

Policy Brief

Equality Only on Paper is Not Enough: From Global Commitments to System Performance

Executive Summary

This policy brief argues that formal legal equality is not enough to achieve real gender equality unless rights are supported by effective institutions, services, enforcement mechanisms, and labour market opportunities. Through a comparative perspective on North Macedonia and Slovenia, it shows that similar legal commitments can lead to different outcomes depending on system performance, particularly in areas such as childcare access, parental leave design, institutional capacity, women's labour market participation, entrepreneurship, and gender pay gaps. The brief concludes that gender equality should move from a narrow focus on legal compliance toward an integrated system-performance approach, where early childhood education and care is treated as economic infrastructure, enforcement bodies are strengthened, gender-disaggregated data is improved, women's economic participation is supported, and equality is mainstreamed across economic, social, fiscal and EU-integration policies. Sustainable progress depends on translating rights written in law into real opportunities in practice.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, gender equality has become an increasingly central component of economic and social policy across countries. Governments have expanded legal frameworks, strengthened protections, and aligned national legislation with international and European standards, reflecting a growing recognition that women's participation in the economy is not only a matter of rights, but also a key driver of growth, productivity, and long-term resilience.

At a global level, this trajectory suggests steady progress. However, closer examination reveals a more complex picture. If we look at the data from the *Women, Business and the Law 2026* report by the World Bank, it indicates that women globally hold only around 67% of the legal rights of men, while only a limited number of countries approach full legal equality. More importantly, the systems required to support these rights, such as enforcement mechanisms, administrative capacity, and access to services, remain only partially developed in many contexts, with laws estimated to be enforced at roughly half of their intended effectiveness.

This suggests that the central challenge is no longer the formal recognition of rights, but their consistent implementation. Gender equality is increasingly shaped not only by what is written in law, but by how effectively those laws operate in practice.

2. From Legal Equality to System Performance

Understanding this gap requires moving beyond a purely legal perspective and examining gender equality as a system outcome. While legal frameworks establish rights and protections, their effectiveness depends on how they are supported by institutions, services, and labor market conditions. In practice, the ability to exercise rights is influenced by access to childcare, the reliability of enforcement mechanisms, and the availability of economic opportunities.

Three interrelated components are particularly important in this regard: care infrastructure, institutional capacity, and labor market access. Where these elements are well developed and coordinated, legal frameworks are more likely to translate into measurable outcomes. Where they are still evolving, gaps can emerge between formal guarantees and actual participation.

This shift from legal recognition to system performance becomes particularly visible when examining countries that have adopted similar legal frameworks but display different outcomes in practice. In such cases, the question is no longer whether gender equality is recognised in law, but how effectively the broader system supports its implementation. Differences in access to services, institutional capacity, and labor market structures begin to play a more decisive role in shaping outcomes.

Within the European context, this dynamic is further shaped by a more integrated institutional environment. Gender equality in EU member states is supported by a comprehensive regulatory framework, including binding directives on equal treatment, pay transparency, and work-life balance, as well as coordinated monitoring and implementation mechanisms led by the European Commission. Comparative tools developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality, such as the Gender Equality Index, provide a structured basis for assessing progress, while harmonised statistical systems coordinated by Eurostat support consistency in measuring gender gaps across member states.

These elements contribute to a policy environment in which legal rights are embedded within broader systems of monitoring, enforcement, and coordination. In contrast, countries outside the EU framework often pursue similar legal alignment within institutional systems that are still developing and consolidating.



3. A Comparative Perspective: North Macedonia and Slovenia

This broader pattern can be illustrated through a comparison between North Macedonia and Slovenia. Both countries share a post-socialist legacy and have undertaken substantial efforts to align their legal frameworks with European standards on gender equality, reflecting a common policy direction. At the same time, they operate within different institutional environments.

Slovenia, as an EU member state, functions within the broader European regulatory and monitoring framework. North Macedonia, as a non-EU country, is progressing through a process of alignment, during which institutional capacity, service provision, and enforcement mechanisms continue to evolve.

This combination of shared foundations and differing contexts allows for a more focused examination of how legal commitments are translated into outcomes. The comparison is therefore not about differences in policy intent, but about how systems operate in practice.

Labour Market Outcomes

Labour market indicators illustrate how differences in system performance are reflected in outcomes. In 2024, women's employment rate in North Macedonia was 38.3%, compared to 53.6% for men, resulting in a gender employment gap of approximately 15.3 percentage points. In Slovenia, women's employment rate was approximately 51.8%, while men's employment rate was around 61.2%, resulting in a smaller gap of approximately 9.4 percentage points.

Inactivity rates further highlight this difference. In North Macedonia, women's inactivity rate is approximately 56.9%, compared to around 46.1% in Slovenia. These figures indicate that a larger share of women remain outside the labor market in North Macedonia.

Differences are also visible in employment structures. Women account for 27.2% of employers and 21.5% of own-account workers in North Macedonia, while in Slovenia women represent approximately 29.9% of self-employed individuals. Pay indicators follow a similar pattern, with Slovenia reporting a gender pay gap of 5.0% based on gross hourly earnings, compared to an estimated 12.8% gap in gross monthly earnings in North Macedonia.

Care Infrastructure and Participation

Access to early childhood education and care plays a central role in shaping these outcomes. In North Macedonia, approximately 37,871 children were enrolled in ECEC services in 2024, reflecting ongoing expansion efforts. In Slovenia, enrolment reached 82,412 children, with approximately 94% attending public kindergartens.

Higher coverage supports more continuous labor market participation, while more limited access can constrain employment decisions, particularly for women with caregiving responsibilities. In this sense, childcare functions not only as a social service but as a key component of economic infrastructure.

Policy Design and Institutional Capacity

Policy design also influences outcomes. North Macedonia provides extended parental leave, while Slovenia structures leave into distinct components, including maternity, paternity, and parental leave, with specific provisions for fathers. This contributes to a more balanced distribution of care responsibilities over time.



Institutional capacity further shapes implementation. In North Macedonia, 523 discrimination cases were reported, indicating increasing awareness and use of available mechanisms. Continued strengthening of institutional capacity, particularly in enforcement and coordination, can further enhance the effectiveness of these frameworks.

4. From Legal Frameworks to System Performance

The comparison between North Macedonia and Slovenia, situated within a broader global and European context, suggests that gender equality is not determined solely by legal recognition, but by how effectively systems translate rights into outcomes. While both countries have established comparable legal frameworks, differences in outcomes reflect variations in institutional capacity, service provision, and labor market structures rather than differences in policy intent.

This points to a broader shift from a focus on formal rights toward an emphasis on system performance. In this perspective, gender equality emerges from the interaction of multiple structural dimensions, including access to care services, the design of policy instruments, institutional capacity and labor market conditions.

If gender equality is understood as the outcome of a functioning system, then strengthening this system becomes the central challenge. Access to early childhood education and care represents a foundational element, functioning as economic infrastructure that enables labor market participation by shaping the distribution of unpaid care work. Policy design, particularly in relation to parental leave, influences behavioral incentives and the distribution of care responsibilities over time.

The availability of reliable and harmonized indicators, especially in relation to gender pay gaps, supports system accountability, while institutional capacity, particularly the effectiveness of labor inspection systems and equality bodies, remains essential for ensuring that legal protections are consistently applied. Labor market structures further shape outcomes through access to employment, entrepreneurship, and financial resources, while the sustainability of gender equality frameworks depends on broader institutional resilience, including stable funding and policy continuity.

Within this framework, the case of North Macedonia can be understood as reflecting a stage of ongoing system consolidation, where strengthening these interrelated components represents a key pathway for translating legal commitments into sustained outcomes.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The analysis suggests that the gap between formal and substantive gender equality is primarily systemic rather than legal. While legal frameworks have expanded significantly across countries, the systems required for their effective implementation, particularly in relation to service provision, institutional capacity, enforcement, and labour market access, remain unevenly developed.

From this perspective, differences between EU and non-EU contexts illustrate how varying levels of institutional integration and system maturity shape outcomes. Legal alignment provides an essential foundation, but its effectiveness ultimately depends on how well it is embedded within functioning systems that support participation, ensure enforcement, and enable access to opportunities. The comparison between North Macedonia and Slovenia shows that similar policy commitments can lead to different outcomes when care infrastructure, institutional capacity,



labour market structures and monitoring mechanisms operate at different levels of effectiveness.

Strengthening the connection between formal rights and their practical realisation should therefore become the central policy priority. This requires moving from legal compliance toward a more integrated system-performance approach to gender equality. In practical terms, this implies several policy directions.

First, early childhood education and care should be treated as core economic infrastructure, not only as a social service. Expanding affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare, particularly in underserved municipalities and rural areas, would directly support women's labour market participation and reduce the burden of unpaid care work.

Second, parental leave policies should be further reviewed to encourage a more balanced distribution of care responsibilities between women and men. Introducing or strengthening dedicated, non-transferable leave provisions for fathers could help shift social norms and reduce the long-term career penalties often associated with motherhood.

Third, institutional enforcement mechanisms should be strengthened. Labour inspectorates, equality bodies and anti-discrimination institutions require adequate funding, technical capacity, clear mandates and stronger coordination in order to ensure that legal protections are applied consistently in practice.

Fourth, gender equality policy should be supported by more reliable, harmonised and regularly published data. Particular attention should be given to improving measurement of the gender pay gap, women's inactivity, access to entrepreneurship, ownership of assets, and the relationship between care responsibilities and labour market outcomes. Better data would improve accountability and allow policies to be adjusted on the basis of evidence.

Fifth, labour market measures should focus not only on employment access, but also on the quality and sustainability of women's economic participation. This includes support for women's entrepreneurship, access to finance, skills development, flexible work arrangements, and active labour market measures targeted at women who are outside the labour force.

Finally, gender equality should be mainstreamed across economic, fiscal, social and EU-integration policies. Rather than being treated as a separate policy area, it should be integrated into broader reform agendas, including public finance, education, employment, digital transformation, regional development and institutional reform.

In conclusion, equality only on paper is not enough. Sustainable progress depends on the capacity of institutions, services and labour markets to translate rights into real opportunities. For countries such as North Macedonia, the next stage of gender equality reform should therefore focus less on whether rights exist in law, and more on whether the system enables women and men to exercise those rights equally in practice.

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