assumptions that they are the primary homemakers. Furthermore, the environmental and care crises may interact in different ways. As Jones-Renaud et al. (2024) note, climate change may intensify care demands through extreme weather events and resource scarcity, while also weakening care systems by damaging care infrastructure and dismantling care networks through forced displacement. Yet positive synergies are also possible: a shift towards less carbon-intensive sectors could offer a response both to the green and the care crises. Care jobs are not only female-dominated but also

inherently low-carbon and essential for resilience in the face of climate change, as they strengthen communities' capacity to adapt and recover from climate shocks. A gender-just transition to a net zero economy therefore requires redistributing care responsibilities and recognising care work as a cornerstone of green economies (Jones-Renaud et al., 2024).

These scenarios all raise questions for which answers remain uncertain. However, what Daly et al. argue, and should be acted upon, is that the remaking of the economy to meet net-zero targets will entail changes with profound implications for gender equality, creating opportunities for progress but also risks of regression into traditional gender roles and stereotypes. It is therefore essential to place gender concerns at the centre of the debate and ensure women's voices are included in decision-making processes.

Achieving net-zero must be driven by state action, both at the national level and through coordinated multinational initiatives. A global perspective on the ecological crisis is as critical as that on the other transitions discussed – if not more so – given Global North–South dynamics in this domain, including the export of environmental externalities to the Global South through carbon credit trading and environmental dumping. Interconnections between the environmental crisis and the digital transformation are also increasingly evident in the significant carbon and extractive footprints of digital infrastructures (Brodie, 2023). Political solutions must therefore ensure global equity. Moreover, effective policies will require profound changes to ways of living, demanding collective, collaborative, and coordinated action. Yet the more solutions are framed as technological fixes, the greater the risk that democratic debate on the accompanying societal transformations will be sidelined. Decision-making power may increasingly shift to technology companies – even when public funding remains the primary source of investment. Current geopolitical tensions further undermine optimism about reaching the consensus required for the far-reaching transformations demanded by the green transition, as reflected in the disappointing outcome of the COP30 climate summit in Belém, which concluded as we were finalising these lines. These considerations set the stage for the concluding discussion in the final two sections of the chapter, where we first distil the book's key messages and then discuss future prospects for advancing gender equality in light of recent developments.

Taking stock: challenges in assessing progress towards gender equality in an era of turbulence

When reviewing progress on gender equality over the period of successive crises until the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, it could be tempting to focus on gender gaps and from that conclude that there has been steady progress, albeit slow in some areas. After all, the empirical evidence presented in this volume shows that women's integration into employment has continued to be normalised, with little indication of a reversal in employment rates. The trend towards dual earner

households and away from the male breadwinner model is equally persistent. Crises have caused, at most, temporary disruptions for some women, and may even have reinforced women's labour market participation in the long run. Gains have also been made in narrowing gender pay gaps, and there is some convergence in time spent on domestic work – though largely because women have reduced their contribution rather than men increasing theirs. Taken together, these developments might suggest a “satisfactory, could do better” assessment, given that women's access to employment and to higher education appear resilient in the face of repeated shocks.

Yet, when we look beneath these aggregate trends – examining what is happening to different socio-economic groups of women, the interactions between the Global North and the Global South, and the forces reshaping how we work and live – such conclusions quickly appear complacent and blinkered. There are at least four main reasons to adopt a different perspective: three drawn from each of the book's main sections and a fourth rooted in the rapidly changing political climate and other sources of turbulence.

In the first place, much of the apparent progress primarily benefits middle class women in the Global North, with these gains for more privileged women (and their male partners) often relying on female migrant workers who provide essential support to sustain social reproduction. In this sense, the resilience of overall employment rates – especially among higher-educated women – and reductions in gender gaps cannot be taken as unequivocal signs of advancement in gender equality, as they obscure the entrenched segregation and persistent precariousness faced by working class and migrant women (Steinmetz & Guarnerio, 2026, this volume). These groups continue to bear disproportionate risks and burdens, including short working hours, employment insecurity and low wages (Bashevskia & Dotti Sani, 2026; Figueiredo & López-Andreu, 2026; Torres & Warren, 2026, this volume). Moreover, narrowing gender gaps – such as in pay – appear partly driven by a weakening of men's position in the labour market, linked to the erosion of labour market institutions such as collective bargaining during crisis periods, hence hardly a win for women (Figueiredo & López-Andreu, 2026, this volume). Relatedly, the reinforcement of a long-term trend towards dual-full-time earning in Europe may signal that this arrangement is increasingly perceived as more financially secure amid growing employment insecurity, rising consumption standards and escalating costs of living (Marx et al., 2026, this volume). This development underscores broader tensions around the boundaries of production and social reproduction.

Second, the emphasis on women's progress in the wage labour market contributes to the invisibility of crises in social reproduction and masks the failures to provide adequate social support to replace women's unpaid domestic labour. This was evident both during the transition to market economies after the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and in highly market-driven systems such as the United States, where reliance on the market has proved insufficient for

sustaining social reproduction. Even in less market-oriented economies, such as some European countries, care policy strategies have been constrained by the EU's broader neoliberal agenda, which prioritises increasing women's employment without considering the quality of those jobs. Some scholars have argued that the gender equality label has been used to make the promotion of flexible employment across Europe appear more palatable (Stratigaki, 2004), as illustrated by the spread of part-time work in contexts with little appetite for it, such as in Spain (Insarauto, 2021). Moreover, this neoliberal framing fails to challenge the trends towards the extensification and intensification of working time that have accompanied digitalisation and an "always-on" culture driven by performance-based management practices, particularly for higher skilled workers (Burchell et al., 2024; Chung, 2022). In this sense, adopting a "replenishing" strategy – providing more state-supported care – without addressing other fundamental aspects of "transformation" may prove insufficient over the long run, especially if such interventions turn out to be more fragile in times of economic crisis or shifts in value systems (Rai et al., 2013). This tendency was evident during austerity, when women were expected to pick up the slack from cuts in expenditure and cancelling of investments in care infrastructure. Looking ahead, the recent social turn in EU policy may be coming to an end due to new defence-related expenditure pressures, the reinstatement of severe fiscal rules after a brief respite during the Covid-19 pandemic and the immediate recovery period, and a political climate increasingly hostile to gender equality goals.

A third factor limiting optimism is the range of emerging threats to women's progress in the labour market, whether these stem from the neoliberal fixation with flexibility, the technology-enabled expansion of gig work, the heightened risks of job displacement from AI diffusion or indeed the transition to net zero. A crucial concern is that these changes jeopardise the survival of standard employment relationships for both men and women. Yet this risk is rarely linked to the central role of formal employment in sustaining social reproduction – at least in the Global North – not only at the household level but also within national economies. This omission once again renders social reproduction invisible. This importance was briefly acknowledged during the Covid-19 pandemic, when governments across the political spectrum recognised the need to compensate for losses in regular employment income to prevent societal collapse (Rubery & Tavora, 2021). However, that insight has largely vanished from mainstream debates on the future of work, which show little recognition of the need for policies that safeguard guaranteed employment contracts and associated income.

On this point, the digital transition can be seen as compounding the crisis of social reproduction in several ways. First, it reinforces households' difficulties in securing provision through the fragmentation of work and the associated reconfiguration of what is considered paid and unpaid labour. By refusing to take responsibility as employers, platforms shift costs and risks onto workers, including unpaid time spent waiting for gigs, bidding for jobs or maintaining ratings (Mangan et al.,

2023; Pulignano & Domecka, 2025). This promotes a “fragmented” working time regime (Piasna, 2024), where all non-productive labour is squeezed out of paid working time, resulting in scarce and unpredictable earnings that make it difficult to assemble a livelihood from multiple gigs. Such precarity forces platform workers to remain permanently available for work to secure a minimum income, resulting in the paradoxical simultaneous fragmentation and extensification of working time (Piasna, 2024). In this way, the platformisation of work contributes to individual and household depletion of economic and temporal resources. Second, the rise of digital platforms in cleaning and care services accelerates the externalisation and commodification of domestic work as a response to households’ time squeezes (Huws, 2019). This process exploits a highly feminised and racialised workforce within colonial care chains (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022) and reinforces the problem by further commodifying, fragmenting and devaluing care work while obscuring its structural causes (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2024).

In this sense, within a polycrisis framework that incorporates a gender perspective, digitalisation emerges as a crisis marked by systemic tensions between the development of productive forces, social relations of production and the social reproductive capacities underpinning the accumulation regime. While pressures on the standard employment relationship are long-standing and driven by other fissuring processes – such as outsourcing, temporary agency work or part-time employment – an open question is whether the additional strains introduced by digitalisation may eventually lead to a tipping point (Burchell et al., 2024) – away from the standard employment relationship as the organising principle for work and working time and from its role in providing stability for social reproduction in post-war European societies.

The direction these changes will take depends not primarily on technological advances, but on the political environment in which digitalisation and AI are deployed – whether driven by the interests of dominant tech oligopolies, by a re-assertive regulatory state, or geopolitical power struggles between the United States and China. Similarly, the path to net-zero remains uncertain amid fragmenting political consensus and persistent contentions over who bears the costs and who benefits from the transition.

This uncertainty underscores the fourth main reason why complacency about progress on gender equality is misplaced: current political turmoil undermines the stability and consensus needed to tackle these multiple, interconnected challenges. Agreement on future objectives at global, regional and national level is at risk of collapse, exposing the fragility of earlier commitments to key goals – from gender equality to net-zero. Amid this political polycrisis, any semblance of ethical capitalism is fading as companies that once pledged non-discrimination and low carbon practices abandon sustainability and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policies to pre-empt political backlash – rolling back initiatives in their US operations under pressure from the Trump administration, while maintaining these principles in Europe where regulatory frameworks, such as gender quotas

and pay-gap disclosure laws, still apply (Rogers, 2025). Furthermore, contention persists about how to compensate for the costs of the climate crisis – from Global North countries, which bear primary responsibility, to the Global South, which suffers most from its impacts. Even more troublingly, the world is regressing to disputes over the validity of climate science, with misinformation fuelling these debates (Barcellos de Moraes, 2025). Some actors exploit such arguments as a pretext to pursue short-term vested interests and avoid the systemic disruption required to phase out fossil fuels and prioritise long-term sustainability. Ultimately, the catastrophic consequences of continued climate inaction may be the only force capable of compelling united action.

Looking forward: the future of gender equality in turbulent times

In the previous section, we identified three core analytical insights emerging from the transversal discussion of the chapters in this volume: first, the need to consider the interaction of gender divides with other social cleavages when analysing the effects of crises; second, the centrality of the tensions between production and social reproduction for understanding current turbulence; and third, the challenges posed by ongoing and future labour market transformations to the standard employment relationship as a pillar for the organisation of social reproduction in contemporary Western societies. Together, these three points substantiate our argument that integrating a gender perspective into the polycrisis debate is essential if we are to fully grasp its scope and design inclusive policy responses to the multiple challenges involved. The chapters in this volume, alongside our review of the broader literature, offer numerous examples of “boundary struggles” (Fraser, 2016) at the interface of production and social reproduction as key sites of conflict in capitalist societies – struggles that we contend are crucial components of polycrisis. These conflicts are deeply shaped by gender, in intersection with other forms of stratification, including class, race, ethnicity, as well as migration patterns and North–South interconnections. While assessing prospects for gender equality becomes extremely difficult in the context of profound uncertainty we have portrayed, what seems certain is that any assessment should take these insights into account. From this perspective, three key points can be made looking forward.

First, recognising the chronic or long-term crisis in social reproduction within polycrisis debates is essential to mobilise action not only in favour of gender equality but also for retaining and expanding institutions that support social reproduction – such as formal employment and public services in childcare and eldercare. There is an urgent need to defend and strengthen such institutions, particularly the standard employment relationship which has historically underpinned equality rights and provided a measure of economic security in the Global North. At the same time, new mechanisms are required to deliver universal gender equality rights, including access to social protection such as pensions, paid maternity leave,

and childcare. While these concerns have long been central in the Global South, the Global North now faces the challenge of finding innovative ways to ensure more universal protections. A possible positive outcome of current turbulence could be the demise of the neoliberal myth that markets alone can meet the needs of a thriving society. The need for a Polanyian response to decades of neoliberalism was beginning to be recognised during the Covid-19 pandemic, in calls for a renewal of society through valuing essential services such as care. Yet that moment was quickly overshadowed by new forms of turbulence and renewed emphasis on rearmament and other “masculine” priorities. Ultimately, addressing the crisis of social reproduction requires not only renewed state engagement in care provision but also a fundamental restructuring of gender social relations, across the private and public spheres and North–South divides, in a way that recognises the value of reproductive labour, that integrates care work into economic policy and that more fundamentally challenges the dominance of financial concerns over human needs (Elson, 2012; Rai et al., 2013).

Second, polycrisis is likely to persist as a defining feature – even with interludes of apparent stability – until a significant realignment of the world order occurs, a question beyond the scope of this volume. What matters is that we are entering an era of profound change, and now more than ever, we need a renewed commitment to gender mainstreaming. That means embedding a gender lens across all core aspects of institution-building and policy-making. Yet, despite commitments – such as those by the EU, the first institution to pledge this shift to their policy framework – implementation remains limited. Thirty years after gender mainstreaming was endorsed at the Beijing conference, a renewed effort is urgently needed. Moreover, this approach must integrate intersectional perspectives and acknowledge Global North–South dynamics, as recognised in the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (European Commission, 2020). Embedding gender considerations in policy also connects to the broader imperative of rethinking how we work and live to achieve sustainability and net-zero goals. These transformations could enable societies to reorganise in ways that support flourishing human and non-human life. However, such opportunities will be missed – and inequalities perpetuated or deepened – unless gender equality is placed at the centre of political agendas.

The scope for realising gender mainstreaming depends largely on the political climate, which brings us to our third and final point. When writing these lines at the close of 2025, amid widespread attacks on gender equality targets and policies from the United States and the growing influence of right-wing populist parties in Europe and beyond, the EU’s role in upholding gender equality as a core value becomes increasingly critical. The current backlash against gender equality is no more a sustained and dominant view than the earlier apparent liberal consensus in favour of greater gender equality. Divergent political views coexist within all societies, and the outcome of these dynamics remains uncertain. Nevertheless, there are well-founded concerns that misogyny is evolving into a deliberate political

strategy, amplified during the pandemic through social media and now weaponised to influence policy and mobilise support for anti-gender agendas (Wiens et al., 2025). Much in the end will depend on whether women themselves are willing to adjust their aspirations and behaviours against pressures towards regression. Some political projects may seek a return to traditional gender relations. However, the key question is whether the views of powerful men can put the genie of women's aspirations towards gender equality back in the bottle.

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