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GENDER EQUALITY IN TURBULENT TIMES

From the financial crash to polycrisis

Jill Rubery, Valeria Insarauto and Núria Sánchez-Mira

This book addresses the impact of turbulence in the economic, social and environmental context on gender equality in the labour market and the social and family system in the Global North. Our starting plan for the book was to explore and take stock of how successive crises experienced from the late 2000s onwards have affected the realisation of and prospects for gender equality by applying and developing concepts drawn from earlier contributions on gender equality under crises (Bettio et al., 2013; Karamessini & Rubery, 2014a; Rubery, 1988). Specifically, this involved reviewing the effects of the financial crisis, through the austerity turn to the Covid-19 pandemic and recovery in stalling, accelerating or even reversing trends in women's economic and social position. These crises are all overt economic crises and have been labelled and recognised as such even where their origins diverged.

The book focuses on both women's contribution to and their treatment within the production and the social reproduction spheres. By making the interactions between production and social reproduction visible, the aim is to provide a feminist-informed perspective on economic crises that can be distinguished from a mainstream or neoliberal economic approach to crises where often only the production sphere is analysed (see concluding chapter Sánchez-Mira et al., 2026, this volume, for further explanation). We characterise this period of successive crises as turbulent times due to both the frequency and the variety of recent challenges to economic and social stability. In the space of only 15 years we have moved from a global financial crisis caused in large part by an out-of-control financial system to an austerity crisis where political preferences for shrinking the state may have exaggerated the need for fiscal restraints, to a major health crisis, originating in the transfer of disease from the animal kingdom to humans but exacerbated by a

lack of readiness, in operational and political terms, to manage such a pandemic, even in the richest countries. Furthermore, the period of recovery from the pandemic, far from offering a respite from turbulence, was becoming quickly dominated by a cost-of-living crisis associated with the Russo-Ukrainian war.

At an early stage in the development of the book, it became clear that a wider consideration of turbulence was needed to capture a range of challenges to the ways in which we live and work. These challenges are much discussed and anticipated but not yet fully realised and include, first, the potential impact from digitalisation and AI on the volume and nature of jobs, particularly as the Covid-19 pandemic had itself induced significant changes in ways of working, at least in white-collar jobs. Platform work was expanding into female-dominated areas such as care work, and an acceleration in the application of AI appeared to be just around the corner. These developments had already induced considerable debate on their gender equality impact, particularly as on the surface they appear in some respects to facilitate combining work and family. Consequently, some scrutiny of the evidence in relation to actual gender equality impacts was called for. The second long-term challenge, that is how to control and even reverse climate change, also has major significance for how we work and live and thus for the system of gender relations. Yet, in practice, the plans for implementing national and international commitments to net zero have hardly discussed changes to our ways of living and instead focus on a straightforward transfer of mainly male workers in high-polluting sectors into newly created green jobs. Not only might this approach reproduce current gender inequalities, but also this technology-driven solution might prove unattainable or insufficient. Hence, again there was a need to bring women's interests into consideration in how this transformation was to be designed and managed.

The third challenge is the by now longstanding need to change ways of working and living to fit changes in women's working patterns. This challenge may be considered a crisis in care provision but a crisis that often remains invisible, particularly at times of difficulty or crisis in the production sphere. The implicit assumption is that women will find some way to manage their responsibilities for both wage work and social reproduction (Elson, 2012) and that addressing the care crisis can therefore wait until times of economic prosperity. However, care crises keep emerging, whether in the form of stress on the health system or harm to children's education and development, not to mention stress on households and women. From these concerns we decided to include chapters on each of these challenges to the current order.

Our focus in the book is on experiences in the Global North. This reflects editorial and thematic choices that inevitably delimit the scope of the volume, leaving perspectives from and on the Global South less visible. Indeed, we recognise that even what is labelled a global crisis is often determined by a Global North perspective, while crises in the Global South may remain largely invisible.

Women in the South struggled at an earlier stage with structural adjustment policies (Elson, 2014) but this received relatively little recognition until women in the Global North faced similar problems under the austerity policies imposed after the financial crash. Some chapters do consider aspects of the multiple sources of interactions between changing dynamics in the North, related to crises and to technological, ecological and social changes, and the Global South. One chapter (Rani et al., 2026, this volume) focuses in detail on the role of digital platforms in opening up access for those located in the Global South to work that is paid for and organised in the Global North.

Importantly, the development of a distinctive feminist lens on the impact of crises also requires recognition of differences in experiences of crises within genders. This applies to spatial difference, not only between the Global North and Global South, as discussed, but also between developed economies where national or local specific institutional arrangements shape the environment in which women are located and their experience of crises (Karamessini & Rubery, 2014a; Rubery, 1988) so that no universal gender effect can be expected. Moreover, despite some commonalities by gender, there are also very different experiences by, for example, social class, ethnicity, race and migration status, age and generation among other factors, and indeed circumstances where the advance of some women's interests comes at the expense of other women. Contributors were encouraged to trace empirical impacts across social as well as spatial divides, to consider who within each gender benefits or loses under turbulence, and along which lines of stratification (class, migration, racialisation, etc.). Hence, while intersectionality was not adopted as a central conceptual framework in the book, and the available data did not always allow for a fully developed intersectional analysis, the overall aim was to be intersectionally sensitive (McBride et al., 2015) wherever possible.

The following sections of this chapter flesh out this introduction to the book project. In the next section, we outline our conceptual approach to gender relations and our understandings of the complex ways in which crises may influence trends in gender equality. This is followed by a brief historical review, starting from the 1970s to the present, of how these interactions between gender relations and crises have changed over time. These changes are linked to the nature of the crises, to the evolving political, social and economic context that is shaping women's position both in the wage economy and the domestic economy and finally, but by no means least important, to the changing aspirations, expectations and behaviours of women (and indeed men) over this time period. This review identifies how the core questions for gender equality have changed along with the changing world order and the more permanent integration of women into wage labour markets. This section is followed by a parallel review of developments over recent decades and into the present day in the three key challenges to how we live and work, namely from digitalisation and AI, from climate change and from failures to address support for care and social reproduction. This review immediately draws us into the intensifying sense of turbulence since the end of the

Covid-19 crisis. The most recent period has been characterised by numerous and dangerous conflicts, from the Russia–Ukraine war to the Israel–Palestine conflict and other flashpoints that may be further destabilised by the ongoing remaking of the world economic and political order. Moreover, the long-term challenges that we identified are themselves part of the observed and experienced turbulence, as they involve the complex problems of how to regulate the new technologies to protect human interests and decent work, how to transition to net zero and how to address the chronic care deficits. While these are longstanding and unresolved policy objectives, the new era has seen threats to the rights of nation states to regulate technologies, the tearing up of international agreements on implementing net zero and the emergence of a significant backlash against gender equality that calls into question even the need to make institutional changes to support developments in gender relations and instead favours a reversal of gender equality policies. In the conclusions of the volume, we take up the implications of what is widely considered to be a polycrisis of unresolved and interrelated crises, yet a polycrisis without a developed gender analysis. This introductory chapter ends by outlining the structure of this volume and explains how the analysis and synthesis of the contributions is provided in the final concluding chapter.

A conceptual lens for analysing the gendered impacts of crises

Before the impact of turbulence on paths to gender equality can be investigated, it is important to locate the analysis in the now rather vast literature on how, why and with what effects gender relations have been changing over recent decades. A key issue is the concept of gender relations which we regard as a social construct (Rubery, 2014) and therefore not related to any essentialist notions of gender differences. This social construct can and does vary over time, place and within genders so there can be no expectation of a uniform response to changes in economic conditions. For example, a rise or a fall in demand for labour does not indicate a uniform response resulting in either higher participation (an added worker effect) or withdrawal of labour (a reserve army effect). Uniform responses can only be expected under essentialist notions of gender, for example with women always being carers first, workers second or always being contingent rather than permanent members of the labour force (see Bruegel, 1979; Humphries, 1983; Rubery, 2011).

These essentialist approaches stand in opposition to the contrary belief, implicit in the influential World Economic Forum reports (see for example World Economic Forum, 2023), that most of the hard battles to achieve gender equality have effectively been won, with only the somewhat myopic views of established elites in business and politics standing in the way of full realisation of the benefits of gender equality for both capitalism and society. From this perspective, progress towards gender equality is a win-win for all, by adding to the available talent, with only outdated social norms the barrier to progress. This optimistic approach also

sits in stark contrast to views that the forces of patriarchy are such that any indications of apparent progress towards gender equality are at best a mirage unless it stems from changes in male norms and values. That said, it is important in these turbulent times to be concerned with the potential for backlash against gender equality (Edström et al., 2024). This may be particularly likely where gender hierarchies are put at risk because patriarchy “is also not only about gender but about the maintenance and management of a multidimensional hierarchical status quo” (Edström et al., 2024, p. 281). Moreover, backlash may not always be reactive to new rights but can also be preemptive and with the objective of establishing a more misogynistic society than previously prevailed, as can be identified in developments in the United States from the formation of the Tea Party to the concerted attacks on gender equality policies and practices unleashed in the second Trump term of office. In analysing the notion of backlash, it is important to recognise that divergent positions on gender equality have always been present including hard-wired misogyny; turbulence may lead to changes in overt or even dominant positions and ideologies (Crouch & Keune, 2005).

Despite the risk of reversals, we take the view that positive change is also possible, supported by beliefs that substantive differences in the form of gender relations can be found across space and time. By regarding gender relations as a social construct, we take the view that gender relations are shaped by different and even divergent national models that follow path-specific patterns of development, reflecting interactions between institutional, social and political as well as economic factors. Research on path-specific developments in gender relations has both challenged and enriched understandings of differences between national models. For example, the varieties of capitalism literature has been critiqued for not accounting for diversity in approaches to social reproduction and the public sector (Mandel & Shalev, 2009), which are critical factors in understanding recent patterns of growth and development and in women’s integration into employment. Likewise, feminist scholars at an early stage in the varieties of welfare state literature identified the need to view these systems not only from an apparently gender-neutral perspective of the decommodification of labour, but to include the issues of whether or not female labour had been commodified in the first place and whether systems of social support were based on strong or weak male breadwinner models (Lewis, 1992; Orloff, 1993; Sainsbury, 1996). Analysis of welfare systems is now more firmly grounded in its effects on women in both paid and unpaid work roles (Saraceno & Keck, 2011). Furthermore, changes in labour markets towards new forms of segmentation or dualisation reflect the divergent processes of women’s integration into wage employment, linked to varieties of production, social reproduction and cultural systems (Pfau-Effinger, 1998; Rubery et al., 1999).

In taking a view that positive change is possible, it is also important to recognise that not all women benefit from apparent changes towards gender equality and that the experiences of change for women are strongly differentiated by race,

ethnicity, migration status, age and social class (Warren, 2015) and other factors within the same employment systems. What constitutes progress for some women may be less advantageous for others (Gheaus, 2020) and could even be reliant on the exploitation of those supporting increased care demands, often female migrant labour (Bettio et al., 2006; Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022). This intersectional perspective needs to be kept in mind in all comparative analyses of, for example, gender relations within and between countries and according to the nature of the crisis or transition. Moreover, this standpoint also makes clear that if gender equality is to benefit most women, it is important to pursue overall equality in the labour market, both to protect vulnerable groups of women from absolute low employment standards and because to pursue gender equality in an unequal labour market is harder as it involves “swimming against the tide” (Blau & Kahn, 1992; Rubery & Koukiadaki, 2016).

In adopting an institutionalist approach to understanding variations in gender equality, we may be considered to be neglecting arguments that the influence of national institutions and models has been significantly weakened due to, for example, globalisation, the financialisation of neoliberal capitalism or the dominance of tech giants, all of which challenge the persistence of distinct varieties of capitalism. However, despite evidence of significant change within national models, the processes of reshaping have also demonstrated the resilience of national models even in the face of globalisation and their continued capacity to shape experiences of work, employment and social relations (Bosch et al., 2009), including gender relations. Furthermore, the current political turbulence is strongly related to the rejection of notions of globalisation and a resurgence of neonationalism.

These debates on the nature and form of change are in themselves linked to issues of how economies and societies respond to crises and turbulence and how the challenges to current ways of living and working stemming from technological, ecological and social changes are being addressed. It is to this topic that we now turn. Crises may play a role in the reshaping of gender relations over the long term but there can be no expectation of deterministic effects. For example, in the case of a political crisis such as war, one can identify how in the case of Portugal the mobilisation of women to fill the labour gaps caused by men fighting overseas led to women undertaking wage work on a full-time basis. This in part explains the exceptionalism of Portugal among the southern European countries in its record of high full-time work, although this characteristic was reinforced by the associated growth of the Portuguese textile, apparel and footwear industries, where women have provided an important source of labour (Tavora & Rubery, 2013). Yet the mobilisation of women for the Second World War effort across the UK and the United States, for example, had limited long-term impact on women's employment as most left their jobs after the war.

Change in gender relations may emerge from the labour market impacts of crises or may be shaped by policies enacted by the state in response to crises.

For example, in Spain, Insarauto (2021) argues that the development of part-time work in response to the financial crisis reinforced women's position as vulnerable economic dependants within the household. The role of the state can be expected to vary according to context; in the financial crisis, most European countries prioritised the implementation of neoliberal policies of flexibility, privatisation and fiscal constraint. Instead, during the Covid-19 pandemic there was widespread recognition of the importance of maintaining macroeconomic stability by supporting a wider range of social groups, including women who were excluded from work (Rubery & Tavora, 2021) to maintain consumption levels both for the well-being of citizens and to maintain demand for businesses. Indeed, the overwhelming need for the state to act during the Covid-19 pandemic perhaps called into question, at least temporarily, the neoliberal preference for market dominance and a small state.

The household is another site of potential change in gender relations for long-term trends towards more equal participation in wage work by couples (despite limited change in unpaid work) may be further strengthened by the experience of crises. This is particularly the case where unemployment risks are high for men (Sánchez-Mira & O'Reilly, 2019; Vitali & Arpino, 2016), putting sole male breadwinner households at high risk of severe income loss. Induced changes in family income generation in response to crises may serve to normalise a wider variety of household breadwinning arrangements but may also be regarded as unwanted and temporary (Sánchez-Mira, 2024).

There is now a wide literature on how economic crises may have gender impacts in both the short and the longer term. In reviewing this body of knowledge, it is clear that each crisis, depending on its nature, has given rise to different problems and challenges for gender equality. The impact is also dependent, on the one hand, on structural and political changes in the organisation of labour markets and, on the other hand, on changes in the strategies and behaviours of women and men. A gap may also exist between these behaviours and the social and institutional context in which people are living. Institutional arrangements may remain stuck in the shadow of the sole male breadwinner model of family organisation long after this has become largely an irrelevance for how people live and work. The following section thus traces the evolution of the context in which crises have occurred as well as changes in the nature of crises and their consequences starting from the 1970s up until the present day.

A brief history of crises and gender equality

Crises in the 1970s and 80s: women's labour as a flexible reserve?

Studies exploring the gender impact of crises in the 1970s and 1980s in the Global North were mainly concerned with the short-term labour market effects, to explore and, if appropriate, refute the notion of women mainly acting as a

flexible reserve that could be turned off and on according to the needs of capitalism (Bruegel, 1979; Humphries, 1983; Rubery, 1988). At this point in the post-war development of women's integration into the wage labour market, the notion that their increased participation might only be a temporary response to high labour demand was still prevalent, at least for those working in low value-added jobs in manufacturing or services. In practice research found that some women did appear to provide a buffer but mainly in some parts of manufacturing and not across the occupational structure. Indeed, Milkman (1976) had argued that gender segregation, particularly into administrative and clerical work, provided protection, for at that time these employees were regarded as fixed overheads in many organisations. In addition, women were also entering expanding female-dominated professional work in public services such as nursing or primary teaching.

A process of desegregation of male-dominated jobs was also taking place, particularly in the United States (Reskin & Roos, 1990) but also in professional-type jobs in the UK (Crompton & Sanderson, 1990) as women were increasingly using investments in education to enter a wider range of occupations. A key question in relation to crises in this period was thus whether substitution effects, that is the process of desegregation and possible subsequent feminisation, were more likely in times of labour shortage. Alternatively, substitution effects might be stronger in the aftermath of recession as employers sought to reduce labour costs through employing cheaper labour or deskilling of work. In both cases women could provide a source of potential lower wage cost labour and a means of re-segregation through the creation of more deskilled or routinised work, as found by Reskin and Roos (1990) in the United States.

These early analyses thus effectively focused on the processes by which women have integrated into wage employment, whether through "buffer-type" jobs, due to their apparent characteristics as contingent labour market participants; through expanding feminised professions and occupations; or through processes of desegregation and substitution that might involve internal restructuring of the occupation and some devaluation of those parts of the jobs that were becoming feminised.

With respect to women's position in the household, there was limited attention to impacts on unpaid work in these earlier stages of integration, perhaps reflecting low expectations of changes in entrenched social norms. Change was nevertheless taking place in household provisioning, with an increased reliance on wage goods as direct substitutes for domestic labour (for example through ready-made food) and as support for domestic labour (through household appliances). This change in consumption meant that there could be no easy reversal of women's participation simply because of a downturn in demand (Humphries & Rubery, 1984), a resistance that was reinforced by the evolving aspirations of women for education and wage work for their own personal development.

From Beijing to the financial crisis: the normalisation of women's employment integration?

In the two decades between the publication of the book on women and recession (Rubery, 1988) by one of this volume's editors and the onset of the financial crash in 2008, there was limited attention paid to the implications of crisis for gender equality in the Global North. This period was regarded as one of relative stability for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development economies, characterised by a general sustained rise in female employment rates (OECD, 2018), reflecting women's greater investment in education and their changing aspirations towards careers. There was also more development of policies to promote gender equality; the high point of optimism was the aftermath of the UN's 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women where an agreement on commitments to gender mainstreaming of all policy was reached and endorsed by the EU, as reflected in the adoption of an equal opportunities pillar in the EU's employment strategy in 1998 (Rubery, 2015). While these developments suggested that policymakers did see merit in promoting gender equality simply for the benefit of women, there was always an economic rationale for this support, particularly that of addressing the problems of sustaining an ageing population. This economic justification for supporting women's employment came to dominate EU policymaking in the 2000s. Moreover, supposed benefits for equal opportunities and work–life balance were used to justify further development of neoliberal flexible labour market policies (Stratigaki, 2004). Nevertheless, the identification of economic benefits led to a widespread assumption that women's participation would continue to increase (in line with the EU's Lisbon target for higher women's employment by 2010) and, importantly, would be permanent.

However, the characterisation of this period as one of stability and progress does not hold up once a more intersectionally-sensitive lens is adopted, for this was also a period of deregulation and movement towards more flexible labour markets. The associated growth of precarious work had negative consequences for women, particularly in lower-skilled work. Changes were also evident in what types of jobs could be considered protected: the increased digitalisation of administrative and clerical work had undermined the protection that Milkman (1976) had argued was attached to these kinds of jobs in the 1970s. Instead, they were transformed into outsourced and offshored call centres or tasks were devolved to all who worked with a computer on a daily basis. Social class divisions were also widening at the household level, as middle-class women, often married to middle-class men, invested more in education and pursued professional careers. Moreover the disintegration of state-socialism from 1989 onwards in Europe caused major turbulence as these countries made the transition to capitalism. When eight of the post-socialist countries joined the EU in 2004, the conditions were set for a major expansion of EU migration flows due to severe problems encountered in adopting Western economic and social models (see Plomien & Schwartz, 2026, this

volume). Migration offered perceived opportunities to improve household income because of the wide wage gaps (though offset by price gaps) within the EU. Moreover, through processes of both EU and non-EU migration by women, a temporary and partial resolution of the care crisis in advanced countries was provided by inflows of exploitable female migrant labour (Bettio et al., 2006).

However, perhaps the most serious way in which this characterisation of stability fails is in its neglect of instability in the Global South. This became more evident as the 2008 financial crisis started and parallels then began to be made, for example to the financial crisis in Asia in 1997. Crucially for the analysis of the subsequent austerity crisis in the Global North, the focus turned to the important critiques of structural adjustment policies implemented in the Global South by the World Bank and the IMF which had negative impacts on women (Elson, 2014). Moreover, women's further integration into wage employment was closely entwined with the further implementation of neoliberal approaches to economic management and financial market deregulation which may be considered to have set the conditions for the financial crash. For example, the consumption and housing booms that predated it were only sustained through the growth of household debt (Roberts, 2016), which in turn reinforced women's increasingly important role in supporting households' wage income and debt financing.

The financial and sovereign debt crises

By the time of the financial crash, earlier concerns over whether women's integration into wage work was temporary or permanent appeared less salient, though the growth of new forms of precarious work meant that many permanent members of the labour force, both male and female, might have little choice but to take jobs on contingent contracts. In the initial phase of the financial crisis, men's jobs were more affected than women's, even though research has found that in the badly affected male-dominated sectors of manufacturing and construction, women still lost more jobs than would be predicted if job loss was strictly proportional to gender shares of employment (Razzu & Singleton, 2018). Nevertheless, research suggested that the main sources of flexible labour supply or buffers in the financial crash proved to be young people and migrant workers (Bettio et al., 2013).

The research focus on gender equality issues turned more to household strategies to address the large loss of male jobs and incomes, particularly in badly hit countries. Women's income became more relevant for the economies of many families. Across Europe, there was an observed increase in the share of households where the woman was the main or sole breadwinner, which was particularly strong in the countries most affected by the crisis, such as Southern Europe, and among working-class couples (Dotti Sani, 2017; Sánchez-Mira & O'Reilly, 2019). Moreover, qualitative research found that household resilience strategies against the generalised reduction in household expenditures over the recessionary

period were highly gendered, relying on an increase in (female) unpaid labour and with women more likely to deprive themselves of their own needs to safeguard their children and other family members (Castrillo et al., 2020). Even within the growing female breadwinner households during the financial crisis, shifts in the division of housework and care tasks were limited as female breadwinning was mostly perceived as an undesired and temporary situation, as research on the Spanish context has shown (Sánchez-Mira, 2024). Research showing the association of female breadwinning with economic hardship and decreased well-being may explain why this arrangement was considered undesirable by women as well as men (Kowalewska & Vitali, 2020; Kowalewska & Vitali, 2024). Nevertheless, women's persistent and increased labour market involvement over the crisis is likely to have reinforced the extension of the dual-earner model over the long run as a key way for couple households to gain protection from labour market risks (Marx et al., 2026, this volume).

The intensity of the crisis made it inevitable that it would spread to more gender-mixed private services from 2010 onwards, but it was the political response that particularly contributed to strengthening the impact of the crisis on women's employment (Bettio et al., 2013; Karamessini & Rubery, 2014b). The austerity policy response that followed can be seen as an effort to reinforce neoliberal policies through stronger fiscal rules and an effort to explain the neoliberal failures behind the crash as due to too high public spending and insufficient reform of labour markets towards the ideal flexible model. This movement was accompanied by a general downscaling of gender equality policies in the EU, endorsing the idea that equality should be perceived as a "luxury for good times", (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Karamessini & Rubery, 2014b) and gender mainstreaming was virtually absent from the political response to the crisis (Bettio et al., 2013). The implementation of austerity was facilitated by the state bailout policies that converted private debt into sovereign debt and enabled the EU, in conjunction with the European Central Bank and the IMF, to impose neoliberal reforms of industrial relations and cuts to public expenditure as conditions for financial support. These strategies were copied in some cases, such as the UK, even when not imposed by international organisations. However, other countries followed different strategies; for example, Obama in the United States applied a more expansive fiscal policy (Karamessini & Rubery, 2014b).

The euphemistically-named austerity policies directed attention to new issues and problems for gender equality, including the cuts to public services from 2010 onwards, that implicitly expected women to add unpaid labour to pick up the slack (Karamessini & Rubery, 2014b). This reduced public support for social care and childcare heightened pre-existing pressures on dual-earning and single-parent families. Furthermore, the long-term public sector employment and wage freezes directed attention to the important role played by the public sector in women's integration into employment and into professional jobs for those with

higher education. Public sector cuts also resulted in a degradation of employment conditions in a female-dominated sector (Rubery, 2013) and favoured a refamilisation of care in countries where the long-term care system was still under development (Cunningham, 2015; Díaz Gorfinkiel & Elizalde San Miguel, 2015; Karamessini, 2026, this volume).

Overall in this period, any perceived reduction in gender inequalities, for example in gender gaps in employment, unemployment, activity or job quality, especially for the lower skilled, was the result of a downward levelling of men's position in the labour market, particularly for the lower skilled (Rubery, 2015; Visser, 2019). In addition, it was during this crisis period that a trend towards the reversal of gender-progressive ideologies emerged, fuelled by the rise of far-right parties and movements in the aftermath of the crisis across Europe and the United States. Most paradigmatic examples are the major backlash against women's social, sexual and reproductive rights, along with those of the LGBTQI community, in East-Central European post-socialist countries such as Poland or Hungary (Grabowska, 2015; Kováts, 2020). This trend against the perceived threat of "gender ideology" has now become stronger throughout Europe, with conservative and fundamentalist movements on the rise in countries as diverse as Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Spain, Slovenia and Slovakia and the United States (Köttig et al., 2017; Kováts, 2018; Stein, 2023).

From austerity to Covid-19

In the exit from the intense austerity period, many different political responses to the period of crises emerged so that overall policy directions have varied between and within continents, in part shaped by who was in power when the crisis hit as a change of government seems to be common during or just after crises (Bartels, 2012). Variation in political priorities can also be found within international institutions that in part govern the world economy; thus international organisations such as the IMF encouraged the EU to pursue strong austerity policies in response to the financial crisis but in the subsequent recovery period and into the Covid-19 pandemic, there was some stepping back from a full embrace of neoliberalism and financial orthodoxy. In the EU's case, this has been labelled the EU's social turn (Piasna & Theodoropoulou, 2024) that started with the development of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017 onwards. It is also found, for example, in the OECD's conversion to the idea that collective bargaining and social dialogue could provide a positive contribution to the reshaping of labour markets in a period of turbulence (OECD, 2019).

It is beyond the scope of this volume to track, let alone analyse, all these twists and turns in the recovery period; where these feature strongly in particular contributions to this volume, they are highlighted in the conclusions (see, for example, Figueiredo & López-Andreu, 2026, this volume; Karamessini, 2026, this volume). However,

these variations in themselves are cause for scepticism (Bosch et al., 2009) with respect to any simplistic model of global convergence towards a neoliberal state.

The Covid-19 pandemic

An important factor likely to shape impacts by gender is the specific nature of the crisis; this effect was particularly evident in the Covid-19 pandemic, when a health crisis became almost immediately also an economic and social crisis due to social distancing measures. Three main new challenges for gender equality could be identified. First, the rapid rollout and effective success of remote working became an important potential long-term legacy, raising issues of how we would work in the future and whether that would be different for women and men. Second, household arrangements were destabilised because of the rise in telework that ensued from the lockdowns, and which placed men as well as women in the space where the increased domestic and care work was taking place. Third, the pandemic led to the possibility of reevaluating how work was organised and rewarded as public recognition of the role played by care workers in keeping people safe raised awareness of the poor conditions of work in essential sectors.

In practice, the overall job loss during the Covid-19 pandemic proved to be relatively gender neutral, at least at an aggregate level, largely because women were more likely than men to work in teleworkable sectors and in sectors that were deemed essential (Eurofound, 2022a). However, remote working widened divisions among women as this option was mainly available to those in white-collar occupations (Eurofound, 2022b) and it was working-class women, particularly those with children, who were more exposed to job loss (Eurofound, 2022b; Rubery & Tavora, 2021). Indeed, well-paid jobs even expanded, reflecting broader pre-existing trends towards occupational upgrading (Eurofound and European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2021), and indicating how gender inequalities interact with class dynamics. Moreover, compared to the financial crisis, a much higher share of women was covered by short-term income support policies (Rubery & Tavora, 2021), though some groups of women still remained outside these protective supports. The legacy of remote working, however, is unlikely to be fully positive even for women who can take advantage of the option. Research is indicating that remote working along with other forms of flexible working may even add to women's working days as women feel under pressure to prove their continued value to the company under increasing competitive conditions to overcome the risk that remote workers may be more invisible (Chung, 2022).

The compulsory lockdowns combined with the closure of childcare facilities resulted in enforced re-familiarisation with care and domestic tasks, triggering consequences such as poor work–life balance and time poverty for parents, especially women. Several European and national-level studies found that more women than men reduced their working hours or left the labour market altogether due to increased unpaid work demands (Eurofound, 2022a; Collins et al., 2021).

Moreover, even though men also often worked at home, evidence suggests that women undertook a disproportionate amount of housework and childcare even when both parents were working remotely and schools were closed. Only when the father worked from home but the mother did not (Eurofound, 2022a) did fathers' childcare share increase.

Care work was at the centre of this pandemic, whether paid or unpaid. For paid care workers, there was increased public recognition of the social importance of this work and the prevailing poor working conditions. However, efforts in practice to improve rewards for care staff often amounted to only very short-term financial bonuses (Eurofound, 2022a). Nonetheless, these considerations may have influenced the EU's later adoption of new measures to raise minimum wages, of particular importance to care staff.

From the pandemic to new sources of turbulence

The expectation during the Covid-19 pandemic was that the experience of lockdown might encourage people – both men and women – to reconsider how they worked and lived. However, while discussions continued, for example on opportunities to change the spatio-temporal organisation of work and the benefits and risks of blurring boundaries between work and home, such reflections were soon eclipsed by new concerns over the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the rapidly accelerating cost of living. Women were particularly vulnerable to rises in the cost of living, described by some as the “shock absorbers” of poverty (Topping, 2022). The cost rises particularly affected essential goods like housing, food and energy (International Labour Office [ILO], 2022) and these increases in essential goods had a particularly negative impact on single parent households, a majority of which are headed by women (Sologon et al., 2024). Women often have more responsibility for managing budgets (Women's Budget Group [WBG], 2024) as well as for energy-intensive household tasks such as cooking. Across many countries in Europe, substantial minimum wage increases were introduced to support low-wage workers in the face of high inflation although in almost half of all those countries with a statutory minimum wage the nominal increases were insufficient to preserve purchasing power during the cost-of-living crisis (Müller, 2023). Nevertheless, this can be seen to have heralded a new era of higher minimum wages, of definite benefit to women who almost always gain most from increases in wage floors. The 2022 adoption of the European Minimum Wage Directive (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2022), with its dual objective of ensuring adequate minimum wages and strengthening collective bargaining, should consolidate this trend towards a higher wage floor in Europe, though further improvements in women's pay are highly dependent on whether the aim of extending collective bargaining coverage is actively pursued.

Since the cost-of-living crisis that followed the Covid-19 pandemic, the world has become even more turbulent, notably due to the Israel–Palestine war to add

to the ongoing war in Ukraine, to the related energy crisis and refugee crises, and to the multi-faceted and unpredictable changes to United States policy in Trump's second term. Contributing to the perception of persistent turbulence are the ongoing long-term crises related to the impact of new technologies, the increasingly evident process of climate change and environmental degradation and continuing gaps in the provision of care. The political turbulence that has accelerated in the three years since we started planning this book in 2022 has added to the uncertainty, putting in question the capacity of policymakers at national and international levels to address these challenges in a systematic way, let alone address their undoubted gender equality implications.

To take first the impact of digital and AI technologies, research over the last 15 years or so has revealed increasing cause for concern over the consequences of these developments for employment and associated risks for gender equality. These concerns include the inequalities and insecurities associated with the platform economy, especially the threat to the survival of the standard employment relationship, which is not only the main institution for providing some economic security and supporting social reproduction but also an essential vehicle for equal opportunities policy such as maternity leave and equal pay. Likewise, extended use of AI may be embedding gender bias as well as increasing risks of job displacement, applying now as much in knowledge work due to generative AI as routine work (Fernandez Macias et al., 2025; ILO, 2025). The impact of these developments by gender is not yet fully known and while digitally-enabled remote and flexible work for women may be providing some new opportunities, there are also some new risks. Indeed, far from solving problems of combining work and family care, the traditional gender division of labour may be being reinforced and working days more extended. Yet, despite both wide agreement that new regulatory frameworks are urgently needed to protect humanity against the potential negative impacts of these developments and also some progress being made in developing new regulations (for example the EU directive and the proposed ILO new standard on platform work), US threats to impose high tariffs on sovereign states attempting to regulate the US-owned tech giants may significantly destabilise regulatory efforts. Moreover, these problems may soon be eclipsed by the intensified competition between China and the United States for technological, economic and political dominance. In this context, gender equality concerns may well be overlooked.

There is just as much turbulence over the planned move to net zero. After the Paris Accords to move the world economy to net zero, there was optimism that the conflict between climate sceptics and climate scientists could be brought to an end, and the hard job of the transition could start. Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Accords in his first term was a warning of what might yet come, and at the moment of writing this introduction, a serious backlash is growing against net zero by all far-right and even some supposedly mainstream conservative parties.

Yet without a concerted move to implement planned changes both to the technologies in use and our ways of living and consuming, catastrophic changes to our way of life can be anticipated. The implications for gender equality of either a planned transition to net zero or an unplanned change in environmental conditions are unclear, not only because these outcomes are in essence still unknowable but also because there has been little consideration of the environmental crisis from a gender perspective. This applies to changes in the wage labour market but perhaps even more importantly to changes in how we consume and their implications for unpaid work in the home. Gender equality so far has hardly featured in net zero discussions (see Daly et al., 2026, this volume) but the likelihood of initiating such a discussion may be diminishing as we face the task of rediscussing what were thought to be settled debates, for example, that the world needs to use less, not more, fossil fuels.

Finally, if we consider the social reproduction and care challenge, political and economic turbulence is also creating contradictory pressures. Women's integration into wage work on similar terms to men is proving unsustainable in the longer term without a new social contract based on both more social support for care from the state (Pearson, 2014) and changes to men's involvement in unpaid work, in turn facilitated by changes in workplace norms. However, a stable political system may be a necessary condition for progress to be made in bringing about the essential changes in welfare systems and in working practices to improve the institutional match with changing gender regimes. The positive shift towards a more active social policy in the EU from 2017 (Piasna & Theodoropoulou, 2024) importantly included a new EU care strategy, but the realisation of that strategy may be put in question by recent fiscal restraints and by the priority accorded to investment in defence over investment in care. Even more challenging is the backlash in the United States and other far-right dominated countries against the whole implicit commitment to support care rather than expect women to undertake double shifts. In some countries, the preferred option might be to reverse women's involvement in the wage economy or at least rescind the implicit social contract to provide more support for their unpaid work.

Thus the mounting evidence of political, social, technological and ecological sources of both disruption and resistance has highlighted the risks of taking for granted both a political commitment, even if weak, towards gender equality and also the continued existence of institutions in the labour market, welfare and public services systems through which progress to gender equality can be both promoted and monitored. At the same time, current turbulence may also be calling into question the globalisation of the world economy and dominance of neoliberalism. Women's employment may have expanded on the back of neoliberalism, but this economic ideology also prevented the development of a more rounded gender equality programme. Furthermore, these fast-paced changes gave weight to the notion of polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2024; Parnell et al., 2024) or permacrisis

(Brown et al., 2023) which have begun to be widely mooted in political and academic circles as appropriate descriptions of the current and likely future state of the world. These concerns have amplified as the book project progressed and in writing our conclusions presented in Chapter 15 (Sánchez-Mira et al., 2026), we have sought to not only consider the lessons of the recent past, as outlined in this introductory chapter and as explored and elaborated in the chapters to this volume, but also to consider the prospects of further turbulence and how gender issues interact with both the sources of turbulence and the outcomes stemming from multi-dimensional and contradictory pressures for change.

The plan of the book

This volume is topped and tailed by two substantive chapters by the editors; this introductory chapter provides information on how we think about conceptualising gender relations and gender equality and offers a brief overview of how the nature and the impact of crises on gender equality have changed over time. These changes are reflective of long-term changes in women's roles in both wage work and the household economy.

These themes in the introduction are then picked up in the commissioned contributions to the volume. The first set of chapters under the title “Labour markets in crises and intersecting inequalities” includes three contributions primarily focused on employment change and one focused on trends in the gender pay gap. Two provide a pan-European perspective (Steinmetz & Guarnerio, 2026; Bashevska & Dotti Sani, 2026) while two offer country case studies, one on the UK (Torres & Warren, 2026) and the other on two southern European countries, Spain and Portugal (Figueiredo & López-Andreu, 2026). This section reveals a range of intersectional impacts, whether by gender and migrant status (Steinmetz & Guarnerio, 2026) or by gender and social class (Torres & Warren, 2026; Figueiredo & López-Andreu, 2026).

The second set of chapters – the largest grouping in the volume – focuses on issues of social reproduction under the title “The crisis of social reproduction: households and the state”. The first two look at different sides of women's position in the household; the first takes a pan-European look at changes in breadwinning strategies as affected by crisis (Marx et al., 2026); the second takes a longitudinal approach to studying change in domestic and care labour in Australia (Baxter et al., 2026). A third chapter (Plomien & Schwartz, 2026) addresses the fallout from the rupture in the economic and social system in post-socialist countries, with Poland and Ukraine the examples where the market transition undermined the social reproduction system. The chapter explores the gendered responses by citizens to this chronic crisis. This example of how the market transition failed to provide for sustainable social reproduction is mirrored in the example of social care arrangements in California discussed in the fourth chapter by Lopezlira and Hunter. The United States is probably the most market-driven economy in the

world, but this system has been unable to develop a workable care system for an ageing population, leading in California to innovative solutions based around both paying for unwaged work and developing new systems of collective bargaining. The final two chapters in this set take up the issues of transforming the care systems (Karamessini, 2026) and the welfare systems (Larsen et al., 2026) to match the changing behaviour of women as they move away from being primarily carers to long-term participants in wage work. Here the EU has been important in finally pushing for further change in care systems across Europe (Karamessini, 2026), but Larsen et al. find that at the nation-state level the legacy of the male breadwinner household model can still be found in welfare arrangements across a wide variety of countries, including even in the Nordic countries, prized for their gender equality records.

The final set of three chapters under the title “Gendering the digital and net zero transitions” explores the gender equality impacts of both the AI and digital challenges and the movement to net zero. The first chapter (Piasna, 2026) shows how two forms of remote working – telework and platform work – are not solving but often reinforcing gender inequality, while the chapter by Rani et al. (2026) further strengthens these conclusions in relation to all forms of gig work, especially in the Global South, where opportunities to work for clients in the Global North are further exploiting and underutilising women’s capacities. The section concludes with a review (Daly et al., 2026) of the lack of a gender perspective on debates on the transition to net zero and the potential consequence of this absence for gender equality.

The final concluding chapter (Sánchez-Mira et al., 2026) not only reviews the implications of these contributions in relation to previous work on gender equality and crises but also describes how this gender lens needs to be extended in the current developing debates on polycrisis, which has remained so far largely gender-blind. This is found to have the effect of maintaining the invisibility of the crisis in social reproduction. The introduction of a gender lens on polycrises extends attention beyond the production system by focusing on women’s role in both production and social production spheres and their interconnections. Against this background, the chapter discusses the prospects for gender equality in turbulent times.

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