

Gender and Precarity in Academia

by Veronika Paksi and Katalin Tardos

Precarity – not a new phenomenon

From the 1970s onwards, global neoliberal economic and political processes began to stem into the global labour market. The process of neoliberalisation has fundamentally changed the nature of work and working conditions, adding to the growing uncertainty of the labour market. These processes have played a major role in shaping the global class structure, with the relatively rapid emergence of a new group, the precariat, comprising millions of workers with precarious employment conditions. The precariat is a class or group that is still being formed today (class-in-the-making), and their members typically *"have precarious jobs, without a sense of occupational identity or career in front of them, they have no social memory on which to draw, no shadow of the future hanging over their relationships, and have a limited and precarious range of rights"*¹.

Precarious employment is a result of the intersection of the increasing number of insecure jobs in labour markets, unsupportive environments at workplaces, and vulnerable employees who were already vulnerable or have become more vulnerable under insecure working conditions².

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of precarious employment²



¹ Standing, G (2012) The precariat: From denizens to citizens? *Polity*, 44(4): 588–608.

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1057/pol.2012.15>

² European Parliament (2016) Precarious Employment in Europe: Part 1: Patterns, Trends and Policy Strategy.

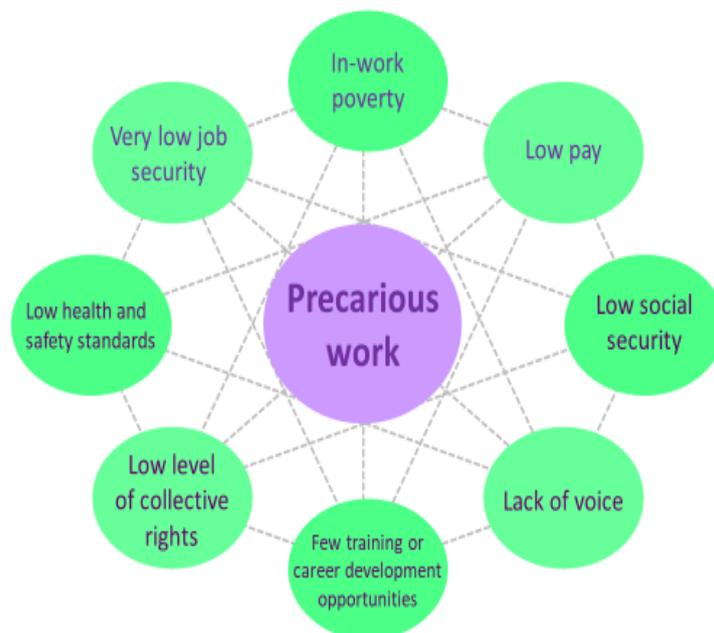
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The nature of precarious work

As labour markets have become more competitive and uncertain, employees often face hiring on temporary or part-time contracts. Precarious employment is not equal to atypical ('non-standard') employment – all employment forms can be precarious. Meanwhile, precarious employment, such as involuntary temporary work with short, fixed-term or zero-hour contracts is almost always atypical, while an atypical work, such as a part-time job, is not necessarily precarious. The European Parliament (EP) defines precarious work as *'employment which does not comply with EU, international and national standards and laws and/or does not provide sufficient resources for a decent life or adequate social protection'*.³ To date, there is no single definition of precarious employment; it is rather the nature of the employment relationship that makes it precarious. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)⁴, "precarious work" meets at least one of the following three criteria:

- Very low pay, where take-home pay from a worker's main job is below the first quintile.
- Very low-intensity working hours (including mini-jobs and zero-hour contracts)⁵.
- Low job security (temporary or permanent contract with a high risk of loss or termination).

Figure 2: The nature of precarious work⁴



³ European Parliament (2017) Resolution on working conditions and precarious employment. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0290_EN.html

⁴ EIGE (1016) Research Note on 'Gender, skills and precarious work in the EU', 21-22. <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-skills-and-precarious-work-eu-research-note>

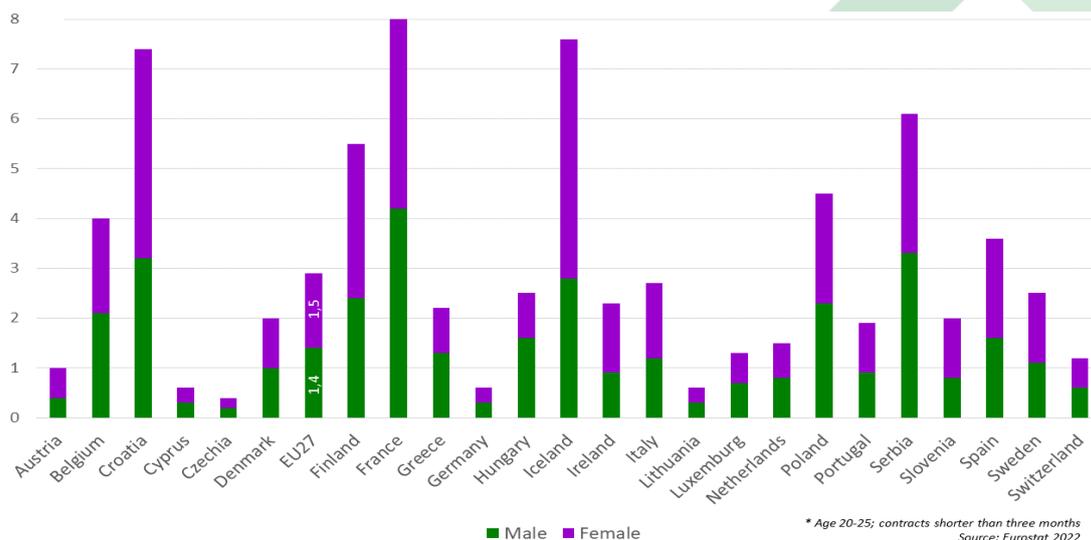
⁵ Study of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/zero-hours-contracts>

European trends

In the EU member states, there is an increasing trend in precarious forms of employment, aggravated by both the financial crisis in 2008 and the COVID-2019 epidemic. Recognising the disadvantages experienced by precarious women workers, the European Parliament (EP) set out a series of measures to address precarity in the European labour market⁶. Though working on a full-time permanent contract decreases the likelihood of precarious work, there is a decreasing trend of full-time permanent contracts across the EU. At the same time, the widening pattern of fixed-term and zero-hour contracts can be observed. Young women, women with a migrant background and women with low levels of educational attainment are even more vulnerable⁷. European statistics show that:

- Women are less likely to receive full-time permanent contracts than men.
- Temporary (fixed-term) employment increased among women in a faster ratio (around 1.8%) than among men (around 1.4%) between 2013 and 2022 on average.
- Women are more likely employed with extremely short contracts (up to three months) (1.5%) than men (1.4%).
- Though the practice of these precarious contracts has been decreasing, this favourable tendency is also slower for women^{7,8}.

Figure 3: Precarious employment in EU member states, 2022 (%)



⁶ European Parliament (2010) Resolution on precarious women workers. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-7-2010-0365_EN.html?redirect

⁷ European Parliament (2020) Precarious work from a gender and intersectionality perspective, and ways to combat it. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU\(2020\)662491](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU(2020)662491)

⁸ Eurostat statistics on temporary employment agency workers by sex, age 20-64. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsa_qoe_4ax1r2_custom_12666856/default/table?lang=en

Academics facing precarity

Neither precarious career paths nor precarious forms of employment are new phenomena in higher education. However, the spread of neoliberalism has amplified uncertain processes, and the concept of the academic precariat has been modelled on the global precariat. The nature of work has also changed fundamentally in universities as a result of neoliberalisation processes, such as there is an increasing reliance on external funding schemes and private sources due to budget cuts; teaching and research work is increasingly competitive and commoditised; the value of the research community and teamwork is diminishing with the focus shifting to evaluating researchers on the basis of their individual performance and profitability. This has also led to a transformation of university staffing needs, with an increased demand for more flexible, less costly and easily modifiable contracts for academics. It is, however, a paradox that even those top educated skilled professionals in academia can heavily experience uncertain and precarious working conditions^{9, 10}.

Gendered precarity

For women researchers, insecurity is aggravated not only by the spread of neoliberal principles but also by the caring and domestic responsibilities associated with and assigned to women. It is a considerable challenge for top educated women to meet the expected characteristics of the 'ideal' academics, who are free of caregiving tasks, extremely flexible, and always available for the organisation¹¹. While performance indicators are assumed to be objective and gender-neutral, they are highly unequal and discriminatory against women. Female researchers, particularly mothers, tend to be employed in precarious positions as their social status as women or mothers is often associated with lower levels of availability and professional competence. Recurrent discriminatory practices, such as unequal pay for the same work (the gender pay gap)¹² and contractual segregation, can be both causes and consequences of their precarity.

⁹ Ryan, S – Connell, J – Burgess, J (2017) Casual academics: A new public management paradox. *Labour and Industry*, 27(1): 56–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10301763.2017.1317707>

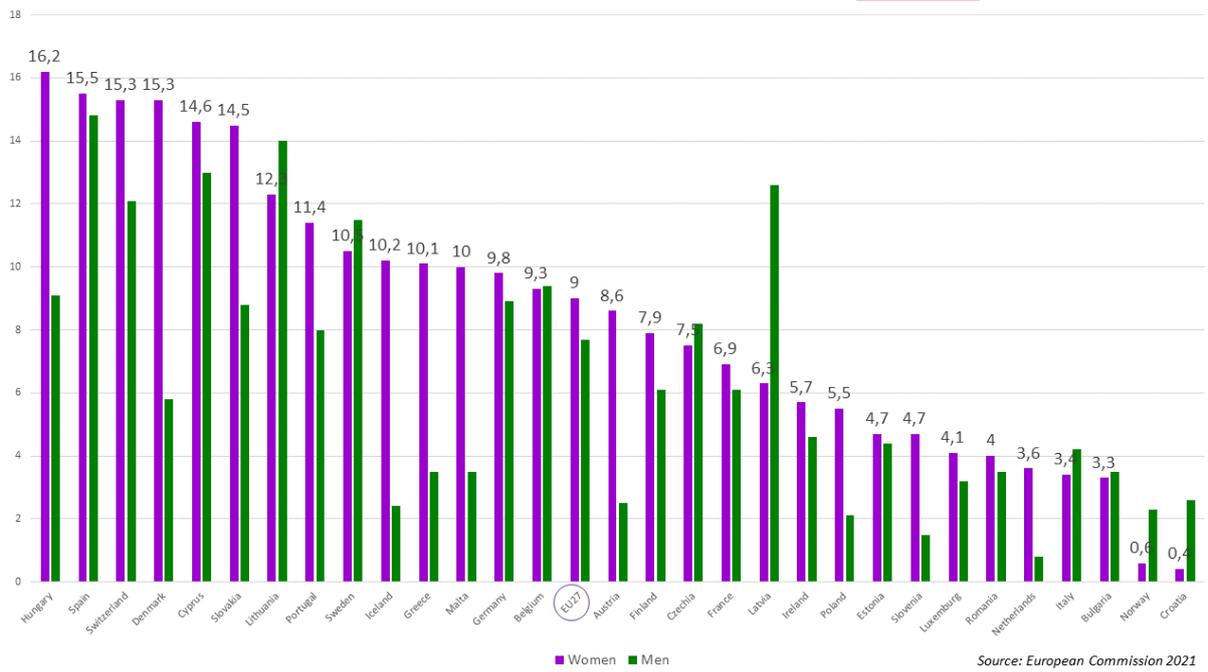
¹⁰ Lynch, K (2014) New Managerialism: The Impact on Education. *Concept: The Journal of Contemporary Community Education Practice Theory*, 5(3): 1–11. <http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/article/view/2421>

¹¹ O'Keefe, T – Courtois, A (2019) 'Not one of the family': Gender and precarious work in the neoliberal university, *Gender, Work & Organization*, 26(4): 463–479. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12346>

¹² European Commission: The gender pay gap situation in the EU. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/equal-pay/gender-pay-gap-situation-eu_en#europeanequalpayday60

Precarity is an ‘academic trap’ for women, hence their gender-based devaluation can easily push them into precarious positions and jobs, which can exacerbate their already disadvantaged position^{13, 14}. Although different national laws on employment contracts and research funding systems also influence employment patterns, Figure 4 below shows that female researchers in higher education (HE) in the European Research & Innovation (R&I) sector are more likely to be employed with precarious contracts than men: 9% of women academics receive fixed-term contracts of one year or less, or no contract at all, while this ratio is 7.7% for men on average. Meanwhile, huge differences can be observed according to countries, regarding the difference between genders (see Denmark, Iceland, Greece, Malta, Austria, Poland, Slovakia, and the Netherlands), and also in women’s high proportion (the highest case of Hungary, Spain and Switzerland)¹⁵.

Figure 4: Proportion (%) of researchers in HE sector in Europe working under precarious contracts by sex, 2019



¹³ Sümer, S – O’Connor, P – Le Feuvre, N (2020) The Contours of Gendered Academic Citizenship. In Gendered Academic Citizenship, 1–36. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-52600-9_1

¹⁴ Ivancheva, M – Lynch, K – Keating, K (2019) Precarity, gender and care in the neoliberal academy. Gender, Work & Organization, 26(4): 448–462. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12350>

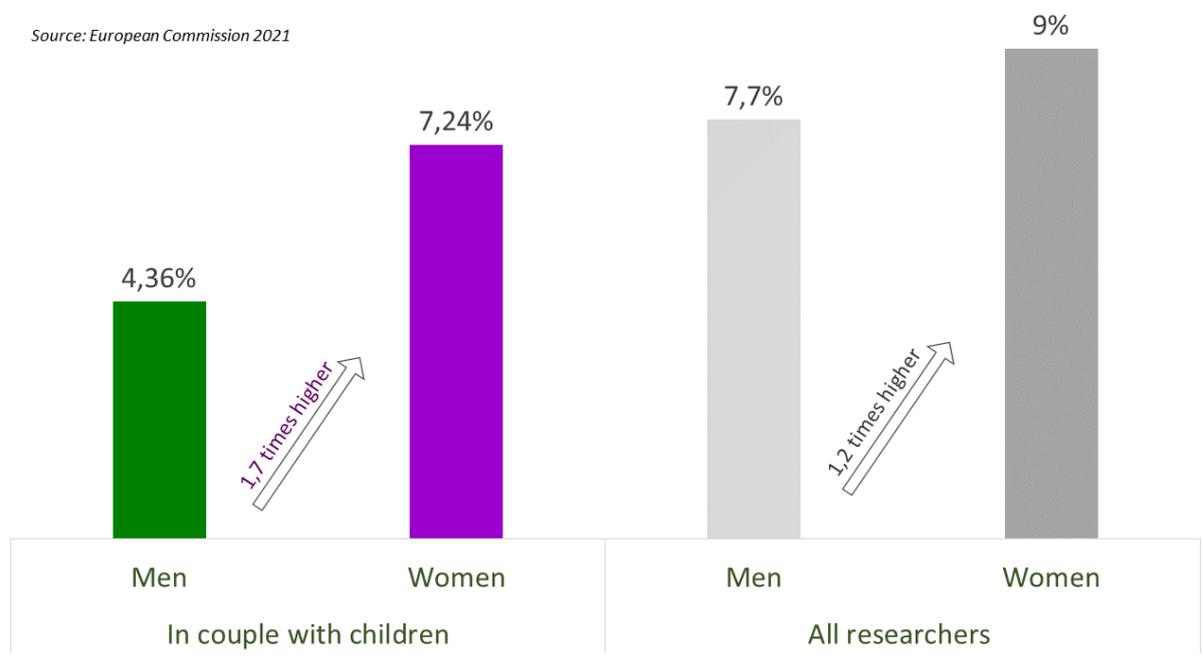
¹⁵ European Commission (2021) She figures 2021: Gender in research and innovation: Statistics and indicators. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/67d5a207-4da1-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

Caring duties increase precarity

Precarity is highly tangible according to parental status. While precariousness can easily affect male researchers, women's disproportionate unpaid and mostly unrecognised caregiving and domestic chores predict precarious employment even among high-skilled professionals in R&I sector. Though the Work-Life Balance Directive of the EP (2019)¹⁶ aims to foster equal sharing of care responsibilities between parents, data indicate that more institutional support is needed. Figure 5 below shows that precarious employment (fixed-term contracts of one year or less, or no contract at all) is less common for both male and female researchers who are in a couple and have children (7.24% and 4.36% respectively). However, it is worth noting that among them, women are more likely- to face precarious employment. Thus, women researchers in a couple and with children are 1.7 times more likely to work precariously compared to their male colleagues. Precariousness varies at the country level: it is the highest for women researchers in couple and with children in Cyprus (26.32%), Spain (19.47%), Greece (11.9%), Sweden (11.29%), Belgium (11.11%), and Hungary (11.11%)¹⁷.

Figure 5: Proportion of researchers in couple with children and all researchers having precarious contracts (HE sector, by sex, EU27, 2019)

Source: European Commission 2021



¹⁶ European Commission (2019) Better work-life balance for parents and carers in the Europe.

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=9438&furtherNews=yes>

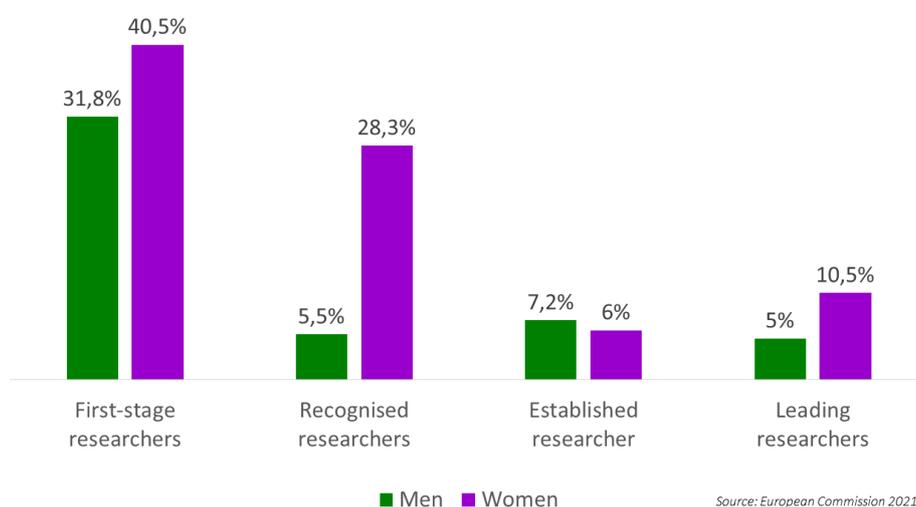
¹⁷ European Commission (2021) She figures 2021: Gender in research and innovation: Statistics and indicators.

<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/67d5a207-4da1-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

Highest precarity at early academic career

Beyond sex, gender and parental status, other personal characteristics or identities, such as ethnicity, sexual identity or age can intersect with the propensity of precarity, which deepens the discrimination of women in academia^{18, 19, 20}. Academics in graduate teaching and early postdoctoral positions quickly experience academic precariousness. Among ‘first-stage researchers’ (up to PhD), the proportion of precarious work (fixed-term contracts of one year or less, or no contract at -all) is alarmingly large: 40% for women and 31.8% for men. When researchers reach the ‘recognised researchers’ stage (PhD holders, or equivalent, who are not yet fully independent), precarious work dramatically decreases by one-sixth for men (from 31.8% to 5.5%), but for women to a much lesser extent (from 40.5% to 28.3%), resulting five times difference between genders (Figure 6)²¹. At the same time, the high rate of precarious contracts can also be partly attributed to the lack of permanent positions, as more newly minted doctorates enter research careers than senior researchers become inactive²². Though the gender gap almost disappears till the ‘established researcher’ career stage (who have developed a level of independence), at the top of the academic career, the proportion of women researchers is again high (10.5%): double both compared to the previous researcher stage and to male leading researchers.

Figure 6: Researchers in HE sector, precarious contracts by sex and career stages (2019, EU27)



¹⁸ Murgia, A – Poggio, B (2019) Gender and Precarious Research Careers. A Comparative Analysis. London and New York: Routledge. <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/76019/1/9781351781428.pdf#page=30>

¹⁹ Fox Tree, JE – Vaid, J (2022) Why so Few, Still? Challenges to Attracting, Advancing, and Keeping Women Faculty of Color in Academia. *Front. Sociol.* 6:792198. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2021.792198/full>

²⁰ European Commission (2020) Communication from the Commission to The European Parliament, The Council and The European Economic and Social Committee of the Regions. A new ERA for Research and Innovation. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0628&qid=1630498105830>

²¹ European Commission (2021) She figures 2021: Gender in research and innovation: Statistics and indicators.

<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/67d5a207-4da1-11ec-91ac-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

²² OECD (2021) Reducing the precarity of academic research careers. Science, Technology and Industry Policy Papers, 113, 68. <https://www.oecd.org/publications/reducing-the-precariety-of-academic-research-careers-0f8bd468-en.htm>

STEM fields

Precarity and gender inequalities in the male-dominated professions in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields also can be exaggerated, hence the masculine view of science and the traditional gender and family norms tend to impose barriers to women's professional advancement. Female professionals often experience gender-based biases and discrimination, devaluation of their knowledge, exclusion from networks of professional advantage, the gendered distribution of tasks at their material and workload expense, as well as the expectation of higher performance, especially in managerial positions^{23, 24}. All these experiences generate a 'chilly climate' for women researchers in their workplace environment, which contributes to the reduced attractiveness of STEM careers and also to leaving academia²⁵.

Precarity of researchers in the AGRIGEP widening countries

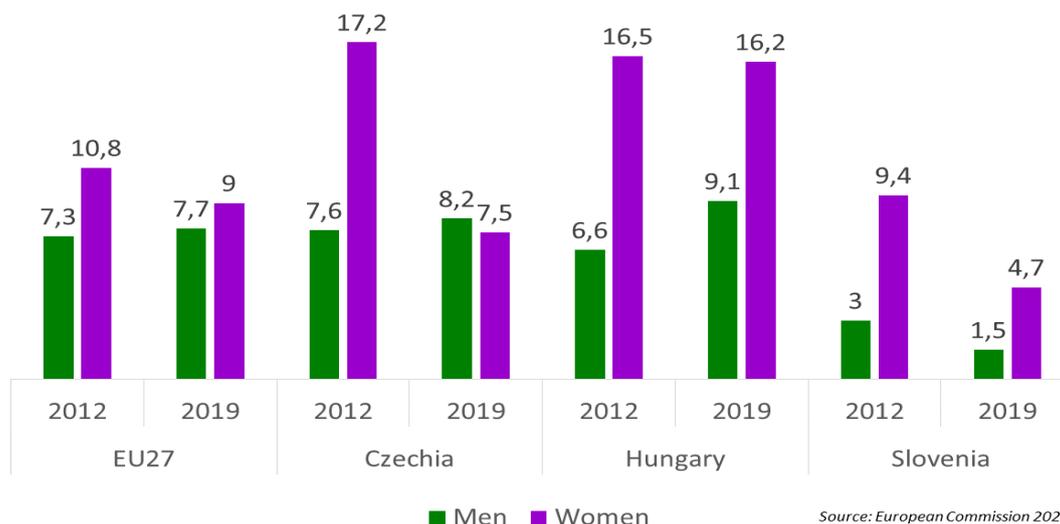
Among the AGRIGEP widening countries, Czechia, Hungary and Slovenia, the extent of precarious work contracts in HE sector has dynamically changed for both women and men between 2012 and 2019. Compared to the European Union's 27 member states' aggregated figures where the rate of precarious work contracts decreased from 10.8% to 9.0% for women and increased from 7.3% to 7.7% for men, the trends in the three AGRIGEP widening countries follow three distinct patterns. Czechia represents the most similar trends with the EU, however the decrease in precarious contracts for women in HE was much more significant with 17.2% in 2012 and only 7.5% in 2019. For men, a slight increase in the rate was observed in the period reaching 8.2%, a figure somewhat higher than for women. Compared to Czechia, in Hungary the employment of women on precarious contracts in HE stagnated between 2012 and 2019 and remained at the same level as in 2012 (16.5% versus 16.2%). In 2019, the highest proportions of employment under precarious contracts for women were found in Hungary within the EU (16.2%). Regarding male researchers, similarly to the European trends, an increase in precarious contracts from 6.6% to 9.1% was observed for men in Hungary. Slovenia is the only country among the AGRIGEP widening countries where both female and male researchers experienced a significant decrease of the ratio of precarious contracts. Though the ratio of precarious contracts is higher for women than for men (4.7% versus 1.5%), both figures are significantly lower than the European average (*European Commission 2021*).

²³ Maranto, CL – Griffin, AE (2011) 'The antecedents of a 'chilly climate' for women faculty in higher education', *Human Relations*, 64(2): 139–159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726710377932>

²⁴ Paksi, V – Nagy, B – Tardos, K (2022) Perceptions of Barriers to Motherhood: Female STEM PhD Students' Changing Family Plans. *Social Inclusion*, 10(3): 149–159. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i3.5250>

²⁵ Xie, Y – Fang, M – Shauman, K (2015) STEM education. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41, 331. <http://10.1146/annurev-soc-071312-145659>

Figure 7: The change in the proportion of researchers in HE sector working under precarious contracts in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, by sex, 2012 and 2019 (%)



Effects of precarity

It is a marked contradiction that although highly qualified scientists enjoy one of the highest social prestige, they often also face degrading working conditions. Precarious academics are more prone to a heavier workload, involving more teaching than research tasks, especially for early career women researchers, who are also assigned a large part of the administrative work. Precarious academics have fewer opportunities to engage in advocacy work and little or no opportunity for career development. Stuck in the academic hierarchy, they worry about their job security and future, and their expectations for the future are also typically pessimistic. This ‘future anxiety’ results in various forms of tension in their lives^{26, 27}. Their persistence in the field is often explained by a sense of vocation and professionalism, which neoliberal organisations tend to abuse. It is a kind of ‘cruel optimism’, when something you want is actually an obstacle to your success²⁸. At the same time, in addition to professional commitment, what keeps women on the career path is that they perceive academic and university working conditions as more compatible with their personal lives and family formation than with more competitive working conditions in other fields²⁹.

²⁶ Read, B – Leathwood, C (2018) ‘Tomorrow’s a mystery: Constructions of the future and ‘un/becoming’ amongst ‘early’ and ‘late’ career academics’. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 27(4): 333–351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2018.1453307>

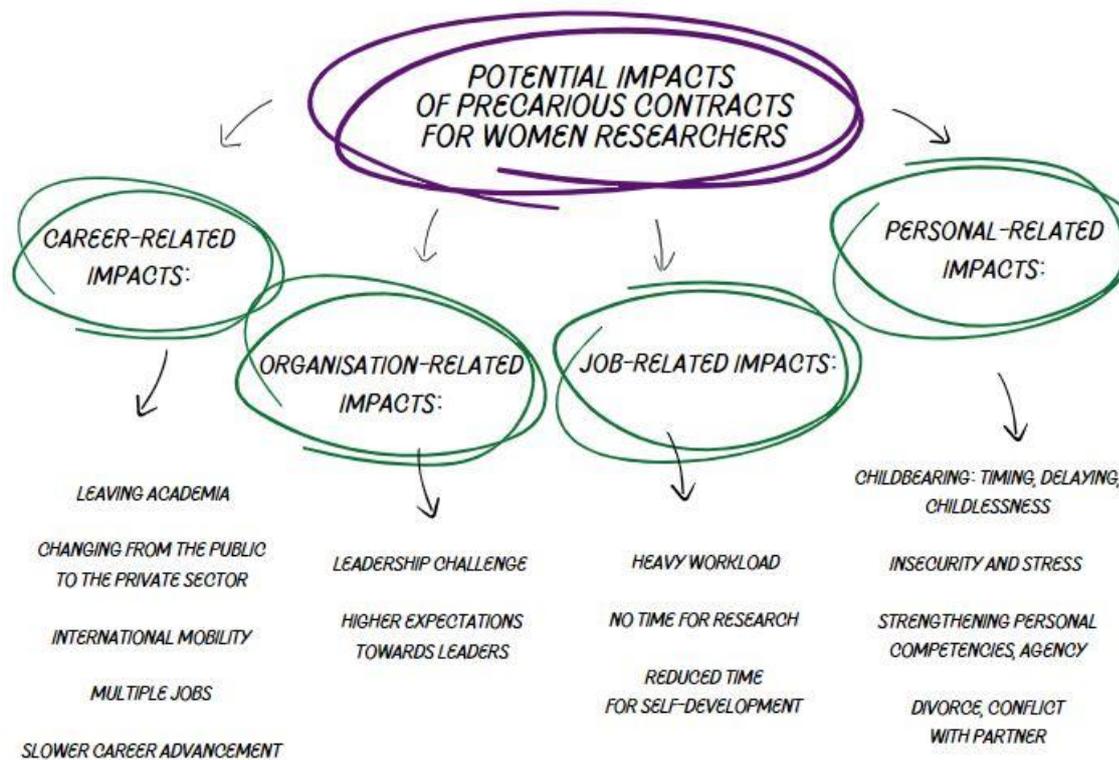
²⁷ O’Keefe, T – Courtois, A (2019), ‘Not one of the family’: Gender and precarious work in the neoliberal university’, *Gender, Work & Organization*, 26(4): 463–479. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12346>

²⁸ Berlant, L (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. London: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394716>

²⁹ Mason, MA – Wolfinger, NH – Goulden, M (2013) *Do babies matter?: Gender and family in the ivory tower* (Families in Focus). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. <https://www.rutgersuniversitypress.org/do-babies-matter/9780813560809/>

Figure 8 depicts some potential impacts of precarious contracts for women researchers, based on a qualitative research carried out in one of the AGRIGEP countries³⁰.

Figure 8: Potential impacts of precarious contracts for women researchers



Precarity and Gender Equality Plans (GEPs)

The EU has taken several actions in the past decade to address precarious work, such as directives on transparent and predictable working conditions and work-life balance, or policy initiatives, such as the new Skills Agenda, the Digital Europe Programme and the Gender Equality Strategy for 2020-2025³¹. To achieve structural change, it is of primordial importance to enhance awareness of R&I institutions' responsibility as employers to reduce precarity in the employment relationship. Moreover, targeting improvements in precarious working conditions as part of the Gender Equality Plans could substantially pave new avenues in this direction. It is recommendable to integrate precarity-related indicators into EU documents supporting the development of Gender Equality Plans in the future.

³⁰ Tardos, K – Paksi, V: The Precarity Paradox: Experiences of Female PhD-holders across Career Stages in STEM. Learning and Teaching. The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences (under publication)

³¹ European Commission (2020) A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0152&qid=1630498219130>

Abbreviations

AGRIGEP: Assessment and Implementation of Agriculture and Life Science Universities' first Gender Equality Plans in widening countries. A Horizon Europe project funded by the EU

EIGE: European Institute for Gender Equality

EP: European Parliament

EU: European Union

GEP: gender equality plan

HE: higher education

R&I European Research & Innovation

STEM: science, technology, engineering and mathematics

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