



Nordic Council  
of Ministers

## TOWARDS PAY EQUITY

Explaining the under-  
valuation of women's work  
in the Nordic countries



# Content

1. About the report	3
2. Summary	5
3. Work, job evaluation, labour market	8
4. Methodology and outline	10
5. Different statistics of gender pay gaps	12
6. Theoretical approaches	20
7. Results of the survey of key stakeholders in the Nordic countries	22
8. Discussion	37
9. References	39
Appendix 1: Survey on equal pay for work of equal value	48
Appendix 2. Recipients of the survey on equal pay for work of equal value	49
About this publication	52

This publication is also available online in a web-accessible version at:  
<https://pub.norden.org/temanord2025-546>



# 1. About the report

The gender pay gap is a challenge that affects labour markets around the world, including the Nordic countries. Despite the fact that women in the Nordic countries are among the most employed in the world, they are still subject to significant gender pay gaps. The pronounced gender segregation of the labour market, with women and men working in different sectors and occupations, reinforces these differences. Occupations dominated by women are often valued and paid less than male-dominated occupations with similar skill requirements.

To help reduce the pay gaps that still exist between women and men in the Nordic countries, the Nordic Council of Ministers has initiated a project on equal pay for work of equal value in the Nordic region. The Nordic Council of Ministers' cooperation body Nordic Information on Gender (NIKK), located at the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research, has carried out the project, which, among other things, has resulted in this publication. The report was written by Jimmy Sand, analyst at the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research.

This publication discusses various explanations for the undervaluation of women's work in a gender-segregated labour market, based on a survey of social partners and other key stakeholders in the Nordic countries. A background review of various statistics of gender pay gaps is provided with the aim of illustrating the underlying factors. Various aspects of the survey highlighted by the respondents are also discussed, drawing on relevant research.

This is the third and final report in a series of publications from the project on equal pay for work of equal value in the Nordic countries. The first report, authored by Eberhard Stüber, describes legislation and policy initiatives in the Nordic countries, including a discussion of the implementation of the EU Pay Transparency Directive with a focus on the theme of work of equal value. The second report in the series, authored by Minna Salminen-Karlsson and Anna Fogelberg Eriksson, examines how available official statistics can be used to measure gender pay gaps in work of equal value at the national level in the Nordic countries, with in-depth studies of Finland, Norway and Sweden.

Special thanks go to the members of the project reference group: Byrial Rastad Bjørst, PhD, lawyer at The Danish Association of Professional Technicians (DK); Kevät Nousiainen, Professor Emerita, Juris Doctor, at the University of Turku (FI); Þorgerður Jennýjardóttir Einarsdóttir, Professor of Gender Studies at the University of Iceland (IS); Mari Teigen, Professor and research leader of CORE – Centre for Research on Gender Equality at the Institute for Social Research (NO); Eberhard Stüber, lawyer and former analyst at the Equal Opportunities Ombudsman (JämO), and senior investigator at the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (SE); and Milla Järvelin, Analyst at the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS).



## 2. Summary

The report is part of a project initiated by the Nordic Council of Ministers with the aim of reducing the gender pay gap in the Nordic region. Despite the fact that women in the Nordic region are among the most employed in the world, there are significant pay gaps between women and men as groups. This report aims to explore why women's work is undervalued through a survey of key stakeholders in the Nordic countries.

Work is divided into paid and unpaid work; unpaid work is often performed by women, affecting their opportunities and earnings in paid work. Job evaluation is used to compare different jobs based on factors such as skills, effort, responsibility and working conditions. Despite this, there is a risk of gender bias, with jobs traditionally done by women being undervalued and therefore paid less. The Nordic labour market is highly segregated by gender, meaning that women and men often work in different sectors and occupations. Female-dominated occupations, for example in health and social care, generally have lower pay than male-dominated occupations, such as engineering and construction. This segregation contributes to the gender pay gap and makes it harder to achieve economic gender equality.

The gender pay gap can be discussed in different ways. The unadjusted gender pay gap shows the difference in average pay without taking factors such as age and education into account. The adjusted gender pay gap, on the other hand, takes these and other variables into account, showing the gap that persists outside the influence of these factors. Structural pay gaps and value discrimination mean that occupations dominated by women are undervalued and paid less than equivalent occupations dominated by men, contributing to the overall pay gap.

The report is based on a survey sent to key stakeholders in the Nordic countries, including government agencies, employer organisations, trade unions and researchers. The survey aimed to gather experience and knowledge about equal pay for work of equal value. The results of the survey were complemented by literature reviews and thematised under three main headings:

1. Gender segregation in the labour market:
  - *General patterns:* Many respondents pointed to the gender-segregated labour market as one of the main causes of the gender pay gap. Female-dominated occupations are systematically undervalued.
  - *Segregation between and within sectors:* There are clear differences between the private and public sectors, but also within the public sector. Female-dominated occupations in the public sector are generally characterised by lower pay compared to other occupations.
  - *Measures to counter segregation:* Proposals from the respondents include information campaigns, active recruitment measures and career guidance to promote less gender-stereotyped career choices.
  - *Problematizing voices:* Some respondents highlighted that the work environment and pay influence career choices, and that there are structural barriers to breaking gender segregation that are not addressed by individual-oriented interventions.
2. Other explanations – Care responsibilities and pay negotiation:
  - *Care responsibilities:* Parental leave and part-time work are unevenly distributed between women and men, which negatively affects women's pay. Proposed solutions include incentives for more equal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work.
  - *Pay negotiation:* Starting salaries tend to be set lower for women than men, contributing to the pay gap. The implementation of the EU Pay Transparency Directive is mentioned as a possible way forward.
3. The Nordic labour market models:
  - *Pay formation in general:* There is a consensus on the strong autonomy of the social partners, but different views on how specific elements such as frontline labour model (*frontfagsmodellen/märket*) should be handled, which express conflicts of goals and interests between the social partners as well as between sectors. A fundamental problem lies in the different conditions between the private and public sectors.
  - *Suggestions for action:* To close the gender pay gap, it is clear that efforts of a kind and scale that are not currently being undertaken are needed. This involves political reforms for structural change, as well as the social partners shifting their focus from declarations of gender equality to specific measures that can lead to change. The balance between statutory and collective bargaining regulation needs to be discussed.

The report concludes with a summary discussion emphasising the key insights from the survey responses and previous chapters, with a focus on understanding and addressing the structural and cultural factors that contribute to the gender pay gap in the Nordic region.



### 3. Work, job evaluation, labour market

*Work* is a fundamental concept in the context of economic equality. Alongside voting rights and sexual and reproductive rights, equal access to paid work in the open labour market has been a core demand of women's movements. The demand for equal pay for work of equal value is enshrined in the ILO Constitution adopted in 1919,<sup>[1]</sup> and in 1951 the organisation adopted Convention No 100 on equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value. The convention clarifies that it is the content of work that should form the basis for comparison between different jobs, not whether these jobs are similar to each other (Stüber, 2024).

In addition to ratifying the ILO Convention, the Nordic countries have committed to working towards the goal of equal pay for work of equal value through the UN's 2030 Agenda, as well as to recognising the value of reproductive work (UN, 2015). The concept of work can be divided into paid work and unpaid work, the latter performed outside the open labour market. Of particular relevance is the distinction between productive labour (usually paid), which generates added economic value, and reproductive labour (usually unpaid), which is needed to raise children and sustain a household, which provides nutrition, security, and opportunities for recovery (Beier, 2018; O'manique & Fourie, 2016; Rai et al., 2019). This is a highly gendered distinction, and one that corresponds with a structural division of labour between women and men that has been remarkably persistent (Måwe, 2019). While the focus of this report is paid work and the income it generates, there is no escaping the fact that the societal organisation of unpaid care and domestic work (characterised as reproductive work) – which is predominantly performed by women – has a number of implications for paid work.

Linked to the objective of equal pay for work of equal value are various tools for gender neutral *job evaluation*, which started to be developed in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the requirements of the ILO Convention (Måwe, 2019). In the

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1. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is the UN's specialised agency for employment and labour issues.

Nordic countries, with the exception of Denmark, it is recommended that employers use job evaluation to compare different jobs performed by women and men that have different content but the same requirements. The requirements of the worker should form the basis of pay setting, usually according to factors defined by the ILO (skills, effort, responsibility and working conditions), rather than the value of the work itself (Oelz et al., 2013). Like all assessments, job evaluations are based on certain assumptions and, despite a structured approach, open to subjective interpretation. A number of research studies have also shown that there is a risk of gender bias in job evaluations, with employers traditionally assigning less value to paid work performed by women (Acker, 1989; Burton, 1991; Steinberg, 1992; Bender & Pigeyre, 2016; Koskinen Sandberg, 2016; see also Salminen-Karlsson & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2025). The fact that occupations predominantly held by women are valued, and thus paid, less than occupations that require similar qualifications predominantly held by men is often referred to as *value discrimination* (Harriman et al., 2024).

*Labour markets* in the Nordic countries are characterised by two general features that are relevant to the discussion of equal pay for work of equal value in a variety of respects. First, they are highly gender segregated: most women (over 70 per cent of those employed) work in female-dominated industries and most men (over 75 per cent of those employed) work in male-dominated industries (Nordic Statistics, 2024). When this coincides with value discrimination, the result is that women as a group receive lower pay than men as a group (Harriman et al., 2024). Second, social partners have a high level of autonomy from the state and legislation with regard to pay formation: it is labour organisations and trade unions that negotiate collective agreements, and there is, for example, no legislation on minimum wages. There is some variation between the different countries in how this model works, for example in terms of the degree of state involvement, and changes have occurred over time as a result of, among other things, technological change, union membership and, not least, a convergence with the EU in several of the countries. Still, it is relevant to discuss the Nordic labour market model – or rather the Nordic group of labour market models (Dølvik, 2013; Dølvik et al., 2014; see also Stüber, 2024; Stenberg & Jochmann-Döll, 2024). Since women and men work in different occupations to such a large extent, and different but equivalent occupations may belong to different collective bargaining areas, the collective bargaining model may make it difficult to compare pay between different occupations with the same employer (see, e.g., Nousiainen et al., 2023).<sup>[2]</sup>

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2. The report is only available in Finnish, but one of the authors, Kevät Nousiainen, is part of the reference group of the project that produced this publication.



## 4. Methodology and outline

This publication presents part of the findings from a project on equal pay for work of equal value in the Nordic region, initiated by the Nordic Council of Ministers with the aim of helping to reduce the pay gap between women and men in the Nordic countries. After an initial inventory phase, which consisted of developing an overview of how the issue of work of equal value has been addressed in national studies and government reports in the Nordic countries over the past five-year period (2019–2024, see Stüber, 2024), a survey was formulated to collect experiences and knowledge from key stakeholders in the Nordic countries.

### Consultation with key stakeholders

During the summer of 2023, the survey was sent to identified persons in government agencies, private and public employer organisations and trade unions, as well as to researchers and other experts involved in labour market issues and working to close the gender pay gap. The aim was to identify problem formulations and themes, as well as conflicts of goals and interests, related to their experiences of the issue of equal pay for work of equal value in the labour markets of the Nordic countries.

The survey (see Appendix 1) was sent out on 16 June 2023 to 56 recipients in the five Nordic countries (see Appendix 2). The deadline for submitting the survey was 15 September, at which point 41 per cent of recipients had responded. Responses were from all over the Nordic region, with a relatively even distribution between the five countries: Denmark (3), Finland (6), Iceland (4), Norway (6) and Sweden (4). The responses also come from a range of stakeholder types: public authorities (8), trade unions (5), researchers (5), private sector employers (3) and public sector employers (2). Given the response rate, this survey should be seen as a kind of consultation, rather than a quantitative study that claims to be representative.

The responses received were compiled and thematised, and following a discussion in autumn 2023 among the project reference group – consisting of experts from the Nordic countries – the survey was supplemented with literature studies to develop, deepen, and discuss the conclusions from the survey. Overall, the results offer a picture of important challenges that need to be addressed to help reduce the pay gaps that exist between women and men in the Nordic countries.

## Structure of the report

Chapter five discusses various statistics of the gender pay gap, introducing the concepts of unadjusted and adjusted pay gaps, structural pay gaps and value discrimination, among others. Statistical examples are used to illustrate various factors that can explain the pay gap.

Chapter six provides an overview of theoretical approaches from research, focusing in particular on segregation in working life and gender labelling of occupations. These theoretical approaches can be seen as a summary of the previous discussion on pay gaps and serve as an introduction to the presentation of the survey responses in the following chapters.

Chapter seven presents the results of the survey of key stakeholders in the Nordic countries, divided into three different themes: 1) Gender segregation in the labour market, 2) Other explanations: caring responsibilities and pay negotiation and 3) The Nordic labour market models. Based on quotes from the survey responses, problem formulations, conflicts of goals and interest are discussed in light of the theoretical approaches presented in the previous chapter and with references to research and other studies.

Chapter eight provides a summarising discussion that highlights a number of overarching reflections from the previous chapter and some key messages for future initiatives to reduce the gender pay gap through equal pay for work of equal value.



## 5. Different statistics of gender pay gaps

Economic gender equality refers to the distribution of economic resources by gender and, as it stands, men – in the Nordic countries included – generally have access to greater economic resources than women, although there are significant differences within groups of women and men (Keeley, 2015; OECD, 2018). In general, men earn more than women – this holds true when looking at unadjusted or adjusted measures, structural pay gaps or, for that matter, disparities in disposable income.

The following section discusses different statistics of the gender pay gap. As different measures can be used to show different aspects of economic inequality, it is important to have an understanding of what each concept means.

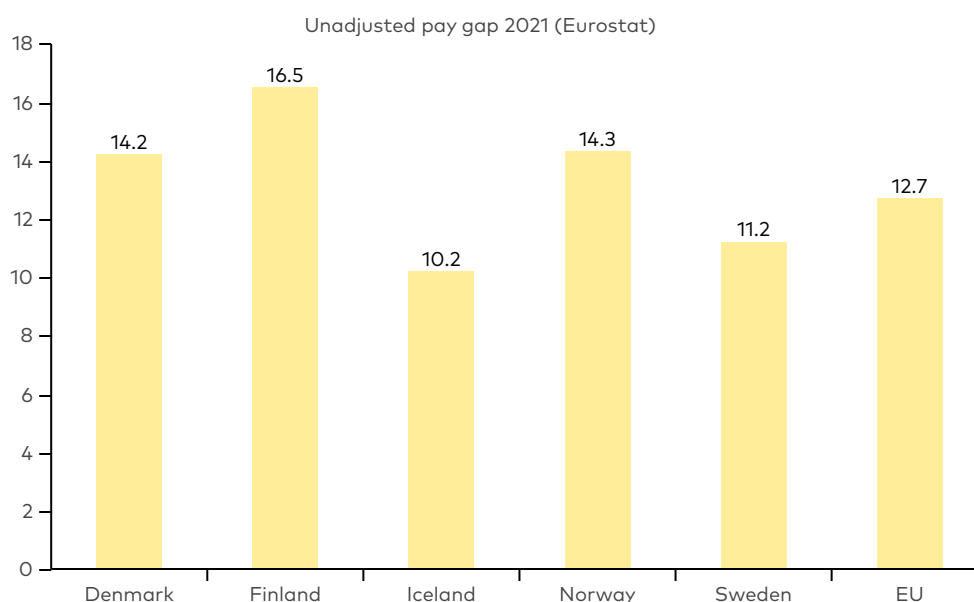
### Disparities in disposable income

An individual's income can come from labour, capital or transfers through welfare systems (e.g. pensions, sickness or parental payments or benefits of various kinds, such as child or housing allowances). Disposable income is the sum of income from labour, capital and welfare transfers and is a measure of money that is available to spend. This is usually measured at the household level rather than the individual level, which means that it can be difficult to distinguish differences between women and men as groups, but as an illustration, a study by Statistics Sweden (SCB) showed that, in 2020, 69 per cent of total capital income (interest, dividends and capital gains) in Sweden went to men and 31 per cent to women (SCB, 2022; see also Ekberg & Beijron, 2023a; Søgård et al., 2018).

However, capital income is extremely unevenly distributed among the population, and for the majority of individuals aged 18–64 in the Nordic countries – regardless of gender – income from work, or pay, is the most significant type of income. Here too, there are various measures of differences between women and men as groups, as discussed below.

## Unadjusted pay gap

The *unadjusted* or unweighted gender pay gap shows the difference in average pay (gross, i.e. before tax and transfers) between women and men, i.e. the difference between the sum of all men's pay and the sum of all women's pay expressed as a percentage.<sup>[3]</sup> Using this measure, the pay gap in the Nordic countries in 2021 was between 10.4 per cent (Iceland) and 16.5 per cent (Finland), compared with the EU average of 12.7 per cent (Eurostat, 2024c).



That this measure of the pay gap is unadjusted means that it does not take factors such as age, education, working hours, occupation or sector into consideration. Women, as a group, are more likely to work part time than men, either voluntarily or involuntarily, which means that the difference in disposable labour income between women and men is greater in practice than the unadjusted pay gap shows. In the Nordic countries, the level of part-time work for women varies between 23 per cent (Finland) and 35 per cent (Norway), compared with the EU average of 29 per cent, whereas for men the figure is between 11 per cent (Finland) and 15 per cent (Norway), compared with the EU average of 8 per cent (Eurostat, 2024f).

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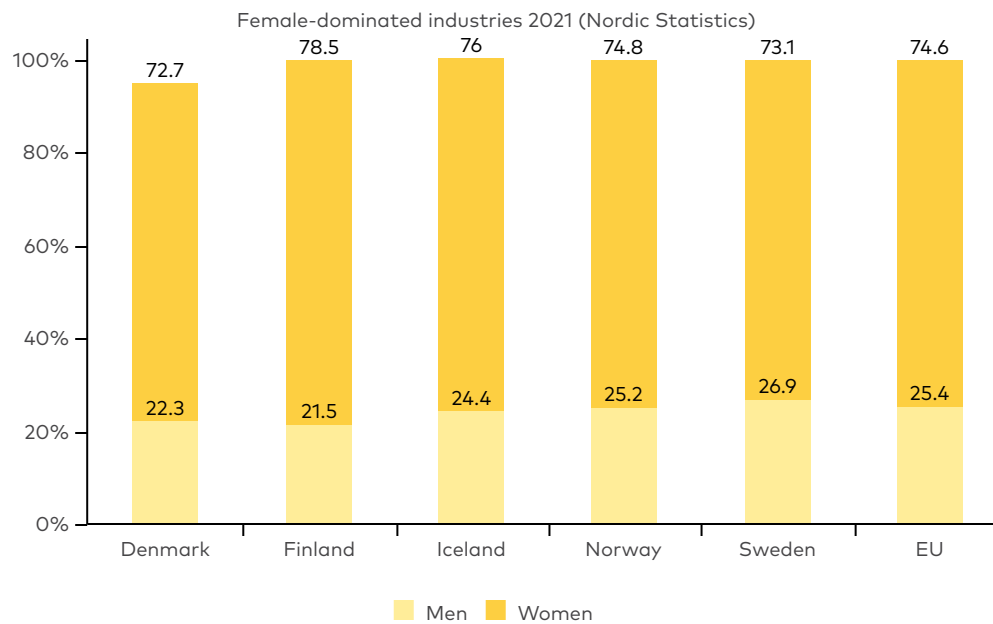
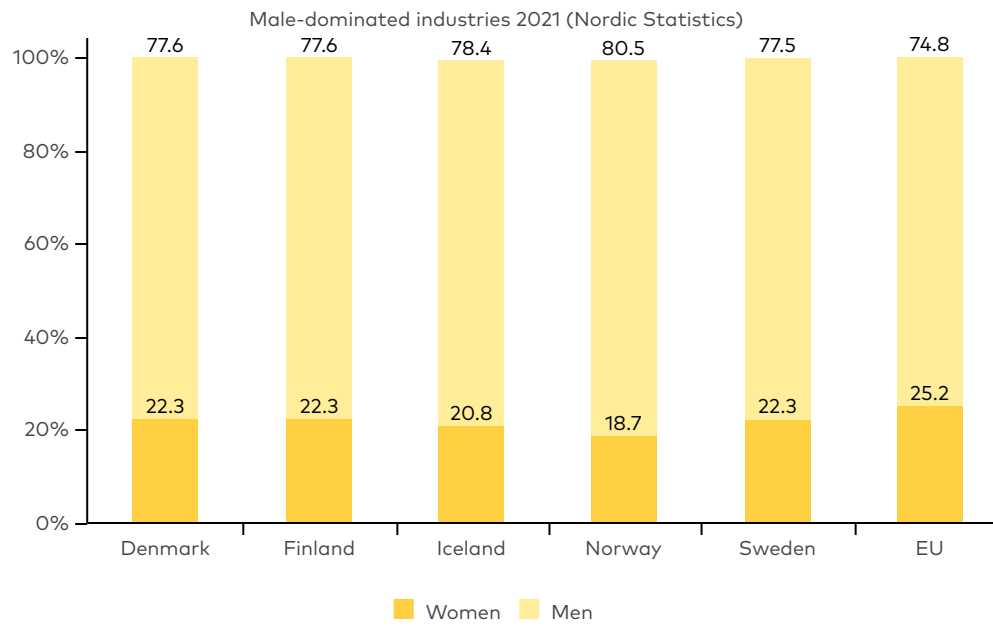
3. National statistics may differ between countries in terms of whether they compare hourly or monthly pay and which pay supplements, if any, are included in calculations. There are also sometimes differences in comparisons of full- and part-time pay, depending on whether part-time pay is converted to full-time pay or vice versa (see Salminen-Karlsson & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2025, for a more detailed discussion).

The gender pay gap also varies with age, as it tends to be smaller when people enter the labour market and increase over time, for example due to differences in the impact of parenthood for women and men (Barth et al., 2021; see also Salminen-Karlsson & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2025, & Wagner et al., 2020, for a discussion of how age interacts with other factors, such as education). In the Nordic countries, the gender pay gap varies between 0.7 per cent (Iceland) and 5.9 per cent (Finland) for the under-25 age group and between 14.5 per cent (Sweden) and 17.9 per cent (Finland) for the 55–64 age group (Eurostat, 2024b).

Similarly, a figure for the unadjusted gender pay gap being lower does not mean that a labour market is more gender equal compared to if the figure was higher. In the EU, this can be illustrated by comparing Italy and Denmark, where the unadjusted gender pay gaps in 2023 were 5 per cent (Italy) and 14.2 per cent (Denmark) respectively, while the female employment rates in the same year were 52.5 per cent (Italy) and 74.2 per cent (Denmark) (Eurostat, 2024e).

In countries where a lower share of women participate in the labour market, the unadjusted gender pay gap is often smaller, which can be explained by the selection effect; in countries with lower female employment rates, a narrower group of women – for example, single women without children – are part of the labour force, and they tend to be less likely than other groups of women to be underpaid (Olivetti & Petrongolo, 2008). The Nordic countries are all characterised by relatively high female employment rates, well above the EU average, largely due to a history of subsidised and high quality childcare and elderly care, as well as generous parental leave schemes for both parents (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019; cf. Lewis, 2002; Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011). In 2023, the employment rate in the Nordic countries varied between 74.1 per cent (Finland) and 81.3 per cent (Iceland), compared with the EU average of 65.7 per cent for women and between 73.9 per cent (Finland) and 85.9 per cent (Iceland), compared with the EU average of 75.1 per cent for men (Eurostat, 2024e).

At the same time, labour markets in the Nordic countries – like in other OECD countries (Fluchtman & Patrini, 2023) – are highly segregated by gender (and other identifiers, such as migrant background, socio-economic status, etc.; see, e.g., de los Reyes, 2014). In 2023, between 71.9 per cent (Denmark) and 79.4 per cent (Finland) of women worked in female-dominated industries, compared to the EU average of 75.1 per cent, while between 76 per cent (Denmark) and 79.2 per cent (Norway) of men, compared to the EU average of 74.7 per cent, worked in male-dominated industries (Nordic Statistics, 2024).



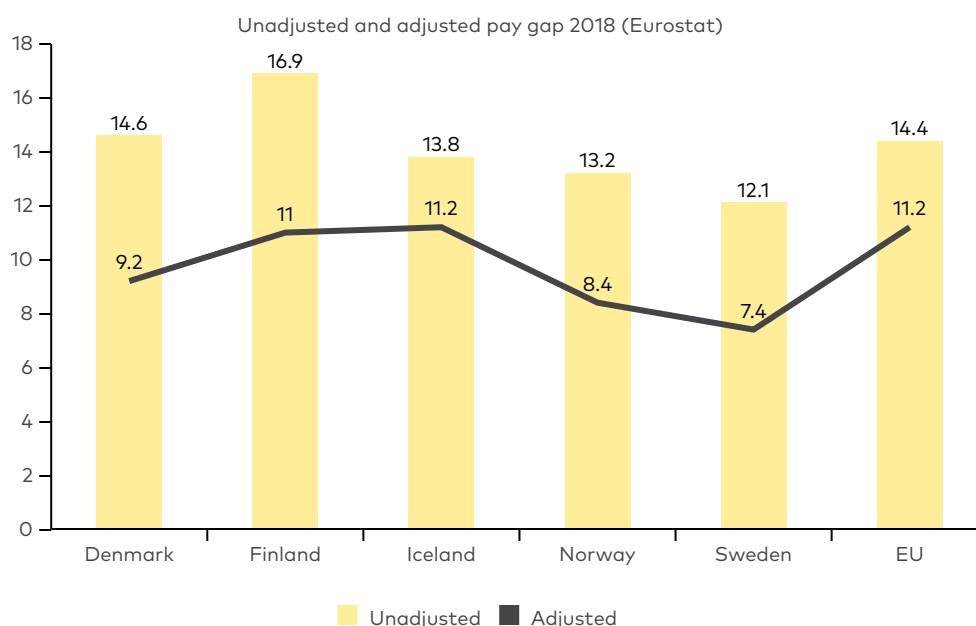
The combination of high female labour force participation and a highly gender-segregated labour market is sometimes referred to as the Nordic gender paradox. This is associated, for example, with gendered study choices; among other things, women in countries characterised by high economic prosperity that rank highly on various gender equality indices are less likely to seek educational paths and careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (Stoet & Geary, 2018; see also Jansson & Sand, 2021). These male-dominated occupations are generally

better paid than, for example, occupations in health and social care, where most women in the Nordic countries work (Reisel et al., 2015; Badgett & Folbre, 1999).

## Adjusted pay gap

Another measure for comparing women and men as groups is the adjusted pay gap, which takes into consideration various factors – such as age, education, working hours, occupation or sector – that can affect pay, or explain pay differences (see, e.g., Larsen et al., 2020; Ekberg & Beijron, 2023b; Grini & Alseth Fløtre, 2023). It is also referred to as the standard-weighted pay gap, if standard weighting is the method of analysis used. The adjusted measure is often smaller than the unadjusted pay gap, mainly because women and men largely work in different occupations characterised by different pay levels, and when you adjust for that, the figure is lower.

As an illustration, a calculation based on Eurostat data for 2018 shows that the difference between the unadjusted and adjusted pay gap across the Nordic countries can vary between 2.6 (Iceland) and 5.9 per cent (Finland), compared to the EU average of 3.2 per cent. The factored variables are age, education, occupation, years in position, permanent or fixed-term contract, full-time or part-time employment, economic activity classification, private or public sector, size of organisation and regional breakdown (Pérez Julián & Leythienne, 2023). This calculation has been conducted using regression analysis, a commonly used method in labour market research that allows for the use of more detailed information than in standard weightings (see also Ekberg & Beijron, 2023b).



In addition to the fact that women and men largely work in different occupations with different pay levels, part of the unadjusted pay gap was previously explainable by educational attainment. However, this is no longer the case. In recent decades, education levels in OECD countries have risen steadily and in most countries women, in particular, are increasingly educated. In the Nordic countries, as well as some others, the gap in educational attainment between women and men as groups is widening. However, the share of women in STEM-related education paths remains low, with the exception of fields in the natural sciences orientated towards life sciences (biology, medicine, etc.) (Kahlroth, 2018; OECD, 2017; Huyer, 2015). In 2021, the share of female graduates from higher education in the Nordic countries ranged from 56.2 per cent (Denmark) to 68 per cent (Iceland), compared to the EU average of 57.2 per cent (Eurostat, 2024d), while the share of female graduates from tertiary education in STEM subjects the same year ranged from 29 per cent (Norway) to 42.8 per cent (Iceland), compared to the EU average of 32.8 per cent (Eurostat, 2024a). As a study by the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (Saco) shows that certain occupations may be unfavourable from a lifetime earnings perspective (taking into account, among other things, the loss of income suffered by academics during their studies, as well as the, in many cases, higher earnings they receive during their working lives). It would be more profitable, for the individual, to start working immediately after upper secondary school, instead of pursuing higher education to qualify for these occupations. In this study, these include biomedical analysis, dental hygiene, library and information science, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, art education and biology. Most of these programmes lead to professions that are heavily dominated by women (Ljunglöf & Simonsen, 2020).

The adjusted pay gap is also referred to as the *unexplained* pay gap, as it represents a difference in pay between women and men that cannot be explained by the selected variables. These unexplained gender pay gaps are not necessarily the same as *unjust* pay gaps, as the term is used in discrimination legislation. In 2018, there was an unexplained pay gap in the Nordic countries of between 7.4 per cent (Sweden) and 11.2 per cent (Finland), compared with the EU average of 11.2 per cent (Pérez Julián & Leythienne, 2023). Behind these figures there can be some occurrence of pay discrimination in the legal sense, i.e. that one individual receives lower pay than another in a comparable situation simply due to their gender or based on other discriminatory grounds. Legislation on discrimination aims to address such unjustified pay differences (Ekberg & Beijron, 2023b; see also Kumlin, 2016). The overall, statistical level of wage differences, with their explanatory factors, is not relevant either for the analysis of wages at individual employers or for the legal examination of the same. However, the statistics can be of great importance in gaining insight into and being able to work with the structural factors that can be assumed to have an impact on the wage differences between women and men.

Unexplained pay gaps may also be due to variables that cannot be accounted for in statistical calculations, but which do not necessarily have an undue basis. These may include time an individual has spent outside of the labour market due to, for example, parental leave, or norms and expectations when negotiating starting pay for a job. The EU's Pay Transparency Directive aims to address some of these (see also Stüber, 2024). The fact that there are unexplained pay differences that are not due to inappropriate pay setting can be assumed to be a result of societal structures and norms related to women's and men's expected roles, for example linked to caring responsibilities or perceptions of competence, which shape individuals' choices. The existence of wage differences at an overall level is the reason why legislation has been enacted to prohibit wage discrimination, for example with requirements, in all Nordic countries except Denmark, for employers to conduct wage surveys. Despite this, wage differences persist, as statistics show.

## Structural pay gaps and value discrimination

In addition to wage discrimination in the legal sense, the term discrimination is also used in a sociological sense, which should not be confused with the legal definition. In contexts where the non-legal meaning of discrimination is used, structural wage differences are sometimes discussed in terms of *value discrimination*, which refers to occupations mainly held by women being valued, and thus paid, less than occupations with similar qualification requirements mainly held by men (Harriman et al., 2024; Ekberg & Beijron, 2023b). Unlike other forms of discrimination, value discrimination targets groups rather than individuals, and it also affects men in female-dominated occupations to some extent (for examples of pay comparisons between men in female-dominated occupations and those in male-dominated occupations, as well as the equivalent comparisons for women, see Salminen-Karlsson & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2025).

There are no official statistics based on pay comparisons between occupations dominated by women and occupations dominated by men with similar qualification requirements, despite the fact that countries that have adopted the 2030 Agenda have undertaken to provide annual reports on pay differences to fulfil the goal of ensuring equal pay for work of equal value (Target 8.5). Instead, reported statistics relate to pay differences between jobs with the same occupational code, i.e. jobs that are similar rather than of equal value (see also Stüber, 2024).

In the Nordic countries, there are examples of more or less far-reaching attempts to develop indicators of pay differences between work of equal value, or in other words a measure of value discrimination in a gender-segregated labour market.

- In Sweden, in 2000, the then Equality Ombudsman developed a tool for pay mapping, Analys Lönelots, which has been provided to employers free of charge since 2018, managed by the expert network Lönelotsarna ('The Wage Pilots'). The organisation has used the tool to propose an indicator for work of equal value on behalf of the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (Johansson, 2021).
- In Norway, a research group at the Institute for Social Research, commissioned by the Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir), has analysed pay differentials for work of equal value and made suggestions for relevant indicators when determining the equivalence of work (Hoen et al., 2024).
- In Iceland, a working group established by the Prime Minister in 2021 developed a pilot model for re-evaluating undervalued work dominated by women in the state sector and enable comparisons between equivalent occupations (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2024).
- As part of the Nordic Council of Ministers' project on equal pay for work of equal value in the Nordic countries, researchers Minna Salminen-Karlsson and Anna Fogelberg Eriksson have investigated how available official statistics can be used to measure pay differences between women and men in work of equal value at the national level in the Nordic countries, based on an in-depth study of Finland, Norway and Sweden (Salminen-Karlsson & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2025).



## 6. Theoretical approaches

As discussed in the previous section on different statistics of gender pay gaps, there are a variety of factors, both structural and individual, that can be used to explain the findings from empirical data. In EU cooperation, a model developed by the European Commission is often used to shed light on women's and men's pay as well as underlying factors of particular importance (European Commission, 2022).<sup>[4]</sup>

The model is based on four different criteria that are intended to be used to support the identification of solutions on the way to equal pay for equal work and work of equal value:

- Sectoral segregation – that women and men largely work in different occupations and sectors and that occupations and sectors dominated by women are characterised by lower pay than those dominated by men.
- Unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work – as groups, women work more hours per day than men, but a large proportion of the work done by women is in the form of unpaid care and domestic work.
- Hierarchical segregation (the 'glass ceiling') – the higher up the labour market hierarchy a position is, the lower the proportion of women in that position; increased power and status is correlated with increased pay and other forms of income (e.g. from capital).
- Pay discrimination – women are paid less than men even when they do equal or equivalent work, despite all the policies and legislation in place to prevent this.

This model encompasses the various explanatory factors that emerged in the previous chapter but introduces the concept of hierarchical segregation – or the 'glass ceiling', i.e. that men more commonly occupy decision-making positions, and these positions are well paid (see, e.g., Kräft, 2022). Sectoral segregation can be

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4. Among other things, the European Commission's model has been used as a starting point in a Nordic-German trade union project on Equal Pay, financed by the Nordic Gender Equality Fund and coordinated by, among others, the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (NFS), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), the Nordic countries and the German trade union confederation DGB (Stenberg & Jochmann-Döll, 2024).

seen as composed of a horizontal dimension, i.e. the actual distribution of women and men in different occupations and industries, and a vertical dimension, i.e. a difference in social status between these different occupations and industries (Bettio & Verashchagina, 2009). Researchers have explained these phenomena as reflecting norms of *gender essentialism*, that women and men are differently suited to different tasks, for example linked to care or technology, and *male privilege*, that men are associated with higher status and that male-coded areas are more highly valued (Charles, 2003; Charles & Grusky, 2004; Kanter, 1977; Abrahamsson, 2002).

Gender labelling of occupations and industries, based on social norms about the tasks to which women and men are suited, reproduces segregation in the world of work, leading women to tend towards jobs with high female visibility and men towards jobs with high male visibility (Badgett & Folbre, 1999; Breda et al., 2020; Charles & Thébaud, 2018; O'Reilly et al., 2015; Peetz, 2015). Other researchers point to a link between social norms that associate unpaid care and domestic work with femininity and the low pay that characterises 'female occupations' in health, education and social care (Nicolás-Martínez et al., 2024; Rubery & Grimshaw, 2015).

Aside from gender, other factors, such as a migrant background, socioeconomic status, etc. have an impact on the conditions people face in the labour market (de los Reyes, 2014; Young Håkansson et al., 2022). These factors affect pay and working conditions for individuals, as well as compounding structural segregation that results in certain individuals being employed in specific roles and industries. The EU Pay Transparency Directive (EU 2023/970) emphasises the importance of taking intersectional discrimination into account. Factors beyond gender need to be used in comparisons of pay between women and men, but national statistics have some limitations in this respect (Salminen-Karlsson & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2025).



## 7. Results of the survey of key stakeholders in the Nordic countries

This chapter presents the responses from a Nordic survey on equal pay for work of equal value, in which respondents were asked to answer questions on problems, challenges and needs, as well as suggestions for actions and approaches, related to equal pay for work of equal value. The aim was to identify problem formulations and conflicts of goals and interests. Special attention was also paid to the interaction between statutory and collective bargaining regulation of the labour market (see previous chapter on the Nordic labour market models, also Dølvik et al., 2014).<sup>[5]</sup> The responses have been thematised and sorted under three main headings: 1) Gender segregation in the labour market, 2) Other explanations: caring responsibilities and pay negotiation and 3) The Nordic labour market models.

In the presentation of the survey responses, numbered abbreviations are used to distinguish between respondents. Public sector employers, two in number, are abbreviated **PuE 1-2**; private sector employers, three in number, are abbreviated **PrE 1-3**; researchers and experts/consultants, five in number, are abbreviated **E 1-5**; trade unions, five in number, are abbreviated **TU 1-5**; and government agencies, eight in number, are abbreviated **GA 1-8**.

### Gender segregation in the labour market

A commonly used explanatory model in the discussion of pay differences between women and men concerns the pronounced gender segregation in the labour market (see previous chapters, cf. Zwysen, 2024): most women work in female-dominated sectors such as social and care work, health and education. Men are mainly

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5. The survey also included questions on the EU Pay Transparency Directive (EU 2023/970), Iceland's so-called equal pay standard and other similar models, but these are beyond the scope of this report (see instead Stüber, 2024).

employed in male-dominated sectors such as agriculture, construction, energy, transport and IT.

The occupations and industries in which women are more likely to work generally have lower levels of pay compared to those in which men are more likely to work. Men also receive lower pay in the female-dominated occupations and industries compared to men working in other occupations, but they are significantly fewer in number than women. The reverse is true for occupations and industries in which men are more likely to work (cf. Harriman et al., 2024).

The emphasis on this vertical as well as horizontal segregation in the labour market (cf. Bettio & Verashchagina, 2009) is consistent in the survey responses. The following are extracts from the responses, with comments by the author of the report.

### General patterns

"The gender segregation of the labour market, combined with the undervaluation of women's work, largely explains the existing gender pay gap. It shows a lack of compliance with equal pay legislation and international commitments on equal pay for work of equal value." (GA1)

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"Studies have repeatedly shown that the gender-segregated labour market is the main cause of the gender pay gap. Systematic undervaluation of traditionally female jobs is a problem, and those in large public sector occupations dominated by women, such as nursing and teaching, have found it difficult to get pay adjustments." (GA2)

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"The gendered labour market has two dimensions, vertical and horizontal. Vertical gender segregation refers to a situation within occupations and workplaces in which men and women occupy different positions, with men more often occupying the upper echelons of power than women. Focus has traditionally been on vertical segregation. The concept of horizontal gender segregation refers to a situation in which women and men perform different jobs in the labour market and gender segregation between occupations is prominent. Women's jobs have historically been, and remain, systematically undervalued. Focus is therefore increasingly shifting from equal pay for equal work to equal pay for work of equal value." (TU1)

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"Taking all sectors into account, it can be broadly stated that female-dominated sectors are characterised by a lower level of pay. One reason for this is historical; when women first entered the labour market it was predominantly in the health, care and cleaning sectors, in which the levels of pay were low. Another is the under-appreciation of work traditionally done by women." (TU2)

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"The labour market is highly segregated by gender: women and men largely work in different sectors and do different tasks. Gender segregation perpetuates narrow gender stereotypes, prevents the full application of individuals' skills, has a detrimental effect on the functioning of the labour market and is also reflected in both pay differentials and pensions." (TU3)

## Comments

It should be noted that the selected extracts from the survey responses presented above come from both government agencies and trade unions, but the general descriptions of gender segregation given reveal no clear conflict of interest between, for example, employer organisations and trade unions, or between social partners and state actors. Employer representatives also provided their views on gender segregation, as discussed below.

In the Nordic countries, women's participation in the labour market increased rapidly from the 1960s onwards, with small variations between countries (Mustosmäki et al., 2021; Stanfors, 2014). This was mainly due to the expansion of the public sector, as well as in-service occupations, but also women taking over tasks in industry that men considered monotonous and boring (Wikander, 1991; cf. Goldin, 1995). The latter category of tasks is low-paid almost by definition, while the expansion of the public sector can be described as a shift from unpaid care work in the home to low-paid work in the service of society (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2015; Wagner et al., 2020).

## Segregation between and within sectors

Gender segregation is evident not only between the private and public sectors but also within the public sector. While there are relatively more men employed in the private sector, there are also staff groups in the public sector among which the absolute majority of employees are men. This is the case, for example, in the police and defence sectors. Among some large groups of public sector employees, the absolute majority are women. This applies, for example, to nurses, educators, midwives and office staff (see, e.g., Andersen et al., 2023; Holt & Søndénbroe, 2022). Additionally, female-dominated occupations in the public sector are generally characterised by lower pay than male-dominated occupations, and

generally provide lower returns in terms of pay relative to educational requirements (see, e.g., Sørensen et al., 2020, 2022).

"The main challenge is the pay return for higher education in the public sector. Higher education (dominated by women) is undervalued in the public sector compared to, for example, industry and finance (dominated by men). It is also a challenge within the same sector, for example in the government sector where pay is high for unskilled workers in the military (dominated by men) and lower in universities where higher education is required (especially where there is a high proportion of women). Determining what constitutes work of equal value can be a challenge here." (TU4)

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"According to research, 85 per cent of the unadjusted pay gap can be explained by experience, leave and the gender-segregated labour market, while 15 per cent of the pay gap between women's and men's hourly pay cannot be immediately explained. Moreover, if women were not on average more educated than men, the pay gap would be even larger." (GA3)

## Measures to counter segregation

In light of the explanatory value of gender segregation for the pay gap between women and men as groups, several respondents point to the need for interventions that they believe can counter segregation.

"The challenge is to reduce gender segregation in the labour market so that there is a more even gender balance both in education and across different professions." (TU5)

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"Information campaigns targeting young people can challenge traditional gender norms and encourage both genders to explore careers outside of traditional gender expectations.

Active recruitment measures can attract under-represented genders in specific professions or sectors.

Career counselling should be provided in schools that breaks with traditional gender expectations.

Support should be offered to those wishing to move into professions that may be traditionally dominated by the opposite sex." (PuE1)

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"To address the gender segregation of the labour market, measures need to be introduced in early education to encourage both girls and boys to make more gender-neutral choices in education and careers." (PrE1)

## Commentary

It can be noted that two of the excerpts included above are from the responses of employer organisations, one representing public employers and the other representing the private sector. Both emphasise skills provision efforts that primarily target the formal education system, especially at school and early ages (cf. Jansson & Sand, 2021; Simonsson, 2022).

Some examples of initiatives explicitly aimed at addressing gendered study and career choices are mentioned. In Norway, the *Jenter og teknologi* (Girls and technology) project, a collaboration between the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO), the Norwegian Society of Engineers and Technologists (NITO) and the National Centre for STEM Recruitment (NCSR) based at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), targets girls aged 15 and 16 and encourages them to choose IT and technology-related subjects in upper-secondary and higher education.

Another example from Norway is *Menn i helse* (Men in Health), a collaboration between the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), the government agency (directorate) that administers the country's social insurance fund, employment service and municipal social services, and the Directorate of Health. This programme targets men who are switching careers, offering them retraining to work in traditionally female-dominated occupations in health and social care.

Finland has an equal pay programme, a tripartite collaboration between the government and central labour market organisations. The last programme period (2020–2023), among other things, examined gender segregation in the labour market and produced recommendations for measures aimed at political decision-makers, employers and other stakeholders in working life, as well as for the organisation of regional cooperation in education and working life (Teräsaho et al., 2023; Teräsaho & Soronen, 2023).

Additionally, significant efforts have been undertaken in the Nordic countries to increase the number of women in educational paths and occupations related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (Jansson & Sand, 2021) or men in health and social care occupations and education (Birgier et al., 2024). Studies of different interventions emphasise the importance of not focusing solely on 'fixing the women' (or the underrepresented group), given the structural barriers to people choosing occupations dominated by a gender other than their own. A narrow focus on individuals, who it is assumed simply need to make the 'right

choices', risks ignoring issues pertaining to the organisation and conditions of work, or the culture and norms surrounding different jobs (Schiebinger, 2008; Schiebinger et al., 2010).

## Problematising voices

However, some respondents pointed to structural barriers to less gender-stereotyped career choices.

"The gendered labour market is persistent. Although there are gender points to encourage boys to enter studies to become nurses, pre-school teachers and primary school teachers, they are not choosing these pathways. We believe it has to do with the working environment and pay." (TU4)

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"In Denmark, social partners have agreed on a number of policy recommendations to try and reduce gender segregation in the labour market. The recommendations specifically address wellbeing in the workplace, as well as work environments free from harassment. Furthermore, it is recommended that both educational institutions and workplaces focus on making the content of their recruitment materials broadly appealing and inclusive to all, regardless of gender. It has also been suggested that guidance counsellors should be required to be open-minded and non-judgmental in their guidance and recommendations." (TU5)

## Comments

It should be noted that these are both extracts from the trade unions' responses.

With regard to the themes highlighted here, studies have been conducted on work environments in relation to gender segregation (see, e.g., Hagen & Steen Jensen, 2022), and a few years ago a Nordic research review was conducted with a particular focus on sexual harassment in working life (Svensson, 2020), followed by a Nordic anthology (Lundqvist et al., 2023). However, it seems that the question of why men do not apply to female-dominated professions and industries is under-researched, compared to the question of why women do not apply to male-dominated professions and industries (Block et al., 2019).

There are also those who problematise the tendency to see gender segregation, especially horizontal segregation, as the main explanation for the pay gap.

"With regard to reducing gender segregation in the labour market, which could help to reduce the gender pay gap, other measures could also be implemented. If more men became nurses, it would not increase the average pay of nurse, but it would lead to greater equality between the average pay of men and women [by reducing the salaries of these men]." (TU5)

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"The problem of the gender pay gap is a multi-headed hydra that involves discrimination of many kinds: in recruitment, pay discrimination and discrimination based on family responsibilities. There is a consistent refusal to discuss pay discrimination, especially discrimination related to non-recognition of work of equal value. The labour market is deeply gender segregated, but a more detailed assessment of the requirements of 'women's' and 'men's' jobs could lead to consistent devaluation of the requirements of women's jobs. In principle, anti-discrimination legislation provides some tools for this. Both social partners and the media tend to blame gender segregation for the pay gap and only consider direct pay discrimination in jobs that are the 'same', when the problems lie in indirect discrimination and different pay for work of equal value." (E1)

The report will return to the issue of the valuation of work in a later section. The following section discusses factors other than gender segregation as explanations for the pay gap.

## Other explanations: Caring responsibilities and pay negotiation

In addition to gender segregation in the labour market, the relationship between paid work and unpaid care and domestic work is highlighted by many respondents.

Research shows that there are two key situations in which gender pay gaps tend to emerge:

"The first is associated with the arrival of a first child – solutions to counteract the emergence of a pay gap in this context lie primarily in policy: expanded and cheap/available good quality childcare, incentives for equal parental leave taking, tax rules (joint taxation).

The second situation is when starting pay is negotiated." (E2)

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"Studies have shown that having children costs women in terms of pay. For men, on the other hand, pay from work is largely unaffected by having children." (G3)

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"There are also a wide range of other factors that contribute to the pay gap, which can also be seen as gender equality problems. These include, for example, the fact that women are less likely to advance to higher positions, which may also be due to discriminatory structures in the labour market. Men work more hours than women, and work more overtime, while women are still more likely to work part-time and take partial care leave to look after children. Parental leave is also still very unevenly distributed between the sexes. Young women are in a worse labour market position than men due to the expectation of family leave, which can also affect income levels." (PuE2)

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"Women still take much more family leave than men. Women are also more likely to work part-time than men." (TU2)

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"Unfortunately, mothers still take the largest share of family leave, which means that family responsibilities often fall disproportionately on mothers. The family leave system should therefore provide greater incentives for families to share leave more equally between both parents.

The so-called 'child penalty', which refers to absences due to family leave, has been shown to have a significant impact on gender pay and career progression. To promote gender equality in the labour market, family and care responsibilities must be shared equally between parents.

Women are still significantly more likely to have fixed-term contracts than men. Two-thirds of all new employment contracts for women are fixed-term, compared to less than half for men. The concentration of fixed-term contracts among women is often justified by the high rate of family leave in female-dominated sectors. However, only one third of fixed-term contracts are concluded on a temporary basis." (TU3)

## Comments

It can be noted that there are no clear differences, possibly reflecting conflicts of interest, in the responses of the representative of a public sector employer organisation and the two representatives of central trade union organisations.

There seems to be an awareness of the relationship between working hours and caring responsibilities, and that there is an unequal distribution between women and men that has a negative impact on women's pay. This is also recognised by the representative of the group of researchers and independent experts, as well as by the representative of the government agencies. For example, the 'motherhood

penalty' is mentioned; studies have shown that, in terms of pay development, women are negatively affected by having children, while men tend to benefit from having children (see, e.g., Kahn et al., 2014; Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015; Adams-Prassl et al., 2024; Sundberg, 2024).

Suggestions for solutions come from a trade union representative and an independent expert, who point to the potential of policy; the unequal distribution of unpaid care and household responsibilities affects women's and men's working hours differently, and by extension their pay, and examples are given of interventions that have historically made a difference (cf. Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019). The responses highlight the importance of looking at the underlying factors of the pay gap, alongside job evaluation and anti-discrimination legislation. However, previous research has problematised the tendency to relegate the problem to the private sphere, when there are measures that employers can take related to work organisation and opportunities for flexibility (see, e.g., Goldin, 2014; Barbieri et al., 2019).

The issue of pay negotiation at the time of hiring is raised by a few respondents. However, this is included as a background to the EU Pay Transparency Directive (EU 2023/970), which requires employers to disclose pay levels for different categories of employees (Stüber, 2024). There have been some studies on the importance of starting pay and social norms that can influence the outcome of an average gender pay gap (see, e.g., Sæve-Söderbergh, 2019; Hernandez-Arenaz & Iriberry, 2019; Kiessling et al., 2024).

The responses also raise the issue of women's and men's opportunities for advancement to higher positions, where the term 'glass ceiling' is often used to describe the hierarchical segregation that results in women typically comprising a smaller and smaller proportion of those occupying management positions in companies and organisations further up the management hierarchy. This is addressed in one of the four criteria in the European Commission's model for identifying solutions on the road to equal pay for equal work and work of equal value (see previous chapter on theoretical approaches; European Commission, 2022). In addition, there have been some studies in this area, covering both statistics and explanatory models (see, e.g., Kanter, 1977; Bertrand, 2018; Kraft, 2022; Taparia & Lenka, 2024; ILO, 2019).

## The Nordic labour market models

The Nordic labour markets are characterised by a number of common institutions, actors, and values, and hence they are discussed here collectively as a family of labour market models. One common aspect, among others, is the organisation of the labour market based on the interaction between statutory and collective bargaining regulation; while the framework for the labour market is established by the state – for example through legislation on discrimination or parental leave –

social partners negotiate applicable labour market conditions, such as pay for work performed (Dølvik, 2013; Dølvik et al., 2014).

## General pay formation

Several respondents commented in their answers on current labour market models and the consequences for the pay gap.

First, extracts from the responses of employer organisations, in both the private and public sectors, are presented.

"An obvious challenge lies in the definition of 'work of equal value'. Even if all parties could agree on what constitutes equal pay for work of equal value, we have a dynamic labour market in which the demand and supply of labour, and therefore remuneration, is constantly changing. Pay is also not the only factor in play. There are various other factors that influence remuneration, flexibility, working hours and environment, benefits, job security, etc. How do you value all these aspects?" (PrE2)

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"The issue of equal pay for work of equal value assumes that pay differentials between sectors and industries are a problem. This is not the case. Pay levels vary between different labour market sectors, industries or occupations and this is fundamental given the evolution of the labour market. Historically, pay has been slightly higher in the private sector compared to the public sector, while job security has been higher for those in local or central government. This is still true for many occupations. Pay levels also reflect the earning power of different industries, financial margins and job requirements. It is fundamentally good that people can choose between jobs that offer different advantages and disadvantages, including, for example, in terms of pay, working hours and skill requirements." (PrE3)

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"Municipalities face particular challenges in terms of equal pay. Although there is a high degree of pay transparency and central pay determination in the local public sector, the gender segregated labour market is one of the main causes of the gender pay gap. Although the local public sector is the sector with the smallest gender pay gap, this can largely be attributed to the high proportion of women in the health and social care sector.

The unique structure of municipalities, where responsibility for all municipal employees is centralised under municipal management, creates additional challenges. When you are responsible for many thousands of employees across a wide range of occupational groups, implementing a regulatory framework to equalise all positions is both time and resource intensive." (PuE1)

These can be compared with the following extracts from responses from trade unions.

"The law should clearly define equal pay and equal value of work. There should also be a universal set of criteria covering all sectors/occupations to evaluate the demands of the work. Currently, there is no definition of work of equal value or assessment factors for determining the level of demand in the legal provisions of this country. There should be a way to assess equality at work between different collective agreements. This would require cooperation on pay systems between different sectors. Of course, these are very difficult objectives and application would be very challenging in practice" (TU2)

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"There has been a discussion in recent years about whether the central system for pay formation (in Norway called the *frontfagsmodellen*, in Sweden *märket*) is implemented such that large female-dominated groups in the public sector are constantly lagging behind in terms of pay. Industry conducts negotiations first, and what is agreed establishes norms for the remaining groups who conduct negotiations afterwards. But instead of a norm, the pay range negotiated by industry has become a ceiling for public sector employers. The private sector cannot manage its own pay framework either. Year after year, we see the pay framework being blown up while the public sector continues to adhere to it." (TU4)

The following are two responses from researchers or independent experts.

"The starting point of the Nordic labour market model is that legislation largely does not touch on issues of pay formation. There are, however, a number of areas governed by policy that directly or indirectly affect career choices and differences in lifetime earnings between the sexes. Such areas include tax policy, childcare provisions, parental insurance, the right to parental leave, conditions for conducting public activities, etc. Other areas governed by the public sector include the enforcement of labour law and discrimination legislation. In addition, political assemblies are ultimately responsible for setting public sector pay.

At times when inflation is higher than the level of pay increases that are directly or indirectly determined by centralised pay setting models, the so-called '*märket*' or '*frontfagsmodellen*', the basic conditions for compensating price increases differ between the private and public sectors. The public sector has less scope to pass on cost increases to 'customers' than the private sector. It is political assemblies that have the mandate to increase budget allocations or reprioritise within budgets. The requirements for taking industrial action (to force higher pay or better working conditions) and the effects of industrial action (who suffers first) also differ between the public and private sectors." (E2)

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"At the moment, the Finnish 'tripartite model' for drafting labour and equality legislation is in a bad state. Employee representatives criticise the government for using the employer position as the basis for new legislative proposals. For example, the government programme mentions legislation that prohibits the National Conciliator from proposing solutions that would allow the pay level of the import sector (male-dominated), as established in the collective agreement, to be exceeded by any other sectoral collective agreement in labour disputes. As the import sector is heavily male-dominated and domestic sectors are female-dominated, such legislation could be indirectly discriminatory. One of the problems lies in the increasing importance of local collective agreements. Traditionally, central labour market organisations have been active in gender equality issues." (E5)

## Comments

Judging from the responses highlighted, there are significant conflicts of goals and interests in terms of pay formation, not least when it comes to comparing the private and public sectors. On the one hand, there is a conflict between employer and employee interests, which in the Nordic countries is managed through what researchers have described as a conflict partnership (Dølvik, 2013), and on the other hand, there are conflicts of goals that can be illustrated by debates between central trade union organisations in Norway over the so-called *frontfagsmodellen*, in which Akademikerförbundet SSR (the Union for Professionals), YS, Unio and LO have taken fundamentally opposing positions, with some questioning the model and others defending it (Arup Seip & Svarstad, 2023).

It should be noted that the general attitude among labour market parties, both central trade union organisations and employer organisations in the private and public sectors, is that it is worth defending the Nordic model, in which pay formation is managed through negotiation, and government intervention is kept to a minimum. The argument is that the model is generally considered to work well. At the same time, there are studies that indicate that party autonomy has been used as an argument in opposition to compliance with conventions and legislation on equal pay for work of equal value (see, e.g., Svenaeus, 2017). Instead, women are often encouraged to apply for male-dominated occupations with higher pay (Wagner et al., 2020).

Furthermore, a study in Finland notes that the social partners often state that they are committed to promoting gender equality and that they evaluate the effects of collective agreements in this regard, but at the same time this rarely seems to result in any specific measures that lead to change (Nousiainen et al., 2023). A report from the then government of Finland stated that the current procedure of cooperation on a tripartite basis (employers, trade unions, state), which is also recommended by ILO Convention No. 100, has proven to be problematic in the

context of gender equality. This is because the primary task of the parties is to promote the interests of the groups they represent, and since there are conflicts of interest between these, it is difficult to gain acceptance for a permanent change in the wage situation between occupational groups (Government of Finland, 2022; cf. Svenaeus, 2017).

Something can also be said briefly about the difference between bargaining power between unions in the public and private sectors that one of the independent experts highlights, and which they have reason to pay attention to. In the event of a strike in the private sector, the employer's finances are affected fairly immediately. In the event of a strike in the public sector, the employer is instead spared wage costs and the one who is immediately affected is the third party (patients, students, etc.) (Ekberg & Andersson, 2016).

## Proposed actions

Among the responses, there are various suggestions for actions that respondents argue could contribute to reducing the gender pay gap.

"It is necessary to distinguish the handling of pay issues as a matter of negotiation (where the union represents its own members) from cooperation to ensure equal pay (where the employee representatives, similar to a safety representative, are expected to represent all employees). The need for comparisons and analyses across agreements is particularly relevant in the case of work of equal value (but not in the case of equal work). Thus, the role of employee representatives in a collaborative process on pay mapping differs from the traditional role of trade unions in representing members in pay negotiations." (E2)

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"Labour market parties should take more responsibility in implementing the principle of equal pay. All pay setting should be based on objective job evaluation systems (and not, for example, on job titles). The position of labour market parties can only be defended if they commit to taking responsibility for fundamental principles, including non-discrimination and the promotion of equal pay." (E3)

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"The introduction of a definition of the value of work from the Pay Transparency Directive is a forward step that needs to be taken.

In the public sector, it will be crucial for parties to accept that pay is not market-determined, which is why an analysis of the value of work can be useful in setting pay." (E4)

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"The *frontfag* model must be applied in a way that ensures that large groups do not lag behind in pay development. The Equal Pay Commission proposed an equal pay pot back in 2009. This has never been politicised, but we still think it is a good idea." (TU4)

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"There is a long tradition of minimum pay and pay issues being agreed between labour market parties. They have also managed to reach agreements on exceeding the general level of pay increase in female-dominated sectors. The freest possible interaction between labour market parties provides an opportunity to take account of local conditions for a functioning labour market, correct pay gaps and develop objective pay systems, which also promotes the principle of equal pay. " (OA2)

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"Policies can also influence structures that improve the conditions for women and men to pursue a career and improve their pay development. For example, by opening up traditionally public organisations to private actors or counteracting stereotypical education and career choices. This will contribute to a more even gender balance in the labour market over time and provide a more balanced pay position between traditionally female and male sectors and industries." (PrE2)

## Comments

These extracts from the responses raise a number of different aspects and suggestions, some pointing to the responsibilities that come with party autonomy, others dealing with the relationship between pay and market forces (and this may include the issue of the central pay formation models *frontfagsmodellen/märket*), as well as how pay is set and how structural conditions that determine pay differentials can be addressed. It can be noted that certain contradictions are discernible among the responses, especially when it comes to market forces. In the last response, a respondent representing employer organisations in the private sector points to the market as an opportunity to raise women's pay through competition. There are studies that indicate that the market argument has not been used by women in the public sector (Wagner & Teigen, 2022). However, attempts to open up to private actors have also not been shown to lead to a reduction in the gender pay gap, and have even led to a deterioration in the pay of care workers (de los Reyes, 2014; Egede Hansen et al., 2022).

Interestingly, the social partners are not at all alien to political initiatives that can "influence structures that increase the conditions for women and men to pursue a career and improve their pay development", as a respondent representing an employers' organization in the private sector puts it. This can be compared to the previously mentioned experiences from Finland, where it is noted that declarations by the social partners about wanting to promote gender equality rarely lead to change, and that tripartite cooperation has proven problematic (Nousiainen et al., 2023, Government of Finland, 2022).



## 8. Discussion

This report has examined different statistics of the gender pay gap and the theoretical approaches that can explain these differences. By discussing both statistical measures and theoretical reasoning and presenting survey responses from key stakeholders in the labour market, a comprehensive picture is developed of the challenges and conflicting goals present in establishing equal pay for work of equal value.

A common reflection is that the high degree of gender segregation in the labour market contributes to the pay gap between women and men. Women and men often work in different occupations and sectors, and female-dominated occupations generally have lower pay. This phenomenon, known as value discrimination, refers to occupations that are dominated by women being valued and paid less than occupations with similar skill requirements that are predominantly male.

Another important factor highlighted is the relationship between paid work and unpaid care and domestic work. The unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work affects women's opportunities for full-time work and career development, which in turn negatively affects their pay. Additionally, social norms influence negotiations on entry-level pay differently for women and men, contributing to the pay gap between the groups.

The Nordic countries have a strong tradition of party autonomy, with labour market parties negotiating pay and working conditions. This system has advantages and disadvantages when it comes to achieving equal pay for work of equal value. However, there are clear conflicts of interest between employers and unions, but also between unions in different sectors, for example. Current models contain a problem that, despite stated ambitions, seems to prevent specific measures that lead to change.

A fundamental conflict is over how much the state should intervene in pay formation. Social partners are concerned with party autonomy and want to minimise state interference, while the state seeks to ensure fairness and equal pay

for work of equal value through legislation. For example, the introduction of the EU Pay Transparency Directive can be seen as an attempt to increase the role of the state in monitoring and regulating pay.

Combining the different statistics of pay inequality with the theoretical approaches and survey responses of key stakeholders, a deeper understanding of the complex mechanisms underlying the gender pay gap can be reached. It is clear that both structural factors, such as gender segregation and value discrimination, and individual factors characterised by social norms, such as caring responsibilities and pay negotiation, play a role. Reducing the pay gap requires a combination of policy measures, changes in labour market structures and norms and efforts to promote gender equality in both paid and unpaid work.

Policy reforms, such as subsidized and high-quality childcare and elderly care, generous parental leave systems for both parents, and income being taxed individually (separate taxation) rather than per household (joint taxation), have historically led to change. There are also examples of cases where the ban on wage discrimination has yielded results, as have efforts by the social partners. But if there is any will today to close the gender pay gap, then efforts of a kind and scale that we have not yet seen are needed.

## 9. References

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# Appendix 1: Survey on equal pay for work of equal value

After a short presentation of the Nordic Council of Ministers' project, the following questions were put to the identified key persons (see [Appendix 2](#)), employer organisations (in the private as well as public sector), trade union confederations and authorities, as well as researchers and other experts involved in issues related to the gender pay gap:

1. What are the main problems, challenges and needs you see related to the issue of equal pay for work of equal value, including differences in pay between male- and female-dominated occupations and/or sectors?
2. Do you have any proposals for action and approaches in relation to the issue of equal pay for work of equal value (pay equity)?
3. What possible ways forward do you see in the interaction between legal and contractual regulation, i.e. legislation and cooperation between social partners, and what obstacles or conflicts of objectives exist?
4. Do you have any comments on the EU Pay Transparency Directive, Iceland's equal pay standard or other models that have been proposed or tried?

# Appendix 2. Recipients of the survey on equal pay for work of equal value

The survey was sent to identified key persons in the following organisations. Researchers and other individual experts are not listed here.

Organisation	Country	Comments
Confederation of Danish Employers (DA)	Denmark	Private employer organisation
Danish Regions	Denmark	Public employer organisation
The Danish Trade Union Confederation (FHO)	Denmark	Trade union confederation
The Danish Confederation of Professional Associations	Denmark	Trade union confederation
Statistics Denmark	Denmark	Public authority
Danish Institute for Human Rights	Denmark	Public authority
The Ministry of Employment	Denmark	Public authority
Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK)	Finland	Private employer organisation
Local Government and County Employers (KT)	Finland	Public employer organisation
Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (FFC)	Finland	Trade union confederation
Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK)	Finland	Trade union confederation

Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (Akava)	Finland	Trade union confederation
Ombudsman for Equality	Finland	Public authority
Centre for Gender Equality Information	Finland	Public authority
Statistics Finland	Finland	Public authority
Ministry of Social Affairs and Health	Finland	Public authority
Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise (SA)	Iceland	Private employer organisation
The Association of Finnish Municipalities	Iceland	Public employer organisation
The Confederation of University Graduates (BHM)	Iceland	Trade union confederation
Confederation of State and Municipal Employees (BSRB)	Iceland	Trade union confederation
Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ)	Iceland	Trade union confederation
Directorate of Equality	Iceland	Public authority
Pay Equity Agency	Iceland	Public authority
Ministry of Finance	Iceland	Public authority
Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise	Norway	Private employer organisation
Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS)	Norway	Public employer organisation
Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO)	Norway	Trade union confederation
The Confederation of Unions for Professionals (Unio)	Norway	Trade union confederation

Confederation of Vocational Unions (YS)	Norway	Trade union confederation
The Federation of Norwegian Professional Associations (Akademikerne)	Norway	Trade union confederation
The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir)	Norway	Public authority
The Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud (LDO)	Norway	Public authority
Statistics Norway	Norway	Public authority
Ministry of Culture and Equality	Norway	Public authority
Confederation of Swedish Enterprise	Sweden	Private employer organisation
Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR)	Sverige	Public employer organisation
Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO)	Sweden	Trade union confederation
The Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees (TCO)	Sweden	Trade union confederation
Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (Saco)	Sweden	Trade union confederation
Swedish Gender Equality Agency	Sweden	Public authority
The Equality Ombudsman (DO)	Sweden	Public authority
Statistics Sweden (SCB)	Sweden	Public authority
The Swedish National Mediation Office	Sweden	Public authority

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Jimmy Sand for NIKK, Nordic Information on Gender

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The Nordic Council of Ministers  
Nordens Hus  
Ved Stranden 18  
DK-1061 Copenhagen  
pub@norden.org

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