

UNTANGLED POLICY BRIEF

POLICIES FOR INCLUSIVE LABOUR MARKETS

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Key Messages

- When using labour-market policies to address inequality, it's crucial to find the right mix of active and passive measures
- While automation is leading to unequal distribution of labour income, the resulting degree of income inequality in households can be mitigated by government redistribution policies
- Countries including Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland, France and Germany offer useful blueprints for policymakers seeking to make those at risk of social exclusion more employable and to address labour shortages in strained sectors
- Recognition of foreign credentials is a powerful tool to prevent exclusion among migrants
- The EU's Work-Life Balance Directive is crucial to achieving the goals of the Transparency Directive, which seeks to address gender discrimination



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Executive summary

In this policy brief we discuss ways to promote the employability of individuals who risk social exclusion; address various issues in strained sectors; and reduce certain types of gender discrimination. We do so by combining UNTANGLED research findings with descriptive evidence of labour market policies and indicators that measure implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

To improve the employability of individuals at risk of social exclusion, particularly older female workers and low-skilled prime-age male workers who have been dismissed after the implementation of automation technologies, it is crucial to rebalance active and passive labour market policies in favour of the former. Public employment and social services in Belgium (Flanders), the Netherlands, Finland and France take holistic approaches to incentivise such people to remain in the labour force, which deserve attention.

Second, to solve simultaneously the problems of job quality, integration of migrants and labour shortages in strained sectors such as healthcare, lessons should be learnt from Concerted Action on Care (Konzertierte Aktion Pflege, KAP), implemented in Germany. This is a set of holistic measures to attract labour, where improvements in remuneration have gone hand in hand with training, personnel management, innovative care approaches, and targeted recruitment and training outside the EU, accompanied by recognition of foreign qualifications and support for language training. Third, difficulties at the country and company levels in implementing the EU's work-life balance and pay transparency directives to reduce gender discrimination suggest that mechanisms for social conditionality in allocating financial resources in the EU should be seriously considered. Finally, the tax-benefit systems in Belgium and Finland, with their balanced redistribution systems encompassing two groups of vulnerable individuals at risk of poverty (low-income and non-rich pensioner households) deserve more attention from policymakers.

Background

The EU institutions have made significant efforts in recent years to promote the social inclusion of vulnerable groups in Member States. The 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) proclamation has been further supported by an [Action Plan](#) launched in 2021, based on three headline targets to be achieved by 2030 in employment, education and poverty reduction. According to this plan, the goal of having at least 78% of the population aged 20-64 in employment is accompanied by the intention to have 60% of the adult population in training every year, and to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty by 15 million by 2030. While the indicators show significant progress for the EU27 Member States, the [Social Scoreboard Indicators](#) (SSI) reveal that certain vulnerable groups have seen only limited improvement.

Several headwinds hinder more effective implementation and quicker achievement of the targets established within the inclusive policies at the EU level. Some of them are conjunctural factors that have worsened living conditions in the European space in the last few years, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian-Ukraine war, and the resurgence of inflation. Other causes of change are more structural and grounded in forces impacting our daily lives. The four megatrends of digitalisation, globalisation, demographic transformation, and environmental challenges affect inequality and interfere with the deployment of inclusive policies. The UNTANGLED project primarily investigated

the first three megatrends, by disentangling their effects on the working-age population in the EU and discussing the policy implications. The project mainly addressed the factors that cause persistent inequalities in skills, employment, wages, and incomes that penalise women, the low-skilled, migrants, and youth, and carefully discussed the policy implications of the main findings.

This report combines UNTANGLED research findings with descriptive evidence of labour market policies and indicators that monitor the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) to discuss inclusive policies. The availability of data determines the periods covered by the empirical evidence.

Key Findings

Policies improving employment and labour market participation

UNTANGLED research shows different impacts of technologies and globalisation on employment, depending on the type of technology (information and communication technologies, or robots), age and occupation of workers, and countries covered in the analysis. A study by [Landesmann and Leitner](#) examines the impact of migration, technologies, and offshoring on the employment of native workers in Austria, Belgium, France, Spain, and Switzerland. The authors find that ICTs penalise more manual workers (machine operators and elementary occupations) than craft workers (better equipped with digital skills). In contrast, robots substitute both categories of workers in manufacturing industries. Likewise, the negative impact of offshoring and migration is more severe for native manual workers (more likely to have only primary education) in the manufacturing industries. [Bachmann et al.](#) found that higher exposure to robots increases the job-finding rate for young workers in countries with lower labour costs, especially in Eastern European countries. This is because industries in countries that gained from FDI increased productivity, labour demand, and activity by introducing robots (*productivity effect*). [Albinowski and Lewandowski](#) analysed the impact of automation technologies (ICT and robots) on employment in 14 EU countries.

They grouped workers by gender and age and controlled for tasks. ICT exposure reduces the employment of older women in both routine and non-routine tasks, while robots substitute for prime-aged men. Findings from other studies support UNTANGLED's research on younger workers. [Haapanala et al. \(2023\)](#) pointed out that robot exposure significantly reduces employment rates for people aged 18-44 in EU countries with solid unionisation, such as Finland and Belgium. [Dauth et al. \(2021\)](#) investigated the impact of exposure to robots on the German labour market. They found that while young workers in manufacturing industries with high robot adoption had lower job-finding rates, they were induced to be employed in the service sector. This may raise concerns, as jobs in service industries for low- and medium-skilled workers are often less secure and pay less than those in highly unionised manufacturing sectors.

Based on the evidence above, [Albinowski and Lewandowski](#), and [Yashiro et al. \(2020\)](#) suggest that targeted training programs, adult education, and lifelong learning are more effective inclusive policies than monetary unemployment benefits or early retirement plans. Improving digital skills to match labour demand is crucial for low-educated youth and prime-aged men. However, since population ageing poses a formidable challenge to fiscal sustainability, promoting longer working lives for older workers (especially women) is essential for mitigating budgetary pressures from increasing pension expenditures. Therefore, to improve employability at any age, active labour market policies should be prioritised over passive ones.

Rates of participation in inclusive policies such as public employment services, training, employment incentives, supported employment and rehabilitation, direct job creation, and start-up incentives (active measures), and out-of-work income maintenance, as well as early retirement plans (passive measures), are presented in Figure 1.¹ It can be observed that the implementation of inclusive policies for employment and labour market participation in European countries has involved a varying fraction of the labour force, ranging from 3% (Czechia) to 38% (France) in 2020. Notably, this percentage has increased remarkably in almost all countries between 2004 and 2020. By contrast, public expenditure as a percentage of GDP decreased in Germany and shrank slightly in Belgium, Finland, Denmark and Sweden (OECD statistics available upon request). In any case, passive labour market measures based on unemployment and early retirement monetary benefits account for the lion's share in almost all countries, with few exceptions (Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden).

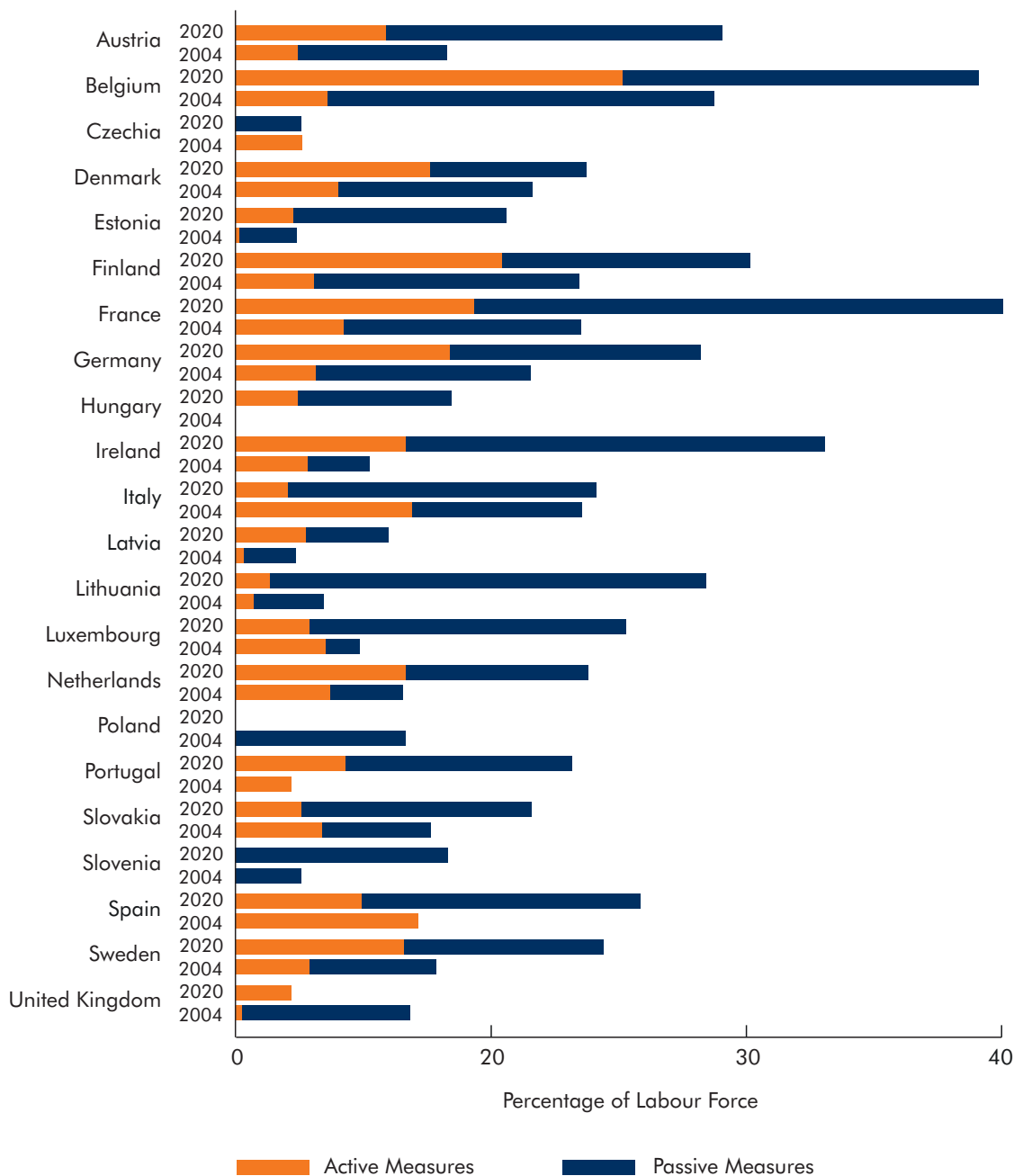
Figure 2 summarises participation in training programmes for those at risk of involuntary job loss². In 10 out of 22 countries, the percentage of workers in specific training programs decreased between 2004 and 2020. This is especially true in Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy (Figure 2, Panel A).³ The overall trends for the aggregate EU-27 countries by age and gender depicted in Panel B of Figure 2 clearly show that the decline in young workers participating in specific training courses to avoid job losses has not been adequately compensated for by an increase in older workers. Notably, the reduction of training for younger workers and the flat trend in training participation for other workers (Figure 2, Panel B) occurred even though [overall long-term unemployment in the EU-27](#) increased remarkably between 2008 and 2014. This evidence may confirm concerns raised by Albinowski and Lewandowski, who claim that national and European institutions do not provide the right incentives for older workers (especially women) to remain in the labour market.

¹ All statistics in this report are our own calculations based on the data sources cited at the bottom of tables and figures.

² Based on a report by the [OECD in 2013](#), certain workers are at a higher risk of losing their jobs and experiencing unfavourable outcomes following a firm's closure or downsizing. Women, older and younger workers fall into this category, although younger workers tend to find new employment more quickly than older workers and women.

³ The reasons for the reduction in participation in training can vary by country. For instance, in Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands, the contemporary reduction in the administration of unemployment benefits and early retirement plans (OECD statistics, available upon request) could lead to a positive reduction of workers who are at risk of losing their jobs involuntarily. This is not the case in Italy: while the number of people requiring unemployment benefits has increased from 2.10% to 11.29% between 2004 and 2020 (OECD statistics, available upon request), participation in training programs has decreased.

Figure 1. Inclusive policies for employment and participation in European labour markets: percentage of the labour force participating (2004 and 2020)



Source: OECD. Note: OECD indicators for labour market policies only include targeted programmes for vulnerable categories of the working-age population, such as the unemployed; training for those at risk of involuntary job loss; and special early retirement benefits in case of restructuring of industries or large enterprises. Active measures include public employment services, training, employment incentives, supported employment and rehabilitation, direct job creation, and start-up incentives. Passive measures consist of out-of-work income maintenance and support, and early retirement.

Policies aimed at enhancing job quality and decreasing wage inequality

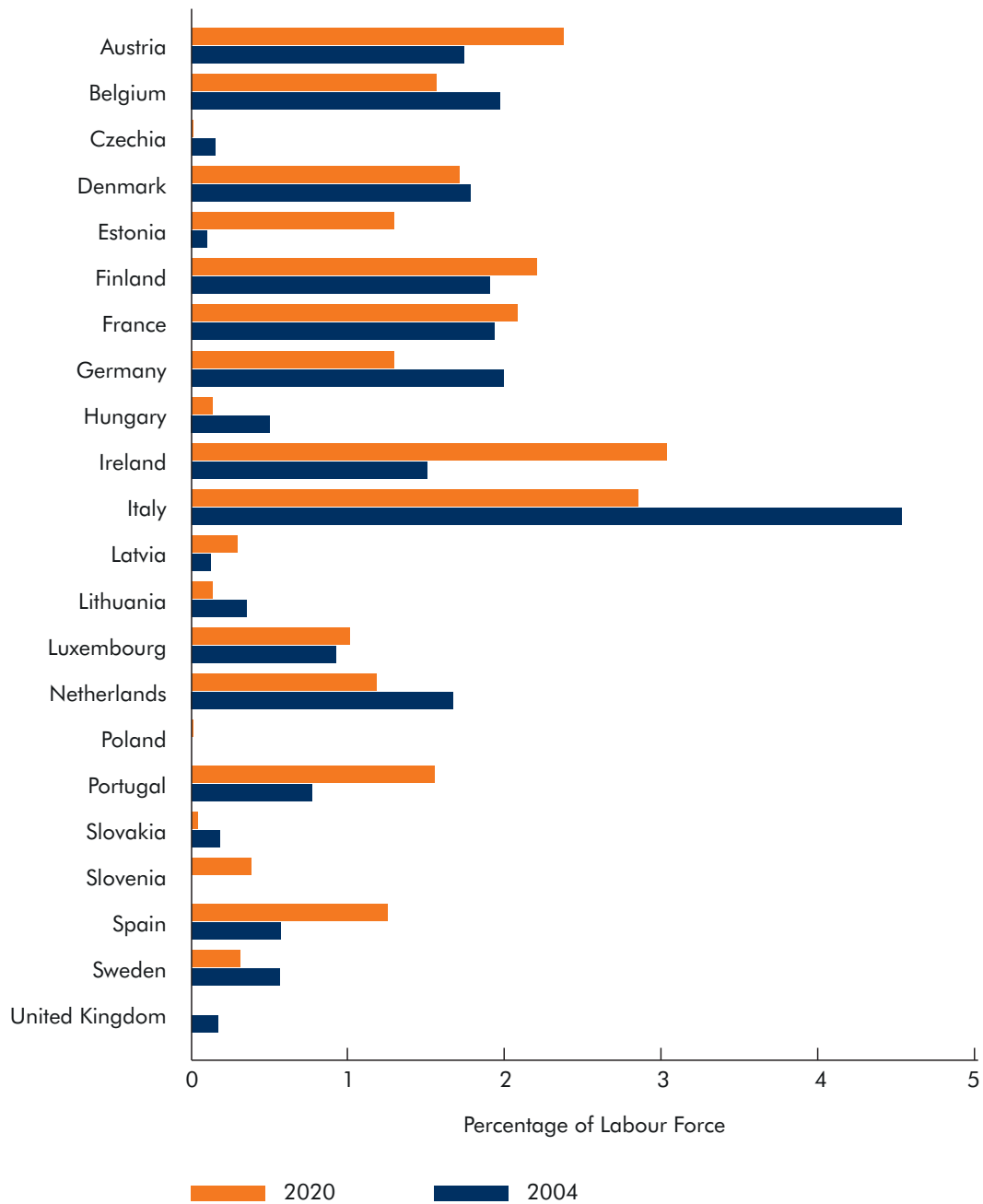
Efforts to improve employment very often end up focusing merely on quantitative aspects, neglecting the quality of job creation. The EPSR stressed that workers, regardless of employment status, education, gender, and country of origin, have the right to fair and equal treatment regarding working conditions and access to social protection and training. On the other hand, ensuring that jobs pay an adequate wage is essential to guarantee adequate working and living conditions, while narrowing excessive pay gaps between regular and vulnerable workers is important to make social communities more inclusive. By tackling these issues, the UNTANGLED research conducted by [Martin and Hauret](#) focused on the effects of digitalisation on safety at work, job security, skills development, relationships at work, work motivation, and self-reported feelings in European countries. They found mixed results depending on how job quality variables were conceptualised and measured. The pandemic has made it clear that labour shortages cannot be explained by wages alone, as the multidimensional aspect of job quality is crucial to understanding the situation in some sectors and labour markets. Poor working conditions caused by a mismatch between *job demands* (such as physical and psychological hazards, high work intensity, and unsocial working hours) and *job resources* (such as task discretion, flexible working hours, and training opportunities) have led to strained environments in sectors such as healthcare and transport ([Eurofound, 2023](#)). In these sectors, wage-based incentives alone are insufficient for retaining or recruiting staff; they must be complemented by factors such as access to training and greater autonomy over working hours.

However, UNTANGLED researchers investigating labour shortages in France and Germany and studying how migrants may address these shortages found that in 2019-2021, STEM and medical doctor occupations suffered more from under-supply ([Bachmann et al, 2023](#)). The authors noted that the mismatch between labour demand in European companies and labour supply from non-European migrants may be due to difficulties migrants face in having their formal qualifications recognised in the EU. For policymakers, therefore, the issue of migrants' diploma recognition should be considered among the priorities for inclusive policies.

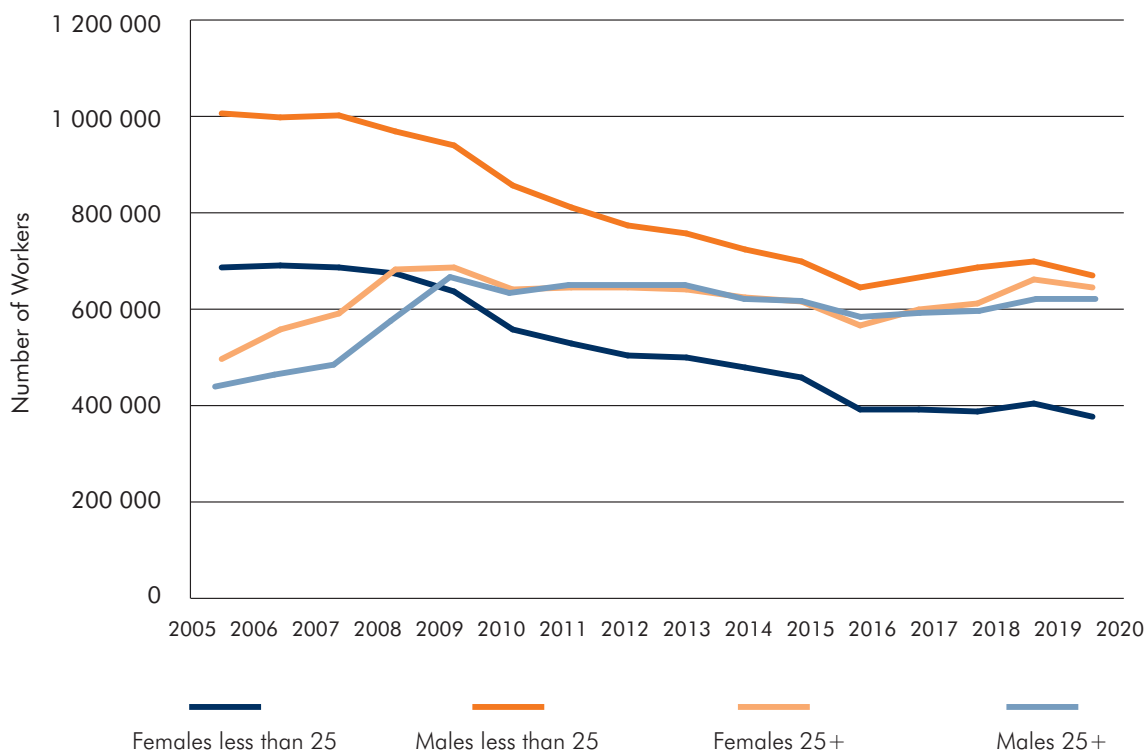
As for wage inequality penalising vulnerable groups, in an UNTANGLED research report [Perugini and Pompei](#) analysed Incentive Pay Schemes (IPSs) as potential drivers of the within-firm gender pay gap, and studied the industry-level moderating effects of various categories of intangible investments. Unlike other researchers, these authors found that when using an adjusted metric of within-firm gender wage gap and controlling for segregation of women into low-wage jobs and firms, IPSs help reduce this type of inequality. However, in contexts with high intensity in intangible investments (such as software/database, innovative property, brand, and advertisement expenditures), increasing flexibilisation and unpredictability of working time make the gender equalising mechanisms of IPSs ineffective. Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin has explained at length the high cost and lower hourly wages of flexible time for women. This issue is linked to the unequal distribution of household chores, which makes it difficult for female workers to meet the targets set within IPSs. Therefore, the [EU Transparency Directive](#) requiring employers to share information about how much they pay women and men for work of equal value will not be enough. The enforcement of a supplementary provision, such as the [Work-Life Balance Directive](#), is crucial to consider factors external to companies and labour markets that strongly affect the gender pay gap and create economic disincentives for women within families.

Figure 2. Training for those at risk of involuntary job loss in European labour markets

A) Training participants as a percentage of the labour force (2004 and 2020)



B) Number of training participants by gender and age in the EU-27



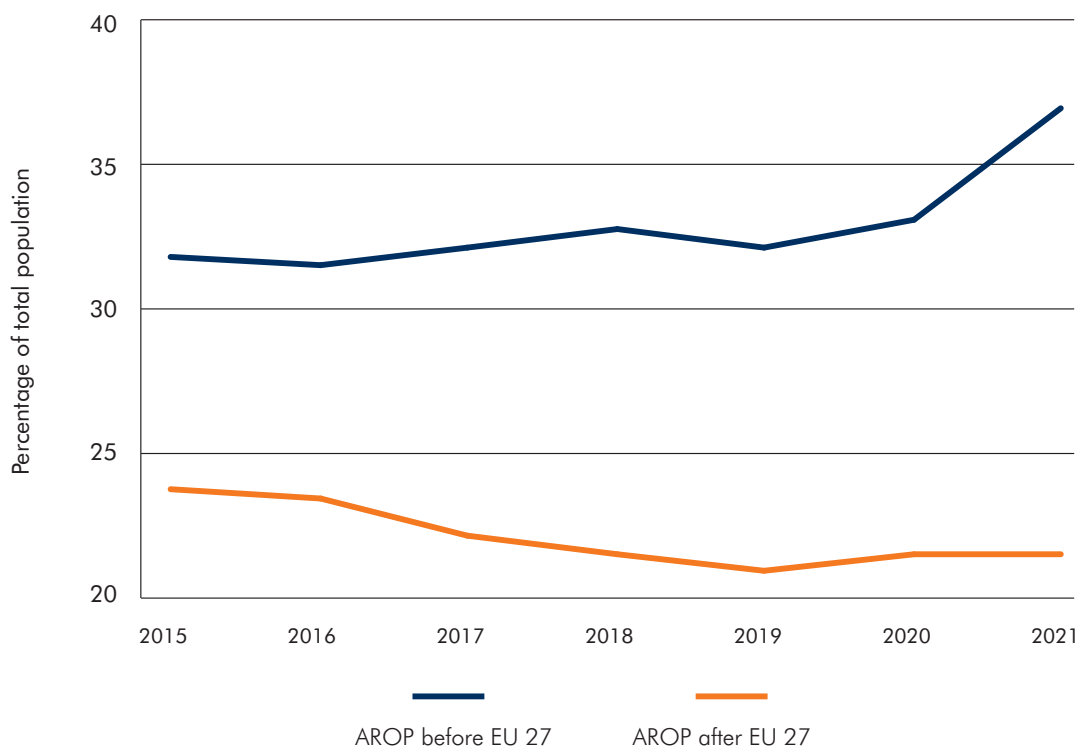
Source: OECD, Eurostat.

From wage inequality to income inequality: policies to reduce poverty and social exclusion

The increasing use of automation technologies affects wages and employment, leading to unequal distribution of labour income. However, the degree to which inequality in the labour market translates into income inequality in households depends on government policies that redistribute resources to low-income working-age households, specifically non-pensioners in the poorest quartile of the population. UNTANGLED research by Doorley et al. (2023) found that the tax-benefit system was able to cushion income shocks, including those generated by automation technologies between 2006 and 2018, especially in Western countries such as Belgium, Germany and Sweden.

The role of the benefit system in reducing social exclusion is evident from Figure 3, where data availability led us to restrict the period under scrutiny. Social transfers, from unemployment benefits to other welfare-related benefits (short-time working schemes, social assistance, sickness schemes, family-related benefits, etc.) reduced the share of the population at risk of poverty by 10 percentage points before the pandemic period. We can observe a slight broadening between 2015 and 2019 of the divergence between the fraction of the population at risk before and after social transfers, presumably driven by technological transformation, as underscored in Doorley et al. (2023). During the pandemic years of 2020-2021, the cushioning effect of social transfers was even more crucial. Without these transfers, and relying solely on market income, the number of people at risk of poverty would have increased to over 35%. However, due to the support provided by social transfers, the percentage remained at 21.7%.

Figure 3. People at risk of poverty in the EU-27, before and after social transfers



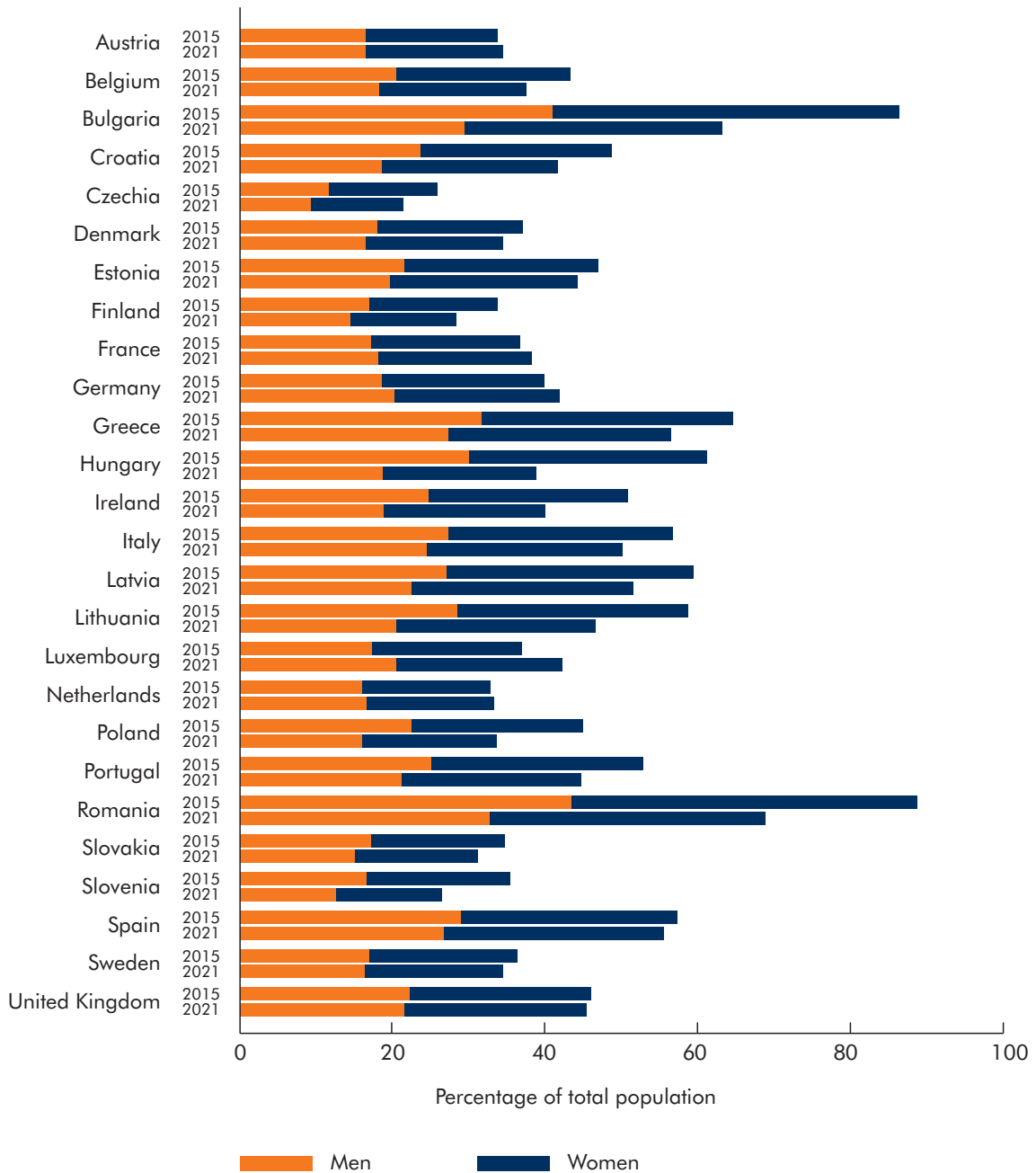
Source: Eurostat European Social Pillar Indicators. Note: This indicator corresponds to the percentage of persons (in the total population) who are: at risk of poverty; severely materially or socially deprived; or living in households with very low work intensity. Persons are only counted once even if they are present in several sub-indicators. At risk of poverty are persons with an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income (after and before social transfers).

The effectiveness of redistributive policies varies across countries and affects gender and age classes in different ways. Figure 4 (Panel A and B) shows that after social transfers, the population at risk of poverty was above 40% in Bulgaria and Romania and more than 30% in Eastern and Mediterranean countries, such as Latvia, Hungary and Greece. However, all countries with a poverty rate above the EU-27 average reduced it from 2015 to 2021. This tells us that efforts have been made to contain social exclusion, especially during the pandemic.

In any case, women experience a higher risk of poverty than men, even though the percentage of those at risk decreased between 2015 and 2021, except in Austria, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the UK (Figure 4, Panel A). One possible explanation for the trend in these six countries is the increase in the number of migrant women from non-EU countries, who normally experience a higher poverty risk than EU-born women (EIGE, 2020). However, in no country did the relative position of women improve in comparison to men.

Figure 4. People at risk of poverty after social transfers in European countries

A) People at risk of poverty by gender



B) People at risk of poverty by age

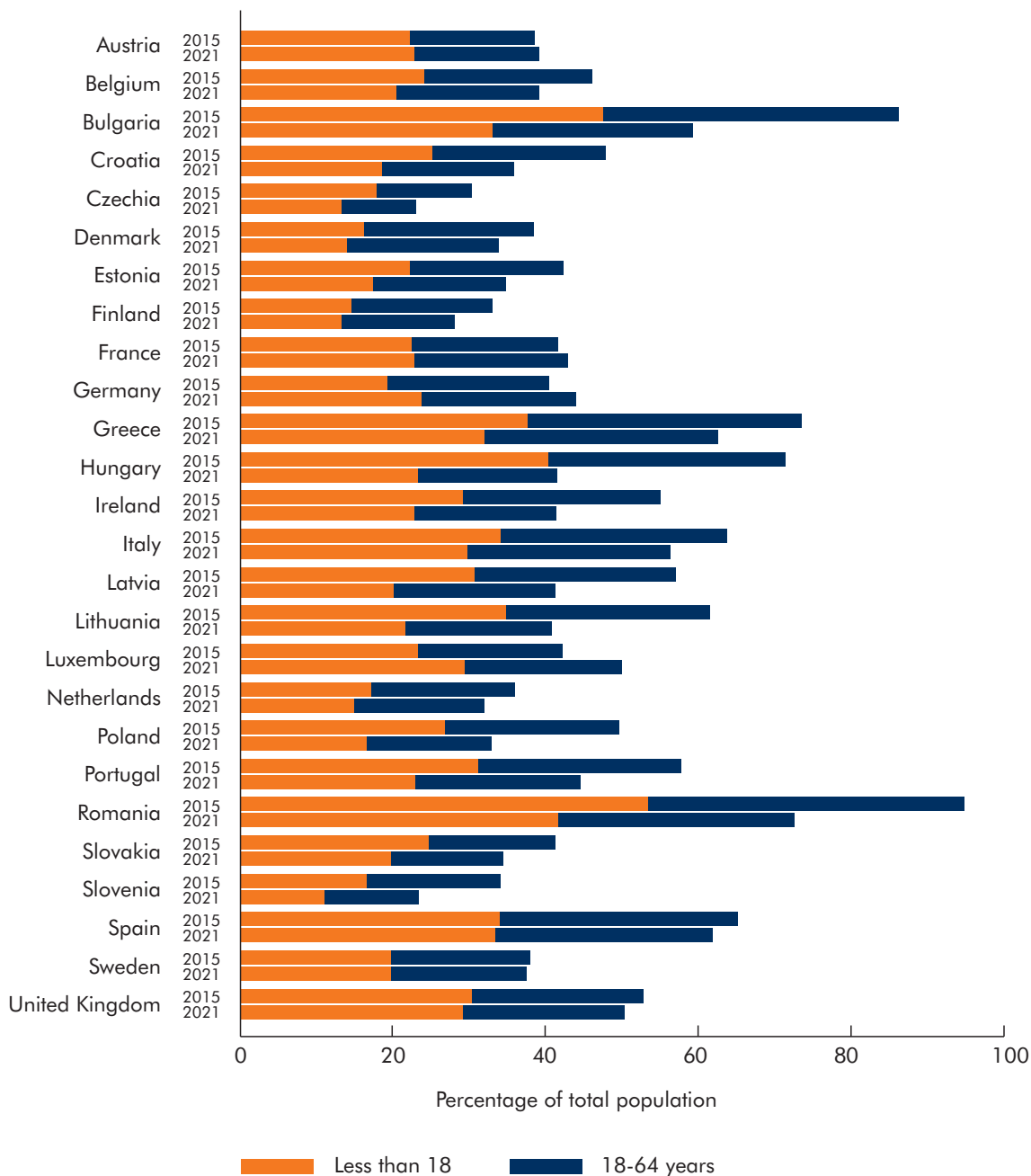


Figure 4 (Panel B) reveals that redistributive policies have an unequal impact on different age groups. Specifically, when we compare the effects on the adult population and children aged 0-17, it becomes apparent that children are more likely to experience poverty in all countries except Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and Slovenia. Furthermore, Belgium, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, and Slovenia successfully reduced the share of children at risk of poverty below the EU-27 average between 2015 and 2021. By contrast, we find countries with poverty risk rates usually below the EU-27 average, such as Austria, France, Germany, and Slovakia, reporting poverty risk rates for children above this average.

Recommendations

Increasing participation in active labour market policy programmes

Although unemployment and other welfare-related benefits are important to reducing the negative impact of technological transformation on disposable income, a rebalancing in favour of active labour market policies is needed to improve labour market participation and employment, as discussed in the UNTANGLED research conducted by Albinowski and Lewandowski. As reported in Figure 1, too many European countries still have a disproportionate number of participants in passive labour market policies (unemployment benefits and out-of-work income maintenance, as well as early retirement plans), compared to active provisions (public employment services, training, employment incentives, supported employment and rehabilitation, direct job creation, and start-up incentives). Very often, the first step to increasing participation in active labour market policy programmes is understanding better which groups needing support are not using public employment services (PES) and why. Arranging detailed datasets based on administrative and survey data has proven crucial for the Netherlands and Finland to identify the most vulnerable groups and their needs early. However, the takeaway from the experience of these two countries, besides that of Belgium (Flanders) and France, is that having the right public financial resources is not enough to implement successful active labour market programmes. Institutions providing employment services and those delivering social services (for example, addressing challenges related to housing, mental health and personal financial difficulties) must have the capacity and willingness to cooperate. Automation and digitalisation to increase the efficiency of PES should be complemented by continuous face-to-face interactions and meetings with jobseekers, especially when low digital skills and limited access to the internet are the main characteristics of the vulnerable groups (OECD, 2021).

As for older workers, in principle employers are less likely to invest in training them, as they are close to retirement age. Older workers also tend to be less motivated to participate in longer, more intensive training. Some countries are trying to make access to such training more preventative by offering opportunities to all workers at risk of job loss, not only the unemployed. One important barrier for older workers who are unemployed is that the skills they have learned on the job through work experience or employer training are not documented, and thus not transparent for potential new employers. An innovative strategy worth imitating that some countries' PES have deployed is identifying and certifying acquired skills during training programmes to address the placement challenge, especially for low-skilled workers who otherwise lack formal qualifications. "Certification of Acquired Skills" in the Netherlands, "My Skills" in Germany and "Experience Certificate" in Sweden are specific training measures valuable for older people that identify and certify competencies and work-relevant skills for new placement years (European Network of Public Employment Services). In addition, various countries and regions in the EU have measures supporting employers in skill assessment and anticipation capacity. *Regional Skills Fora* in Ireland and *Competence Centres* in Wallonia, Belgium, are two prime examples of such support.

Other innovative forms of training and mentoring for older people, often combined with subsidised employment, are those deployed in Austria, where the PES cooperates with a wide network of companies engaged with the social economy (social enterprises). Here, vulnerable groups are segmented into sub-groups according to their distance from the labour market. The people furthest from the market are offered subsidised employment in the social economy. Those somewhat closer might be offered a programme where they get an employment contract with a non-governmental organisation that leases temporary workers for the primary labour market. Austrian programmes involving social enterprises have been found to significantly strengthen participants' labour market participation and integration into unsubsidised employment in the primary labour market. The positive effects are particularly pronounced for women, older workers and people with disabilities.

Creating job quality and integration for migrant workers and imposing conditionality to reduce gender discrimination

To simultaneously address job quality, migrant integration, and labour shortages in healthcare, Germany's *Concerted Action on Care (Konzertierte Aktion Pflege, KAP)* provides valuable lessons. This is a set of holistic measures to attract labour, where improvements in remuneration have gone hand in hand with i) training and qualification, ii) personnel management activities to improve working conditions and reduce involuntary part-time or temporary jobs; iii) introduction of innovative care approaches (e-counselling and tele-nurses); iv) targeted recruitment and training outside the EU, accompanied by recognition of foreign qualifications and support for language training.

Other initiatives, intended to address the higher levels of unemployment and underemployment among migrants and guarantee adequate working conditions, are the *German IQ* and the *Swedish Fast Track* measures. Both facilitate the recognition of migrants' qualifications gained abroad, and provide advice, information and training to validate skills for both migrants and employers, language training or training on local culture/institutions.

As for the gender pay gap, the simultaneous enforcement of the *work-life balance* and the *pay transparency* Directives would be a step forward in the containment of gender discrimination and reduction of the gender pay gap. Member States are expected to adopt measures to strengthen the application of Directive (EU) 2023/970, for *pay transparency* for work of equal value between men and women by June 2026. By contrast, the *European Commission* is still struggling to induce 11 Member States to implement Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on *work-life balance for parents* into their national law, which they should have done by August 2022.

Reluctance by Member States to implement these two Directives is only one of the difficulties European institutions are experiencing in promoting this social right. Once all countries implement the two Directives in their national law, we should see companies behave accordingly. Concerns about the effective implementation of social rights such as these are stimulating an *interesting debate* on the inclusion of social conditionalities in the allocation of resources scheduled in the EU's *Multi-Annual Financial Framework* (the document designating political priorities and resource allocation) and *Financial Regulation* (the document indicating how these resources should be employed and controlled). Indeed, the European Commission has already taken a step in the right direction by introducing some amendments concerning social conditionality in the financial rules. Thus we strongly recommend that policymakers set out mechanisms for social conditionality in the allocation of financial resources in the EU to secure the eradication of gender-based and other forms of discrimination.

Does a single redistribution policy for all EU countries exist?

If we consider the aggregate of the EU-27, the redistribution policies and tax-benefit systems work well in attenuating income inequality observed before social transfers. However, women and children suffer more from poor living standards and low income after social transfers. The evidence reported in the literature is only partially reflected in findings reported in the previous sections (Figures 4, 5 and 6). Based on this *wider evidence*, European countries have different models for their tax-benefit systems, with polar opposite cases being the old-age-oriented and low-income-oriented models. The old-age-oriented countries (Greece, Italy and Spain) redistribute income, giving generous benefits to specific groups of pensioners but little to non-pensioner households. The low-income-oriented countries (Ireland, the UK, Denmark, and the Netherlands) redistribute a small portion of total income but provide substantial support to low-income populations. The other countries fall between these cases, except for Finland and Belgium, which offer comparatively high benefits to both pensioners and non-pensioners. However, in these two countries, redistribution to income-rich pensioner households is lower than in old-age-oriented countries.

The differences in tax-benefit systems across countries reflect varying preferences of the population for redistribution, and the ability of political parties shaping the parliamentary majorities to enact these measures. This makes it difficult to identify a unique redistribution system that adapts to this dissimilar situation. That said, the examples of Finland and Belgium, with their balanced redistribution systems encompassing two groups of vulnerable individuals at risk of poverty (low-income and non-rich pensioner households), certainly deserve more attention from policymakers.

Conclusions

Social inclusion is one of the most critical targets in the EU's plans to reinvigorate democracy, foster inclusive growth and build a sustainable welfare system for the 21st century. The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and its Action Plan are ambitious actions deployed by the EU institutions to achieve social inclusion along many dimensions, such as increasing the employment rate of vulnerable groups, improving job quality and reducing wage and income inequality. Project UNTANGLED provides evidence of the impacts of the megatrends of globalisation, technological transformation, and ageing of the population on these labour market outcomes, and discusses some policy implications directly addressing the issue of social inclusion.

Combining UNTANGLED results with updated evidence on monitoring aspects related to inclusive policies, we conclude that the most promising actions are those that discard one-dimensional provisions and adopt holistic approaches. Active labour market policies based on tight cooperation among public employment services, social services and other organisations of the social economy have proven crucial to improving employability, education, working conditions, and labour compensation of vulnerable groups. The difficulties that the European institutions are facing in implementing measures aimed at reducing gender discrimination, such as the *work-life balance* and *pay transparency* Directives, suggest it is crucial to consider social conditionality mechanisms when allocating financial funds from the EU. Finally, redistribution policies such as those in Belgium and Finland should receive more attention from policymakers, as they cater to low-income working-age households and non-rich pensioners simultaneously, solving the problem of the trade-off that emerges in aiding these two vulnerable social groups.

Further Reading

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About UNTANGLED

UNTANGLED is a three-year interdisciplinary Horizon 2020 research project that seeks to examine the interconnected trends of globalisation, demographic change and technological transformation, and their effects on labour markets in the European Union and beyond. By engaging a broad range of stakeholders, including companies and civil society organisations, we will develop practical policy proposals to help governments cushion the negative impacts of these trends and ensure their benefits are enjoyed fairly across regions and sectors.

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