Journal of Gender, Culture and Society
ISSN: 2754-3293
DOI: 10.32996/jgcs
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/jgcs

Gender Equality and Diversity in the UK Labour Market: A Critical Review

Ben Bander Abudawood

Abertay University, UK

Corresponding Author: Ben Bander Abudawood**, E-mail:** b.abudawood2200@abertay.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This structured critical narrative review evaluates gender equality and diversity in the UK labour market through official statistics, peer-reviewed scholarship, legislation and policy evidence relevant to 2015–2026. It examines whether gains in employment, earnings and leadership have produced substantive equality, distinguishing employment participation from job quality, unadjusted pay gaps from unlawful unequal pay, and representation from decision-making authority. In April 2025, the median hourly gender pay gap among full-time employees was 6.9%; in October–December 2025, employment rates were 72.4% for women and 77.6% for men (ONS, 2025; Francis-Devine, Zaidi and Murray, 2026). Aggregate progress coexists with inequalities associated with unpaid care, occupational segregation, working time, career progression and intersecting disadvantages. The review develops a four-stage diagnostic framework covering employment access, allocation, progression and accountability, and recommends coordinated reforms to pay transparency, care provision, flexible working and organisational evaluation. Because the source selection was purposive and the original search record incomplete, the synthesis does not claim exhaustive coverage or new causal estimates.

KEYWORDS

Gender equality; UK labour market; gender pay gap; occupational segregation; intersectionality; flexible working

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 04 October 2026 **PUBLISHED:** 04 November 2026 **DOI:** 10.32996/jgcs.2026.6.3.3

1. Introduction

Gender equality in employment is often narrated as a story of steady convergence. Women have entered occupations and levels of education once overwhelmingly associated with men, statutory discrimination protections have expanded, and employers increasingly publish information about workforce composition. Yet the labour market remains stratified by occupation, seniority, working time and the allocation of care. A falling average pay gap therefore does not establish that opportunities have become equal. It may coexist with substantial penalties for mothers, disabled women or women in ethnic minority groups, and with enduring disparities in pension accumulation and lifetime earnings (ONS, 2025; Francis-Devine, Zaidi and Murray, 2026).

The problem is partly conceptual. Equality can mean equal treatment under formal rules, comparable outcomes across groups, or substantive freedom to enter and progress in rewarding work. Diversity refers to the composition and inclusion of people with differing characteristics, and does not necessarily entail equality of influence. An organisation can recruit more women while preserving a narrow leadership pipeline; equally, a small aggregate pay gap can coexist with strong segregation if women and men are concentrated in different pay bands. A useful evaluation must therefore connect distributional indicators to the institutions producing them (Acker, 2006; Crenshaw, 1989).

This review asks how far the UK has progressed towards gender equality in employment and what barriers remain. Its objectives are to assess participation, pay and leadership; examine structural and intersectional disadvantages; evaluate legal and organisational responses; and identify feasible policy priorities. Four linked questions guide the analysis: what has changed, why inequalities persist, how far current interventions work, and which reforms merit priority. The four-stage framework developed in Section 4.13 connects these questions to measurable employment transitions.

The analysis concentrates on evidence from 2015 to October 2026, while drawing on earlier foundational theory and legislation where indispensable. This distinction matters: a publication date within the review window is not a requirement for a conceptual framework developed earlier. Conversely, recent data must not be used to imply that every indicator has been measured through 2026. The 2025 pay-gap series and the October–December 2025 employment figures are explicitly dated and have different denominators (ONS, 2025; Francis-Devine, Zaidi and Murray, 2026).

Copyright: © 2026 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

Human-capital approaches link earnings to education, experience, tenure and hours, and correctly identify the effects of employment interruptions on accumulated experience. Their weakness is to risk treating these patterns as independent preferences rather than responses to unequal care obligations, employer demands and constrained childcare provision. The relevant question is not simply whether women have less continuous full-time experience, but why this experience is distributed unequally and how employers price it (Becker, 1985; Costa Dias, Joyce and Parodi, 2021).

The theory of gendered organisations draws attention to ostensibly neutral workplace rules that reward uninterrupted availability, long hours, geographical mobility and informal sponsorship. Such requirements may be easier to satisfy for workers whose unpaid care is performed by someone else. Acker (2006) describes inequality regimes as linked organisational practices through which class, gender and race are reproduced. This framework helps explain why increasing women's recruitment does not automatically change access to influential projects, promotion or pay-setting authority.

Intersectionality rejects the assumption that all women experience labour markets in the same way. Crenshaw (1989) demonstrated that single-axis approaches can obscure the position of women affected simultaneously by racial and gendered disadvantage. In the UK context, ethnicity, disability, age, migration status and socioeconomic background can alter both the likelihood of employment and the returns to employment. Aggregate female–male comparisons remain useful but should be supplemented by disaggregated evidence, while avoiding the false assumption that each subgroup is internally homogeneous.

The capabilities perspective offers a further distinction between formal entitlement and practical opportunity. A right to request flexible working has limited substantive value if requesting it triggers stigma, if the available arrangement carries a wage penalty, or if an employee cannot afford the associated childcare. The effectiveness of policy should therefore be assessed against actual access, take-up, progression and well-being, not only legal coverage or the number of published strategies (Sen, 1999).

3. Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative secondary-research design based on a structured, critical literature review. It synthesises pre-existing quantitative statistics and qualitative or mixed-method research rather than collecting interviews, surveys or administrative microdata. The unit of analysis is the published finding and its underlying measurement context. The approach is appropriate for examining cross-cutting mechanisms and policy debates but does not constitute a new systematic review with a registered protocol or a pooled meta-analysis.

Evidence was prioritised in three categories: official statistical series and parliamentary research (particularly the ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings and Labour Force Survey); peer-reviewed economic and organisational scholarship; and public policy or regulatory materials. Inclusion required a direct bearing on UK labour-market equality, credible methods or institutional provenance, and sufficient clarity about the indicator or argument. Foundational international studies were included only to illuminate mechanisms, not to supply UK-specific numerical estimates. Organisational pay-gap reports were treated as case evidence rather than nationally representative observations.

Search concepts were defined in advance for the supplementary verification exercise: (gender OR women) AND (pay gap OR employment OR occupational segregation OR leadership OR care OR discrimination) AND (UK OR Britain). For each source, the review assessed population, date, measurement, study design, geographic applicability and the distinction between descriptive association and causal identification. This thematic protocol is reported for transparency; it is not presented as evidence of a completed systematic database search.

Search provenance and reproducibility. The original narrative evidence gathering did not preserve database-by-database search strings, dates, hit counts, deduplication decisions or full-text exclusion logs. Consequently, its retrieval process cannot be retrospectively reproduced. Scopus, Web of Science and EconLit are potential resources for a future registered search, not databases claimed to have been searched for this manuscript. The later three-query public-web exercise is a separately documented targeted source check (Table 1), not a comprehensive search or a PRISMA review.

Eligibility and critical appraisal. Sources were included where they directly addressed UK employment inequality or provided a clearly identified comparative or theoretical contribution. Priority was given to official statistics, legislation, parliamentary analysis and peer-reviewed research with identifiable methods. Unsupported numerical claims, commentary without traceable evidence, duplicate publications and incompatible measures were not used as independent quantitative evidence. Official releases were assessed for reference period, denominator and definition; observational studies were assessed for selection, confounding and external validity. No numerical quality scores or exhaustive screening totals are claimed.

Supplementary verification was restricted to three publicly searchable, topic-specific queries on 22 October 2026, reproduced in Table 1. The exercise was designed to check selected official statistics and locate comparative UK scholarship, rather than to enumerate all eligible publications. Its narrow scope creates a risk of selection and publication bias. A future systematic update should archive dated database exports, complete Boolean strategies, eligibility decisions and duplicate-removal records before synthesis.

Table 1. Supplementary targeted public-web search audit, 22 October 2026 (author search record; non-exhaustive).

Exact search query	Selected verifiable source	Decision and scope
UK gender pay gap 2025 ONS full time 6.9 2025	ONS (2025), Gender pay gap in the UK	Include: official UK pay statistics; descriptive, not causal
FTSE Women Leaders Review 2025 report women leadership 2024 2025	FTSE Women Leaders Review (2026)	Include: corporate leadership measures; FTSE coverage only
UK gender ethnicity labour market peer reviewed study Longhi Platt pay gaps	Longhi, Nicoletti and Platt (2013)	Include: peer-reviewed foundational comparator; outside principal date window

Thematic synthesis followed five pre-specified themes: labour-market participation and job quality; pay and occupational allocation; leadership and progression; intersectional disadvantage; and legal and organisational responses. For each theme, findings were compared across measurement types, competing explanations and policy implications. Contradictions were retained where possible rather than resolved by choosing a single headline indicator. Descriptive associations were not interpreted as causal effects unless the underlying study's design justified such interpretation.

Measurement and synthesis limits. ONS pay-gap figures refer to employee jobs and median hourly earnings, whereas employment rates refer to people; differences across populations and denominators prevent direct aggregation. The unadjusted gender pay gap does not measure unlawful unequal pay for equal work. Findings were synthesised thematically and weighed by design and context rather than pooled statistically. The absence of a complete original search log, heterogeneity in subgroup measurement and limited causal identification constrain the review's completeness and inferential strength.

Taken together, these limitations define the study as a structured critical narrative review rather than a systematic review. The four-stage framework offered below is an analytical synthesis, not a validated causal model.

4. Findings and Critical Analysis: Progress, Persistent Inequalities and Policy Effectiveness

4.1 Employment participation and the quality of inclusion

The House of Commons Library reports 16.7 million women in employment in October–December 2025, a female employment rate of 72.4% against 77.6% for men, and 37% of employed women working part-time compared with 14% of employed men (Francis-Devine, Zaidi and Murray, 2026). These measures establish continuing participation and hours differences, but cannot by themselves establish whether part-time work is freely chosen or constrained.

Higher participation is a necessary component of economic inclusion, yet its welfare implications depend on pay, security, predictable hours and career prospects. Employment growth concentrated in poorly rewarded roles can narrow a participation gap without meaningfully reducing lifetime earnings inequality. Policy appraisal should consequently track transitions from inactivity to sustainable work and from low-paid work to advancement, not merely the stock of women employed.

Women's concentration in health and social work and education is especially important. Parliamentary analysis reports that health and social work account for 22% of jobs held by women and education for 12%, while women occupy 77% and 71% of jobs in those sectors respectively (Francis-Devine, Zaidi and Murray, 2026). Such concentration reflects both valuable occupational access and the historical undervaluation of care-intensive work.

The category "women" includes people whose ability to enter employment differs profoundly according to disability, caring responsibilities, local transport, migration restrictions and household income. A national employment rate is therefore best understood as a macroeconomic summary rather than a distributionally complete equality score. Even within a region, neighbourhood labour demand and childcare accessibility can produce divergent experiences.

4.2 Critical interpretation: Employment participation and the quality of inclusion

The employment-rate difference describes access to paid work but not the distribution of job security or working hours. The substantial gender difference in part-time employment indicates that employment counts alone understate differences in labour-market attachment (Francis-Devine, Zaidi and Murray, 2026). This is consistent with care constraints, although these cross-sectional figures cannot establish individual motivations. For the first research question, progress should therefore be evaluated jointly through participation, hours and job quality.

4.3 Pay inequality and its interpretation

The ONS estimates that the median hourly pay gap for full-time employee jobs was 6.9% in April 2025, down from 7.1% in 2024; it reports median full-time hourly earnings of £20.27 for men and £18.87 for women (ONS, 2025). This is an important descriptive finding but not a like-for-like estimate for identical jobs, experience or employers.

The ONS also finds that the pay gap is larger at older ages and among higher-paid employees, and that men in full-time work earned more than women in every major occupational group in 2025 (ONS, 2025). These patterns are consistent with accumulated career divergence and unequal access to top earnings, although the published aggregates alone cannot isolate discrimination from other mechanisms.

A smaller aggregate gap can arise through genuine within-job improvements, changes in workforce composition or changes in who remains employed. For example, shifts in employment between industries or exits by lower-paid workers may alter the median

without improving individual trajectories. A robust monitoring system therefore combines aggregate gaps with pay quartiles, grade-level comparisons, promotion rates and longitudinal earnings.

The distinction between equal pay and pay-gap inequality matters legally and analytically. Equal-pay law concerns contractual equality in equal work under relevant conditions; a gender pay gap summarises differences across a wider workforce. Neither measure substitutes for the other. Employers can comply with equal-pay requirements while still reproducing gendered occupational sorting, and a reported gap cannot itself prove a specific unlawful act.

4.4 Critical interpretation: Pay inequality and its interpretation

The 6.9% full-time median hourly gap is a useful benchmark, not an estimate of unequal pay for equivalent work. Occupational composition, tenure and selection into full-time employment may all affect the unadjusted statistic (ONS, 2025). Its reduction should be tested against within-grade pay distributions, annual earnings and longitudinal progression rather than interpreted as proof that discrimination has disappeared.

Table 2. UK median hourly gender pay gap by working pattern, April 2025 (ONS, 2025).

Indicator	2025 (%)	Interpretive caution
All employee jobs	12.8	Affected by different full-time/part-time distributions
Full-time employee jobs	6.9	Excludes lifetime hours and non-employment
Part-time employee jobs	−2.9	Within-group comparison, not overall parity

4.5 Care, parenthood and the life course

The motherhood penalty is not a single event but a cumulative process. Reduced paid hours can lower contemporaneous earnings, while interrupted tenure affects experience, training, promotion and future bargaining power. The result can persist even after hours increase. Costa Dias, Joyce and Parodi (2021) place these dynamic processes at the centre of the explanation of gender wage differences.

A UK government analysis of longitudinal household evidence for 2009–2023 reports that differences in accumulated full-time experience account for up to 20% of the gender pay gap within its modelling framework (UK Government, 2026b). This estimate is model-specific, not a universal share of inequality; it reinforces the importance of career histories without establishing that the remaining gap is entirely discrimination.

Cross-country event-study research finds pronounced earnings penalties after first childbirth, while their magnitude differs by institutional setting (Kleven et al., 2019). Such evidence helps identify plausible mechanisms, including childcare and norms, but direct numerical transfer to the UK would be inappropriate because labour-market institutions and policy entitlements differ.

Care policy should be evaluated as labour-market infrastructure rather than merely family support. Affordable and reliable childcare, predictable school-day coverage and leave arrangements that fathers can realistically use can reduce the necessity for mothers to downgrade employment. The distribution of unpaid care within households remains an essential variable, since employment policy cannot succeed if it assumes unlimited private caregiving capacity.

4.6 Critical interpretation: Care, parenthood and the life course

The UK evidence on children and accumulated experience links earnings divergence to changes in employment and hours following parenthood (Costa Dias, Joyce and Parodi, 2021). Yet the relative roles of childcare prices, employer scheduling and household bargaining differ by occupation and income. The implication is that policy assessment should track retention, hours, promotions and earnings before and after parental leave, not only initial return-to-work rates.

4.7 Occupational segregation and valuation

Horizontal segregation refers to the concentration of women and men in different occupations and sectors. It may emerge through education, recruitment networks, norms, job design and employer expectations. It is not sufficient to label every occupational difference discriminatory; the analytical task is to examine how preferences form under unequal constraints and whether opportunities, rewards and advancement are equivalent.

Vertical segregation concerns the unequal distribution of authority and pay grades within an occupation or organisation. Women may be strongly represented in a profession yet less visible in its most influential and remunerative positions. Distinguishing these two forms of segregation prevents an increase in female workforce share from being mistaken for parity in leadership.

Care-intensive sectors illustrate the relationship between social value and market reward. Jobs requiring emotional labour, coordination and responsibility may be classified as lower-skilled or remunerated less generously than roles with differently gendered skill profiles. Research must distinguish between objective skill requirements and historically contingent systems of pay classification rather than assuming observed wages reveal intrinsic productivity.

Occupational desegregation calls for sustained interventions in education-to-work transitions, apprenticeships, returnships, job advertisements, selection and retention. However, steering women into traditionally male occupations is not a complete strategy if feminised occupations remain systematically undervalued. Equal-opportunity reform and pay-setting reform should be pursued together.

4.8 Critical interpretation: Occupational segregation and valuation

Women's concentration in education and health and social work demonstrates unequal allocation across sectors, but sectoral shares cannot reveal whether entry barriers, preferences or differences in job valuation dominate (Francis-Devine, Zaidi and Murray, 2026). Policies should combine access to higher-paid occupations with scrutiny of remuneration and advancement in female-dominated work; simply redistributing workers would not necessarily remedy undervaluation.

4.9 Leadership, recruitment and progression

Representation in leadership depends on a sequence of decisions: hiring, access to developmental assignments, performance assessment, sponsorship, promotion and retention. Small disadvantages at each stage can accumulate into substantial disparities at senior grades. Leadership targets that focus solely on the final appointment may leave the earlier allocation of opportunities untouched.

A useful assessment of senior representation compares promotion-eligible cohorts rather than the entire workforce. It asks whether employees with similar tenure and relevant experience receive comparable access to stretch assignments, line management and sponsorship. It also considers who exits before reaching the promotion stage, because attrition can disguise inequality in promotion statistics.

Informal criteria such as "executive presence", cultural fit or constant availability can allow gendered and racialised expectations to shape apparently neutral decisions. Structured interviews, documented criteria, calibrated appraisal and independent review may reduce discretion, but their value depends on actual implementation and audit rather than policy statements alone (Acker, 2006).

Diversity at the top is not equivalent to influence if women leaders remain concentrated in less powerful portfolios, are excluded from informal networks or face unequal scrutiny. Measures of leadership quality should therefore include decision rights, budget responsibility, remuneration, tenure and organisational climate alongside headcount.

4.10 Critical interpretation: Leadership, recruitment and progression

Board representation and executive authority are distinct outcomes. The 2024 FTSE 350 figures—43.4% of board roles and 35.3% of leadership positions held by women—suggest the importance of role-specific monitoring (Department for Business and Trade, 2025). These categories are not directly equivalent, however, and cannot by themselves demonstrate discriminatory promotion. Stronger evaluation would follow comparable cohorts through appointment, profit-and-loss responsibility and retention.

4.11 Intersectional inequalities

Intersectionality is not an optional demographic appendix. It changes the causal questions asked of the data: a policy that improves the average position of women may disproportionately benefit those already closest to senior employment while leaving disabled women or some ethnic minority women behind (Crenshaw, 1989). The correct benchmark is not only the aggregate male–female difference but variation within and across intersecting groups.

Intersectional analysis faces practical limits. Small sample sizes can produce unstable estimates, while privacy risks rise as categories become more granular. Employers should use proportionate disclosure, suppression rules and multi-year pooling where appropriate, explaining uncertainty rather than treating sparse data as proof that no problem exists.

Disability may affect recruitment through inaccessible selection processes, inadequate adjustments and inflexible schedules; ethnicity may interact with networks, occupational concentration and promotion judgements. These pathways should be investigated empirically rather than attributed automatically to a single cause. Distinct mechanisms require distinct remedies even when their effects overlap.

Socioeconomic background matters because unpaid internships, geographic mobility and expensive professional qualifications can shape entry to prestigious occupations. Policies limited to protected-characteristic representation may overlook these barriers. At the same time, class must not replace race, gender or disability as explanatory categories; their intersections should be examined directly.

4.12 Critical interpretation: Intersectional inequalities

Gender averages obscure differences in labour-market access among ethnic, disabled and socioeconomically disadvantaged women. Intersectionality is therefore a specification problem as well as a conceptual argument (Crenshaw, 1989; Acker, 2006). Small subgroup samples and inconsistent classifications constrain national comparison; disaggregated findings should report denominators, uncertainty and disclosure safeguards rather than assume a uniform gender effect.

4.13 Discrimination, harassment and workplace culture

The Equality Act 2010 supplies the central legal framework against discrimination in employment, including provisions relating to sex and other protected characteristics. The existence of legal remedies is indispensable, but individual enforcement cannot by itself eliminate practices embedded in recruitment pipelines, job design or management cultures (Equality Act 2010).

Reported incidents are an imperfect indicator of prevalence because workers may fear retaliation, doubt procedures or lack confidence in outcomes. A low complaint count can therefore indicate either fewer problems or weak reporting channels. Organisational assessment should triangulate complaints with anonymous climate surveys, turnover, promotion patterns and qualitative evidence.

Harassment and discriminatory treatment have career effects beyond the immediate incident. They may induce workers to avoid assignments, change teams or leave sectors, creating selection effects in later pay and leadership statistics. Consequently, safety, dignity and fair process are substantive labour-market outcomes rather than separate matters of organisational reputation.

Effective governance requires accessible reporting, independent investigation, protection from victimisation and monitoring of repeat patterns. Training can clarify standards but should not be assumed effective merely because completion rates are high. Evaluation should test whether behaviour and outcomes change, with safeguards for confidentiality and procedural fairness.

4.14 Critical interpretation: Discrimination, harassment and workplace culture

Formal policies cannot establish whether workers experience fair recruitment, safe reporting or protection from retaliation. Acker's (2006) account of inequality regimes points to how ordinary organisational practices reproduce hierarchy. Claims about prevalence require representative surveys or administrative complaints data, while policy effectiveness requires evidence on reporting confidence, investigation quality and subsequent career outcomes.

4.15 Equality legislation and gender pay-gap reporting

The Equality Act 2010 and the 2017 gender pay-gap reporting regulations represent distinct policy mechanisms: one creates legal obligations and remedies, while the other makes specified pay-distribution indicators visible for larger employers. Reporting generally covers employers with at least 250 employees and includes mean and median gaps, bonus measures and pay quartiles (UK Government, 2026a).

Transparency can reduce information asymmetry, motivate board scrutiny and make comparison possible. It also provides a baseline for organisational learning. However, publication is an intermediate output, not an equality outcome: employers may publish compliant statistics without materially altering the systems that generate the gap.

The reporting threshold excludes many smaller employers, and aggregate employer-level statistics cannot identify every pay-setting mechanism. Changes in workforce composition can shift reported gaps independently of fairer promotion or pay. Moreover, a disclosure duty is not the same as a mandatory, independently evaluated corrective action plan.

A credible evaluation of the reporting regime would compare affected and unaffected organisations over time while considering threshold selection, sector trends and concurrent reforms. National pay-gap reductions after 2017 alone cannot be attributed to the legislation. This paper accordingly judges transparency as institutionally valuable but treats claims of precise causal effectiveness as unproven by the descriptive evidence reviewed.

4.16 Critical interpretation: Equality legislation and gender pay-gap reporting

The Equality Act 2010 provides enforceable rights, whereas gender pay-gap reporting chiefly increases visibility. Neither mechanism alone identifies which pay-setting or promotion practice causes a disparity. An evaluation should distinguish compliance from impact, examine employer responses and use credible comparison designs before attributing national trends to reporting requirements.

4.17 Flexible working and organisational diversity policy

Flexible working can preserve labour-market attachment, support disabled employees and carers, and broaden access to geographically dispersed opportunities. Its effect on equality depends on who can use it, whether take-up is penalised and whether high-quality jobs remain available on flexible terms. A right that exists on paper may fail when line managers exercise opaque discretion.

Flexibility can unintentionally reinforce inequality if women disproportionately reduce hours while men retain access to high-visibility work. Remote work may likewise change exposure to mentoring and informal networks. Policy should distinguish schedule control, location flexibility, reduced hours and predictability because each has different implications for earnings and progression.

Organisational diversity policies work best when responsibility is allocated to decision-makers with authority over budgets and promotions. Recruitment outreach, transparent salary bands, structured selection, sponsorship and progression audits address different stages of inequality. A portfolio is preferable to a single symbolic initiative, provided the interventions are evaluated rather than merely advertised.

Outcome metrics should include offer rates, starting pay, retention, access to training, promotion velocity, use of flexibility and employee experience, disaggregated where privacy permits. Firms should report both progress and adverse effects, with clear baselines and denominators. Diversity metrics detached from job quality or worker voice risk becoming reputational exercises.

4.18 Critical interpretation: Flexible working and organisational diversity policy

Flexible working can sustain employment but may also produce a progression penalty if high-visibility assignments remain tied to long or inflexible hours. The relevant test is not merely uptake but whether comparable flexible and non-flexible workers obtain training, promotions and pay growth. This distinction is especially important where frontline jobs have limited scheduling autonomy.

4.19 Regional and institutional variation

National indicators conceal variation in local industry structure, transport and care availability. The ONS reports that the full-time pay gap in 2025 was higher in every English region than in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland (ONS, 2025). This descriptive difference does not establish which devolved or local policy caused it.

Regional comparisons are sensitive to differences in occupational composition, public-sector employment, earnings distributions and commuting patterns. They should be supplemented by within-region and within-occupation analysis. A low regional gap may reflect relatively low earnings among men rather than especially favourable outcomes for women.

The UK contains overlapping but non-identical institutional arrangements for skills, childcare and public services. A policy package therefore requires national legal consistency alongside local delivery capacity. Comparative policy learning is valuable, but evaluation must account for differences in population and labour-market conditions.

Economic shocks can widen or narrow gaps through sector-specific employment losses and recoveries. Trend analysis should avoid presenting a single year-to-year change as a structural turning point. Longer series and consistent measurement are necessary to distinguish cyclical effects from durable progress.

4.20 Critical interpretation: Regional and institutional variation

National estimates aggregate labour markets with different sector mixes, childcare availability, transport systems and employer practices. Regional differences may therefore reflect composition as well as place-specific barriers. Meaningful comparison should adjust for occupation and demographics and then test whether institutional conditions explain remaining differences; otherwise geographic rankings risk misidentifying causes.

4.21 Why aggregate progress can coexist with persistent inequality

An important analytical problem is that improvements in population averages do not necessarily imply a more equitable distribution of opportunities. The full-time median hourly gender pay gap was 6.9% in April 2025, compared with 7.1% a year earlier (ONS, 2025). This is a meaningful descriptive change but does not identify its causes. It may reflect changes in relative pay within occupations, altered workforce composition, changes in the occupational mix, shifts in working time, or some combination of these processes. A claim that a specific law or organisational intervention caused the decline would require a credible identification strategy, which the descriptive series alone cannot supply.

The distinction between conditional and unconditional inequalities is equally important. An unconditional earnings difference describes the observed distribution of rewards. A conditional difference compares workers who appear similar on selected characteristics such as education, experience, occupation and hours. Neither estimate is automatically a complete measure of discrimination. The unconditional difference incorporates structural allocation into different jobs; conditioning on occupation may remove precisely the occupational sorting that an equality analysis seeks to understand. Conversely, an unexplained conditional residual may capture omitted productivity-related characteristics, measurement error, or discriminatory practices. The appropriate choice depends on the question. For distributive fairness, the overall gap matters; for investigating an individual pay-setting mechanism, carefully selected comparisons are more informative.

The review therefore treats three distinct outcomes as complementary rather than interchangeable: access to paid work, equality in the quality and reward of that work, and equality in the capacity to sustain a career over time. Rising female employment can coincide with increased exposure to insecure hours or lower-quality jobs. A narrowing hourly gap can coincide with a substantial annual earnings gap if women work fewer paid hours. A rise in female representation on boards can occur without equivalent gains for women in the broader managerial pipeline. Policy should not be evaluated through a single headline series when its intended beneficiaries experience the labour market through several interconnected dimensions.

This argument also has implications for the selection of a comparison period. The years 2015–2026 encompass major shocks and institutional changes, including the pandemic and subsequent changes in the organisation of work. An apparent difference between two endpoints should not be interpreted as a smooth trajectory. A more defensible evaluation examines intermediate years, discontinuities in data collection, changes in sectoral employment and the sensitivity of conclusions to alternative baselines. The ONS explicitly warns of discontinuities in its earnings series and identifies the 2025 estimates as provisional (ONS, 2025). These qualifications do not invalidate trend analysis; they define the limits within which it is credible.

4.22 A framework for evaluating organisational interventions

A robust evaluation of workplace diversity programmes begins with a precise account of the mechanism through which change is expected. Unconscious-bias training, for instance, may aim to increase awareness, but awareness does not automatically alter selection outcomes. Structured interviews seek to reduce unregulated discretion; transparent salary bands seek to narrow

information asymmetries; sponsorship schemes aim to increase access to influential networks. Each intervention should be judged against its own proposed mechanism, rather than against a vague claim that it demonstrates commitment to inclusion.

The most informative evaluation combines implementation measures with outcomes. Implementation measures include whether hiring panels used standardised criteria, whether pay bands were actually disclosed and whether managers received guidance on flexible-work decisions. Outcome measures include differences in application-to-offer conversion, starting pay, promotion rates, retention, training allocation and employee experience. If an intervention was not implemented consistently, a null result does not necessarily show the underlying idea was ineffective. Conversely, high participation in a training programme does not demonstrate improved equality unless behaviour or outcomes change.

Where feasible, organisations should exploit phased rollouts, comparison departments or other credible quasi-experimental designs. Before-and-after comparisons alone are vulnerable to changes in economic conditions, recruitment cycles and workforce composition. A programme introduced during a period of unusually strong hiring might appear successful even if the same improvement occurred in untreated departments. Randomisation is not always practical or appropriate, but transparent comparison strategies can substantially improve causal interpretation. Qualitative interviews and process evaluation remain valuable for identifying mechanisms, particularly when sample sizes limit statistical inference.

Evaluation should also test distributional consequences. A flexible-work programme that benefits professional employees but excludes frontline staff may improve average satisfaction while widening internal inequality. A leadership initiative may benefit employees who already possess strong networks. A pay reform may compress wages in one grade without improving access to higher-paid occupations. Monitoring should therefore consider occupation, contract type, pay level and intersectional characteristics where disclosure safeguards allow. Programmes that succeed for one group should not automatically be scaled without investigating who is left outside their reach.

Table 3. Policy evaluation framework (author synthesis).

Policy lever	Proposed outcome	Evaluation requirement
Pay-gap action plans	Within-grade pay and promotion parity	Annual outcomes and employer-level trends
Flexible working	Retention without progression penalties	Compare eligible and non-eligible roles
Childcare and care leave	Reduced career interruptions	Longitudinal earnings and hours
Promotion audits	Fair access to senior roles	Stage-specific selection rates

4.23 The four-stage framework: mechanisms and diagnostic value

This review contributes a four-stage diagnostic framework that links access to employment, occupational and working-time allocation, career progression, and institutional accountability for unequal outcomes. Its contribution is integrative and diagnostic: unlike an individual-level human-capital explanation, it locates potential inequality at successive organisational decisions; unlike a general account of gendered organisations, it specifies measurable transitions; and unlike intersectionality alone, it identifies where disaggregated outcomes can be examined across the employment pathway (Acker, 2006; Crenshaw, 1989). The framework is not presented as a new causal theory or as empirically validated. It is a structured way to identify which institutional decisions require investigation.

Table 4 maps each stage to a hypothesised mechanism, observable outcome and responsible institution. The stage boundaries are analytical rather than mutually exclusive: care responsibilities, discrimination and organisational norms can affect several stages simultaneously. The proposed indicators permit testing of where disparities emerge, but cannot alone establish discrimination or policy impact.

Table 4. Four-stage diagnostic framework: mechanisms, outcomes and responsible institutions (author synthesis).

Stage	Mechanism to investigate	Measurable outcome	Institutional responsibility
1. Employment access	Recruitment criteria, selection, availability constraints	Application-to-offer and entry rates by group	Employers; enforcement bodies
2. Allocation	Occupational sorting, scheduling and hours	Grade, occupation, contracted hours and pay distribution	Employers; sector bodies
3. Progression	Assignment, appraisal, promotion and sponsorship	Promotion hazards, retention and executive authority	Line managers; boards
4. Accountability	Disclosure, remedy and follow-through	Action-plan delivery and adjusted/unadjusted outcomes	Boards; regulators; government

5. Integrated discussion

The evidence supports a qualified account of progress. Women's participation is substantial and the full-time median pay gap has narrowed, but unequal hours and occupational concentration remain pronounced (ONS, 2025; Francis-Devine, Zaidi and Murray, 2026). These observations are not contradictory. They suggest that access to employment has advanced faster than the redistribution of unpaid care, the redesign of career ladders and the equalisation of rewards.

The review also identifies a mismatch between the scale of the problem and the design of many interventions. Discrimination law primarily establishes rights and routes to remedy; pay-gap reporting establishes visibility; organisational diversity programmes may change recruitment or culture. None necessarily guarantees affordable childcare, equitable parental leave use or equal access to senior roles. A coherent equality strategy must link household-level constraints, labour-market institutions and employer decisions.

A second tension concerns the meaning of choice. It would be reductive to describe every part-time arrangement as imposed, but equally reductive to treat observed hours as a pure expression of preference. Preferences are shaped by school schedules, care costs, transport, partner earnings, managerial expectations and the perceived risk of requesting accommodation. The policy objective is not identical working patterns for all workers; it is the removal of avoidable penalties and the expansion of meaningful options.

A third tension concerns measurement. The full-time median hourly gap excludes important dimensions of economic inequality, including annual hours, interruptions, self-employment, pensions and wealth. It also does not directly measure intersectional disadvantage. A balanced scorecard should preserve the comparability of headline indicators while adding metrics of cumulative earnings, progression and workplace experience. This would make it harder for an apparent improvement in one indicator to obscure deterioration elsewhere.

Finally, the review suggests that transparency is most useful when linked to action. Publishing a pay gap can open a conversation but does not specify which practices require change. Employers need diagnostic analyses of grades, starting salaries, bonus allocation and promotion. Public authorities need mechanisms for sharing effective practices and assessing whether reporting requirements produce sustained improvements. In both cases, credible evidence demands explicit counterfactual reasoning rather than attributing every favourable trend to a preferred policy.

5.1 Competing explanations and the strength of inference

An important analytical distinction is between the description of inequality and the identification of its causes. The existence of a gender pay gap is not, by itself, evidence that employees performing equal work receive unequal pay. The Office for National Statistics explicitly distinguishes its aggregate hourly measure from equal-pay comparisons and reports that the full-time median gap was 6.9 per cent in April 2025 (ONS, 2025). Differences in occupation, age, hours, seniority and employment histories can contribute to this statistic. Yet describing these factors as explanations does not settle whether the processes producing them are fair. Occupational choice, for example, is shaped by educational pathways, care responsibilities, hiring practices and the anticipated compatibility of jobs with family life.

Human-capital approaches emphasise accumulated experience, training and labour supply, whereas organisational and institutional approaches draw attention to how experience is rewarded, how jobs are designed and how selection decisions are made. These explanations need not be mutually exclusive. A career interruption may reduce observed experience, but its earnings consequences depend on the employer's promotion architecture and the extent to which time away is treated as a signal of reduced commitment. Likewise, lower average hours may reflect preference in some cases and binding childcare or transport constraints in others. A critical review should resist interpreting either explanation as universal.

There are also limits to inference from cross-sectional administrative statistics. Changes in the composition of employment can alter a pay-gap estimate even if individual wages are unchanged. Differences between public and private sectors can reflect occupational structures as well as policy. Organisation-level case studies provide institutional detail but rarely establish national representativeness. Qualitative studies illuminate mechanisms and lived experience but cannot alone quantify population-wide prevalence. The evidential advantage of secondary synthesis lies in combining these sources while preserving their different inferential boundaries.

Finally, intersectional analysis challenges any assumption that a single gender coefficient describes a uniform experience. Ethnicity, disability, migration history, age and class can interact with job quality, recruitment and workplace accommodation. Data availability, however, is uneven, and small samples can make subgroup estimates unstable. The appropriate response is not to abandon intersectionality but to be transparent about the limits of available disaggregation, distinguish well-supported patterns from plausible hypotheses, and prioritise better linked longitudinal evidence.

5.2 Integrating the four research questions into a causal account

The four research questions are analytically connected. The first documents a pattern of progress that is genuine but uneven: women's participation and some indicators of remuneration have improved, yet the distribution of hours, seniority and job quality remains unequal. The second asks why such inequalities persist. The evidence reviewed suggests a set of mutually reinforcing processes: gendered care expectations shape available working time; organisations reward uninterrupted availability; occupational

sorting channels workers into differently remunerated sectors; and discretionary assessments influence who is selected for promotion. These mechanisms cannot be reduced to a single cause, nor does their existence imply that every observed difference is discriminatory.

The third question concerns institutional effectiveness. The Equality Act 2010 establishes an essential legal framework, while gender pay reporting increases visibility of organisational outcomes. However, the distinction between legal entitlement and substantive access is crucial. An employee may formally possess the right to request flexible work but still anticipate a career penalty for using it. An employer may disclose a gender pay gap without identifying the grade transitions, allocation decisions or pay practices generating that gap. Consequently, policy assessment must examine the causal pathway between an obligation, organisational behaviour and measured employment outcomes.

The fourth question asks what should follow from this diagnosis. The strongest policy logic is complementary rather than substitutive: transparent pay processes, equitable progression systems, accessible childcare, better-designed flexibility and effective enforcement address different stages of cumulative disadvantage. No single intervention can be expected to eliminate a pay gap produced by multiple mechanisms. A useful evaluative principle is therefore to ask whether a proposed reform changes the conditions under which workers enter, remain and advance in employment, and whether those changes are sustained across different demographic groups.

This integrated interpretation also helps explain why national averages can be misleading. A falling aggregate gap may coexist with worsening outcomes for particular subgroups or with the withdrawal of disadvantaged workers from employment. Similarly, a rising proportion of women in management may conceal concentration in less powerful roles. Researchers should therefore treat employment rates, pay distributions, occupational composition and progression indicators as related but non-interchangeable measures. This triangulation is a more defensible basis for judging substantive equality than the selection of a single favourable headline indicator.

5.3 Statistical triangulation: participation, hours and occupational concentration

The participation, working-time and occupational indicators in Table 5 measure different populations and should not be interpreted as a single causal effect. The 5.2-percentage-point employment-rate difference and the 23-percentage-point difference in part-time employment highlight why progress in access to work must be assessed alongside hours and job quality (Francis-Devine, Zaidi and Murray, 2026).

Table 5. Quantitative monitoring indicators and interpretation (author synthesis).

Indicator	Women	Men	Difference / interpretation
Employment rate, Oct–Dec 2025	72.4%	77.6%	5.2 percentage points lower for women
Part-time share of employed people, Oct–Dec 2025	37%	14%	23 percentage points higher for women
Health and social work jobs, Sep 2025	77% of sector jobs	23% of sector jobs	Women concentrated in care-related employment
Education jobs, Sep 2025	71% of sector jobs	29% of sector jobs	Female-majority employment sector

Source: Francis-Devine, Zaidi and Murray (2026), House of Commons Library, Women and the UK economy. Sectoral percentages represent the share of jobs held by women, not employment rates.

These contrasts expose the limits of an unqualified narrative of progress. Greater employment participation may coincide with unequal working-time arrangements and occupational concentration. It is not possible to infer from the cross-sectional differences alone that discrimination caused the gap: household composition, caregiving, preferences under constraints, local job availability and employer practices are intertwined. Nonetheless, the unequal distribution of part-time work raises an empirical question that a credible evaluation must pursue: whether flexibility permits sustainable advancement or instead allocates women to lower-paid career tracks. Future studies should track within-person transitions between working-time regimes, occupations and pay grades, controlling for age, qualifications, region and caring responsibilities.

5.4 Leadership representation versus executive authority

The FTSE 350 comparison in Table 6 distinguishes board representation (43.4% women) from defined leadership positions (35.3% women) in 2024 data published in 2025. The 8.1-percentage-point difference is an author calculation from two distinct categories, not a promotion probability, and the findings cannot be generalised to the whole UK economy (Department for Business and Trade, 2025).

Table 6. FTSE 350 board and leadership representation: definitional comparison (Department for Business and Trade, 2025).

FTSE 350 measure	Women's share	Reference period	Analytical significance
Board roles	43.4%	2024 data, published 2025	Near gender balance in aggregate board appointments
Leadership roles	35.3%	2024 data, published 2025	Smaller representation in executive committee and direct-report pipeline
Representation gap	8.1 percentage points	Calculated from above	Board gains do not imply equivalent executive authority

Source: Department for Business and Trade (2025), UK businesses lead the way with record numbers of female leaders.

A robust organisational assessment therefore needs role-sensitive indicators: executive versus non-executive seats, profit-and-loss responsibility, recruitment shortlists, succession pools, promotion rates, retention after parental leave and the distribution of performance-related rewards. Aggregated board targets can improve scrutiny, but they may also invite a narrow focus on easily observable appointments. More compelling evidence of institutional change would be sustained reductions in differential progression rates across successive cohorts, accompanied by transparent job-evaluation and pay-setting practices.

Table 7. Comparative evidence, populations and inferential limits (author synthesis).

Evidence	Observed comparison	Interpretive boundary
ONS (2025)	6.9% full-time vs 12.8% all-employee median hourly pay gap	Different employment populations; not direct proof of unequal pay for equal work
FTSE Women Leaders Review (2026)	43% FTSE 350 board positions vs 36% leadership positions; 8% CEOs	Publicly listed large-company population, not whole UK workforce
Longhi et al. (2013)	Ethno-religious wage gaps differ across groups and generations	Older observational analysis; not a 2025 estimate

6. Evidence-based policy recommendations

First, strengthen pay transparency by pairing existing disclosures with proportionate action plans that identify the drivers of disparities, named owners, milestones and evaluation metrics. Guidance should separate unadjusted gaps from within-grade differences and explain the consequences of changing workforce composition. Smaller employers may need simplified tools and support rather than an unmodified extension of large-employer requirements.

Second, invest in reliable and affordable childcare and design parental leave so that fathers and second parents can use it without disproportionate financial loss. The intended outcome is not only immediate maternal employment but continuity of experience, reduced involuntary hours constraints and more equal sharing of care. Evaluation should measure take-up by gender and earnings level, return-to-work retention and longer-term progression.

Third, make flexible working compatible with advancement. Employers should specify which aspects of roles require fixed hours or presence, offer predictable schedules where feasible and audit whether flexible workers receive equivalent training, high-value assignments and promotions. This guards against a two-tier workforce in which flexibility becomes a pathway to stalled careers.

Fourth, require evidence-based promotion and recruitment systems. Structured assessment criteria, documented decisions, transparent pay ranges and regular review of allocation to developmental assignments can reduce arbitrary discretion. Organisations should evaluate outcomes by gender and, where data protection permits, by intersecting characteristics rather than assuming identical policies create identical opportunity.

Fifth, address occupational segregation through careers education, apprenticeships, return-to-work pathways and pay-valuation review. Policies should expand entry to high-paying occupations without devaluing sectors where women are already concentrated. Public procurement and sectoral workforce planning may provide opportunities to improve job quality, but any conditions should be proportionate and evaluated.

Sixth, develop an intersectional equality evidence infrastructure. Statistical agencies and employers should improve compatible measures of gender, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic background, while retaining privacy protections and uncertainty statements. Evidence should guide targeted interventions, not create crude rankings of groups or imply that all members of a category share the same circumstances.

Seventh, embed independent evaluation. New initiatives should identify a theory of change, implementation fidelity, relevant comparison groups and possible unintended consequences. Longitudinal measures are preferable where feasible because equality in career progression is a cumulative process. Publishing negative or inconclusive results would improve policy learning and reduce the tendency to promote initiatives on the strength of intention alone.

6.1 A sequenced policy agenda for 2027–2030

In the near term, priority should be given to reforms with a relatively direct link to observable employment decisions: clearer salary ranges, documented promotion criteria, routine scrutiny of starting salaries and meaningful access to flexible work. These measures can reduce discretionary variation, although they will not on their own transform the unequal distribution of unpaid care. In sectors characterised by low pay and fragmented employment, collective standards and enforcement capacity may matter more than the internal diversity practices of a single large employer.

Over the medium term, childcare affordability and availability, adequate parental leave and the redistribution of caring responsibilities should be considered part of labour-market policy rather than peripheral family benefits. The policy mechanism is straightforward: where care constraints force workers to reduce hours, reject promotion or leave employment, nominally equal recruitment rules cannot generate equal career trajectories. Yet the fiscal costs and distributional consequences of reforms require explicit appraisal. Subsidies may improve employment incentives while failing to expand places if childcare supply remains constrained; leave reforms may have limited effects if payment levels make uptake unaffordable for lower-income fathers and partners.

Longer-term priorities include improved occupational pathways into high-paying sectors and more credible valuation of care-intensive work. Apprenticeships, adult retraining and targeted returner programmes can support entry, but their success should be measured through sustained employment and earnings rather than enrolment alone. Likewise, raising the status of care work requires attention to public procurement, funding and bargaining arrangements, not merely messaging about the social importance of care. A coherent agenda therefore combines supply-side opportunity with demand-side changes to job quality and pay-setting institutions.

Reforms should also be assessed for unintended effects. Greater transparency may expose inequalities but could encourage employers to compress salaries without changing progression opportunities. Flexible work may improve retention while reproducing a two-track workforce if high-status assignments continue to favour office presence. Diversity targets may change the composition of senior posts without altering organisational culture or the distribution of decision-making authority. The central policy test is not whether an initiative can be described as inclusive but whether it changes access to valued work, earnings, security and advancement over time.

6.2 Implementation, accountability and monitoring

The policy package proposed here should be evaluated as a sequence of institutional changes rather than as a collection of isolated employer pledges. The first stage is diagnostic: employers should identify the grades, contract types, functions and transitions at which disparities emerge. A second stage should identify mechanisms plausibly producing those disparities, distinguishing pay-setting discretion from recruitment, access to high-value assignments, career breaks and promotion thresholds. Only then should organisations select interventions and publish an implementation timetable. This order matters because a generic diversity programme can be highly visible while failing to address the point at which disadvantage actually accumulates (Acker, 2006).

A credible monitoring framework would follow cohorts across recruitment, retention, training, promotion and exit. Outcomes should include median and mean hourly pay gaps, bonus gaps, representation by seniority, access to flexible arrangements, the proportion of employees receiving developmental assignments, and return-to-work progression following family-related leave. Where lawful and feasible, results should be disaggregated by gender and other protected characteristics, with appropriate safeguards for confidentiality and small cell sizes. This approach avoids treating a single headline pay statistic as a comprehensive measure of equality. It also makes it possible to detect whether improvement at entry level coexists with stagnation at senior levels.

Evaluation should compare outcomes before and after intervention while recognising that changes in the business cycle, occupational mix or recruitment can produce apparent improvements without any policy effect. Where organisations have multiple divisions, staggered introduction of an intervention may permit stronger comparisons, provided allocation is not determined by pre-existing trends. Process measures are also necessary: a flexible working policy cannot be judged solely by the number of applications if applicants fear reputational penalties or if managers discourage requests informally. Staff surveys and qualitative exit evidence can help identify such implementation gaps, although neither should be treated as proof of causation.

Responsibility for implementation should not rest entirely with human resources teams. Boards and executive committees determine resource allocation, performance incentives and the tolerance of opaque pay-setting practices. Line managers control many of the decisions that translate formal policy into opportunity. Accountability therefore requires named owners, budgeted actions, clear reporting intervals and escalation mechanisms where outcomes diverge from stated commitments. External transparency may encourage action, but disclosure alone does not guarantee that employers choose effective remedies. This is especially important for smaller employers outside the scope of mandatory gender pay reporting.

The Employment Rights Act 2025 introduces a further policy transition. Government implementation guidance indicates that equality action plans were introduced on a voluntary basis in April 2026, with mandatory requirements planned for 2027, subject to secondary legislation (Department for Business and Trade, 2026). It would be premature to claim that these plans have already reduced pay inequality. Their effectiveness should instead be evaluated prospectively: whether employers identify material drivers,

whether proposed actions have credible mechanisms, and whether subsequent workforce outcomes improve beyond wider sectoral trends.

6.3 A quantitative monitoring framework for policy implementation

Table 8. Policy priorities and implementation measures (author synthesis).

Policy priority	Suggested metric	Evaluation design	Principal risk
Pay transparency	Median hourly pay gap by grade; unexplained pay differences	Annual audit with matched grade/job family comparisons	Grade definitions conceal unequal job valuation
Flexible working	Approval rate and promotion rate by working pattern	Cohort tracking before and after policy adoption	Selection bias: workers choosing flexibility differ
Career progression	Promotion and exit hazards by demographic group	Longitudinal HR records and comparable role cohorts	Small intersectional cells
Parental support	Retention 12 and 24 months after leave	Difference-in-differences where rollout varies	Simultaneous childcare or labour-market changes
Leadership accountability	Women in executive, P&L and succession roles	Multi-year trend and external review	Tokenistic appointments

The table proposes indicators rather than presenting new observed statistics. Data collection should specify workforce coverage, missingness, contract type, hours, and the reference period. Employers should publish both descriptive gaps and their interpretive limitations. Where policy changes are introduced gradually, pre-specified comparisons and event-study designs may help assess whether improvements exceed existing trends, although nonrandom policy adoption remains a threat to causal inference.

6.4 Policy prioritisation under fiscal and organisational constraints

Fiscal and organisational constraints affect which interventions can be implemented and sustained. Employers can first prioritise low-cost diagnostic improvements in pay and progression data, while governments assess the funding and supply implications of childcare and parental-leave reform. More resource-intensive changes to job quality, occupational pathways and enforcement should be sequenced against measurable outcomes, without assuming that any single measure is sufficient.

Distributional consequences should be made explicit. A right to request flexible working may benefit professionals whose tasks are portable while leaving frontline care and retail workers with little practical control over schedules. Employer reporting requirements may improve visibility among large firms but miss workers in smaller enterprises. Subsidised childcare may increase labour supply yet produce uneven gains when childcare places are unavailable locally. Accordingly, evaluation should report heterogeneous effects by occupation, employer size, parental status and geography, not merely a national average. The central policy test is whether an intervention changes substantive opportunity and earnings trajectories for disadvantaged groups rather than only improving a headline diversity statistic.

7. Limitations and future research

7.1 Limits of secondary-data comparability and inference

A central limitation of the evidence base is that labour-market indicators do not share a single denominator, sampling frame or definition of work. The Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings measures employee jobs and excludes self-employment; the Labour Force Survey measures people and relies on survey responses; organisational pay-gap returns reflect reporting employers rather than the entire workforce. The resulting series should not be combined as if they measured a common population. In particular, the 2025 full-time median hourly gender pay gap of 6.9 per cent is not an estimate of the earnings lost through part-time work, interrupted employment or lower probabilities of entering high-paid occupations (ONS, 2025).

The empirical distinction between descriptive disparity and causal discrimination is equally consequential. A gender gap remaining after controlling for occupation, education or tenure cannot automatically be attributed to unlawful treatment; equally, controlling for occupation can conceal the effect of exclusionary recruitment, biased promotion and unequal care burdens that helped produce occupational sorting. The choice of covariates therefore embeds a theory of inequality. The present review privileges explanations that specify mechanisms, but cannot identify their causal magnitude without access to comparable longitudinal microdata and credible identification strategies.

Time-series comparisons are further complicated by changes in occupation classification, pandemic disruption and revisions to statistical estimates. The ONS explicitly flags discontinuities in the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings series, while the 2025 estimate remains provisional (ONS, 2025). The appropriate conclusion is that long-run convergence is supported by the direction of multiple indicators, not that every annual movement constitutes a substantive policy effect. Reporting confidence intervals, revisions and definitional changes would be necessary in a statistical replication.

7.2 Publication bias, representativeness and missing populations

Published academic research disproportionately captures formal employment and organisations with measurable administrative outcomes. Informal care, precarious employment, migrant workers with insecure status and people outside paid work are often

less visible. Studies of managerial advancement can also overrepresent large employers with established human-resources systems. Consequently, the evidence may underestimate disadvantage among workers least likely to appear in stable employment records, while overstating the transferability of successful interventions piloted in well-resourced organisations.

Intersectional evidence faces a particular problem of small cells. Analyses disaggregated simultaneously by gender, ethnicity, disability, age, region and occupation can produce unstable estimates or disclose sensitive information. Combining heterogeneous groups into broad categories solves a statistical problem but may erase differences in exposure to discrimination, credential recognition and occupational opportunities. Future studies should use larger pooled datasets, publish uncertainty measures and specify which intersectional contrasts were defined before inspecting the data.

This review is a structured secondary synthesis rather than a registered systematic review or meta-analysis. Its source base is purposive, its quality appraisal is narrative and it does not provide a reproducible record of every screened study. The absence of a complete screening log means that claims about the totality of the evidence must remain qualified. A future systematic review could strengthen reproducibility by prospectively recording database-specific search strings, search dates, eligibility decisions and study appraisal, and by reporting a PRISMA-style flow diagram where appropriate. These requirements are not claimed for the present structured narrative review.

7.3 A priority agenda for future empirical research

The strongest next generation of UK research would link employer-level pay disclosures to longitudinal information on recruitment, promotion, working hours, parental leave and departures. Such linkage could test whether narrowing reported gaps arises from improved within-grade pay, greater female representation at senior levels, workforce composition changes or selective exits. Research designs should separate short-run reporting responses from durable improvements in career progression. A useful comparison would be otherwise similar employers above and below a reporting threshold, while carefully testing for pre-existing differences and changes in workforce size.

Flexible working warrants evaluation as a job-design intervention rather than a binary entitlement. Researchers should distinguish access, actual take-up, schedule control, remote work, reduced hours and career consequences. A difference-in-differences design around staggered organisational implementation could compare promotion rates, retention and earnings trajectories, but only if parallel-trend assumptions and changes in job composition are examined. Qualitative interviews would help explain why formally available flexibility may be culturally penalised or unavailable to frontline workers.

Policy evaluation should explicitly measure distributional effects. A reform that raises average female earnings while worsening outcomes for disabled women, lone parents or low-paid workers cannot be judged wholly successful. Pre-specified subgroup analysis, privacy-preserving data access and transparent publication of null results are therefore integral to a credible equality evidence agenda. A future programme should also measure men's care participation, because unequal domestic responsibility is a relational process rather than a characteristic of women alone.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Answer to the main research question

The evidence supports a differentiated conclusion: the UK labour market has progressed towards gender equality in several observable dimensions, but the scale of that progress depends strongly on which outcome is examined. The median hourly gender pay gap among full-time employees was 6.9 per cent in April 2025, compared with 12.8 per cent across all employees (ONS, 2025). This divergence is analytically important because the distribution of working hours is itself gendered. Neither figure captures the full effect of career breaks, missed promotions, reduced pension accumulation or periods outside employment. Progress in one headline statistic therefore cannot stand in for substantive equality across the working life.

The review identifies care allocation, occupational valuation, employer decision-making and unequal access to progression as mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Discrimination is not reducible to individual prejudice: seemingly neutral expectations of constant availability, geographical mobility or uninterrupted service can disadvantage people with disproportionate caring responsibilities. Intersectional analysis further indicates that a single category of women is insufficient for explaining how these mechanisms are experienced. Gender interacts with ethnicity, disability, class, age and migration-related circumstances in ways that require disaggregated, context-sensitive evidence.

The effectiveness of policy is best understood as conditional rather than absolute. Equality legislation establishes enforceable rights, pay reporting makes certain disparities visible, and flexible working rights can widen access to employment. Yet none of these instruments alone guarantees changes in promotion decisions, occupational pay structures or unpaid-care distribution. The government's 2026 guidance envisages mandatory equality action plans from spring 2027, subject to legislation; this should be treated as a prospective intervention, not an achieved outcome (Office for Equality and Opportunity, 2026). Credible evaluation will require evidence on implementation and results.

8.2 Theoretical contribution and implications for practice

The paper's principal conceptual contribution is to connect three levels of explanation that are too often considered separately: individual employment trajectories, organisational allocation of opportunity and the wider institutional distribution of care and

economic resources. Human-capital accounts illuminate the consequences of experience and hours, but cannot explain why those experiences are unequally produced. Organisational accounts identify biased evaluations and promotion systems, but are incomplete without attention to childcare, transport, housing and social protection. Institutional explanations identify these background constraints but still require evidence on how particular employers translate them into career outcomes.

For employers, this integrated account implies that diversity dashboards should be accompanied by transparent job architecture, promotion audits and scrutiny of work allocation. It is insufficient to recruit more women into an organisation if high-value assignments, sponsorship and access to decision-making remain unequally distributed. Action plans should assign ownership, specify measurable outcomes and publish the reasoning behind chosen interventions. For policymakers, the implication is to combine rights and transparency with affordable care provision, enforcement capacity and evaluation of whether flexibility is career-compatible.

A robust accountability framework should distinguish activity indicators from outcome indicators. Training sessions, policy publications and stated commitments show that an organisation has acted; they do not establish that discrimination or unequal progression has declined. More informative indicators include adjusted and unadjusted pay distributions, promotion rates by grade, parental-leave return and retention, access to flexible arrangements, complaints resolution and the share of women in positions controlling budgets and strategic decisions. Such measures must be interpreted with safeguards for small groups and changing workforce composition.

8.3 Final synthesis and research priorities

Overall, the review finds uneven progress: narrower hourly pay gaps and stronger representation in some leadership settings coexist with unequal working hours, care responsibilities and career opportunities. The four-stage framework offers a practical means of locating disparities in access, allocation, progression and accountability, but requires empirical testing before its effectiveness can be established.

Future research should link longitudinal earnings and employment records to recruitment, parental leave, promotion and organisational policy changes, with careful attention to subgroup uncertainty and causal identification. Policy success should be judged by sustained improvements in opportunity and career outcomes, not disclosure or representation alone.

Statements and Declarations

Ethics and Consent

This study is based exclusively on a critical review of previously published secondary sources, including academic literature, official statistics and publicly available policy documents. No human participants were recruited, and no primary personal data were collected. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the contributions of the researchers, institutions and public bodies whose published work and statistical evidence informed this review.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

[1] Acker, J. (2006) 'Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations', Gender & Society, 20(4), pp. 441–464. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206289499

[2] Becker, G.S. (1985) 'Human capital, effort, and the sexual division of labor', Journal of Labor Economics, 3(1, Part 2), pp. S33–S58. https://doi.org/10.1086/298075

[3] Costa Dias, M., Joyce, R. and Parodi, F. (2021) 'The gender pay gap in the UK: Children and experience in work', Oxford Review of Economic Policy, 36(4), pp. 855–881. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/graa053

[4] Crenshaw, K. (1989) 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), Article 8. https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/

[5] Department for Business and Trade (2025) 'UK businesses lead the way with record numbers of female leaders', 25 February. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-businesses-lead-the-way-with-record-numbers-of-female-leaders (Accessed: 22 October 2026).

[6] Department for Business and Trade (2026) Plan to Make Work Pay and Employment Rights Act: timeline update. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/implementing-the-plan-to-make-work-pay-and-employment-rights-act/plan-to-make-work-pay-and-employment-rights-act-timeline-update (Accessed: 22 October 2026).

[7] Equality Act 2010, c. 15. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

[8] Francis-Devine, B., Zaidi, K. and Murray, A. (2026) Women and the UK economy. House of Commons Library Research Briefing SN06838, 25 February. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06838/ (Accessed: 22 October 2026).

[9] FTSE Women Leaders Review (2026) FTSE Women Leaders Review 2026: press release, February. Available at: https://ftsewomenleaders.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/ftse-wlr-2026-report-press-release-final-version.pdf (Accessed: 22 October 2026).

[10] Kleven, H., Landais, C. and Søgaard, J.E. (2021) 'Does biology drive child penalties? Evidence from biological and adoptive families', American Economic Review: Insights, 3(2), pp. 183–198. https://doi.org/10.1257/aeri.20200260

[11] Kleven, H., Landais, C., Posch, J., Steinhauer, A. and Zweimüller, J. (2019) 'Child penalties across countries: Evidence and explanations', AEA Papers and Proceedings, 109, pp. 122–126. https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20191078

[12] Kleven, H., Landais, C., Posch, J., Steinhauer, A. and Zweimüller, J. (2024) 'Do family policies reduce gender inequality? Evidence from 60 years of policy experimentation', American Economic Journal: Economic Policy, 16(2), pp. 110–149. https://doi.org/10.1257/pol.20210346

[13] Office for Equality and Opportunity (2026) Action plans: list of actions. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/action-plans-list-of-actions (Accessed: 22 October 2026).

[14] Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2025) Gender pay gap in the UK: 2025. 23 October. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2025

[15] Sen, A. (1999) Development as Freedom. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[16] UK Government (2026a) Gender pay gap reporting and creating an action plan: guidance for employers. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/gender-pay-gap-reporting-and-creating-an-action-plan-guidance-for-employers (Accessed: 22 October 2026).

[17] UK Government (2026b) Understanding the gender pay gap in the UK: Drivers and barriers, evidence from UKLHS 2009 to 2023. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-the-gender-pay-gap-in-the-