

*Arnaud Lechevalier*

## Gender and the labour market: A survey on French research\*

*Abstract:* This article provides a survey on the contributions made in France in sociology and economics over the last three decades in the field of gender focused research on (female) employment as well as on discrimination against women in the French labour market. The first part shows that the topics of women's work and then female employment have turned into the determining issues for the emergence of gender centred studies in social sciences in France. From this point of view, three main drivers need to be considered: the feminist movements, the internationalisation of (Anglo-Saxon) scientific research and the European integration. The second part presents an overview of French research on gender issues and the labour market with an analysis focused on employment trends and inequalities from the 1990s onwards. It looks at the ways in which this gender approach in economics and sociology research has led, first, to the revisiting of traditional issues, second, to the conceptualisation of analytical shifts as well as, third, to the exploration of new issues. Against this backdrop, this literature review highlights some of the key developments in France over the three decades concerning female employment and labour market gender inequalities.

*Keywords:* Gender and labour market, women and work, employment, segmentations, inequalities and discrimination, public policies.

*Arnaud Lechevalier, Gender und Arbeitsmarkt: Eine Erhebung des französischen Forschungsstands*

*Zusammenfassung:* Der Artikel gibt einen Überblick über die Beiträge, die in Frankreich in den letzten drei Jahrzehnten in Soziologie und Wirtschaftswissenschaften im Bereich der geschlechtsspezifischen Forschung zur (weiblichen) Beschäftigung sowie zur Diskriminierung von Frauen auf dem französischen Arbeitsmarkt geleistet wurden. Im ersten Teil wird gezeigt, dass in Frankreich die Themen der Frauenarbeit und später der weiblichen Beschäftigung zentrale Fragestellungen für die Entstehung und Entwicklung geschlechtsspezifischer Studien in den Sozialwissenschaften gewesen sind. Aus dieser Perspektive müssen drei treibende Kräfte berücksichtigt werden: die feministischen Bewegungen, die Internationalisierung der (angelsächsischen) wissenschaftlichen Forschung und die europäische Integration. Der zweite Teil bietet einen Überblick über die französische Forschung zu geschlechtsspezifischen Fragen und dem Arbeitsmarkt mit einer Analyse, die sich auf

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Beschäftigungstrends und Ungleichheiten ab den 1990er Jahren konzentriert. Es wird untersucht, wie dieser geschlechtsspezifische Ansatz in der Wirtschafts- und Soziologieforschung erstens zur Wiederaufnahme traditioneller Themen, zweitens zu analytischen Verschiebungen und drittens zur Erforschung neuer Themen und Fragestellungen geführt hat. Vor diesem Hintergrund beleuchtet diese Literaturübersicht einige der bedeutendsten Entwicklungen in Frankreich in den letzten drei Jahrzehnten in Bezug auf die Beschäftigung von Frauen und die geschlechtsspezifischen Ungleichheiten auf dem Arbeitsmarkt.

**Stichwörter:** Gender und Arbeitsmarkt, Frauen und Arbeit, Beschäftigung, Arbeitsmarktsegmente, Ungleichheiten und Diskriminierung, öffentliche Politik

*Arnaud Lechevalier*, University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire pour la Sociologie Economique (UMR 3320 CNRS-CNAM, Paris).

Correspondence address: Arnaud.Lechevalier@univ-paris1.fr

### *Introduction*

The women's emancipation movement from a legal point of view, yet also concerning the rise of women's qualifications and labour force participation as well as in terms of sexual habits and social issues, represents one of the most significant social developments of the second half of the 20th century. In particular, "Women's increased involvement in the economy was the most significant change in labour markets during the past century" (Goldin, 2006: 1). Paradoxically, despite its significance, with a few exceptions these major social facts were initially largely overlooked by the social sciences until the women studies and then the concept of "gender" emerged as a theoretical framework. The adoption of a gender focused perspective has ultimately led to a different understanding of modern societies as well as a different conception of the social sciences themselves.

"In its most recent usage, 'gender' seems to have first appeared among American feminists who wanted to insist on the fundamentally social quality of distinctions based on sex. The word denoted a rejection of the biological determinism implicit in the use of such terms as 'sex' or 'sexual difference' (...) In addition, and perhaps most important, 'gender' was a term offered by those who claimed that women's scholarship would fundamentally transform disciplinary paradigms. Feminist scholars pointed out early on that the study of women would not only add new subject matter but would also force a critical re-examination to the premises and standards of existing scholarly work" (Scott, 1986:1054).

This link between the gender issue and its impact on the way research was conceived is of decisive importance in the present context as the gender problematic in France emerged mainly around the issues of women's work and then women's employment. The specific perspective of the gender approach is indeed an essential analytical tool for understanding the major transformations in employment over the recent decades,

given that “women are not marginal, peripheral, but symptomatic of all the major changes in the labour market” (Marry, 2011: 170).<sup>1</sup> Our contribution presents a survey on the research done in economics and sociology focusing on gender and labour market issues in France over the past three decades. It shows how the gender issue progressively transformed theoretical perspectives and the objects of research in this field.

In a first part, we analyse the driving forces behind the emergence of the gender issue during the second half of the twentieth century in France and the ways it has been utilised or reappropriated in economics as well as in sociology, particularly where the dynamics of (female) employment and labour market discriminations against women are concerned. Three primary driving forces will be identified that have influenced the content of this research agenda: the feminist movement, the internationalisation of research, and the European integration. In each case the issues of women’s work, and then female employment were central for the emergence and consolidation of the gender problematic in French social sciences. In the second part, we will initially examine a variety of gender and employment issues that have led academic research in economics and sociology to revisit traditional subjects (growth of employment and changes in employment rates, women’s qualifications and careers; occupational gender segregation) as well as triggering analytical shifts and new issues in the areas of gender inequalities on the labour market, employment and public policies, discriminations in pay and recruitment. At the same time, this literature review allows us to present some empirical developments in France in the field of female employment, working conditions and careers over the past three decades.

### *1. The emergence and consolidation of gender issues in France: The driving forces of change*

Three primary driving forces will be identified that have influenced both the problematics and the content of the research on gender and labour market in France: the feminist movement, the internationalisation of research, and the European integration (Lechevalier, 2022). Analysing the first driving force presents a major clue on how the debates and demands of the feminist movement have led French feminist research and (female) researchers in sociology to tackle the issue of women’s (paid and unpaid) work from the end of the 1970s onwards. Second, the reappropriation of Anglo-Saxon research in France highlights why the issues of division of labour between men and women, and those of discrimination against women on the labour market, have fuelled first orthodox and then, from the 1990s onwards, heterodox gendered approaches to economics. Third, because of its hard and soft laws, the European Union has played a key role in France in supporting and developing the research in social sciences on gendered discriminations in the labour market and regarding public policies. In all

1 Our own translation – as in the rest of the text.

three cases, we will see that the issue of women's work and female employment have been decisive factors in the emergence and consolidation of gender centred studies.

### *The feminist movement(s)*

Most analyses of the institutionalisation of first the feminist studies and then of the gender focused research agree on locating this genealogy in the feminist movement of the 1970s' (Pavard et al., 2020, chapter XII). This process of institutionalisation has been the result of a long and conflictual process since the end of the 19th century and the (social) birth of feminism.<sup>2</sup> After World War II, feminist research was developed primarily in anthropology and sociology, often in the context of issues concerning women's work and the gendered division of labour. In sociology, it can be said that "(women's) work was at the beginning of everything" (Clair, 2015). Yet, despite the pioneering works of Madeleine Guilbert, Évelyne Sullerot and Andrée Michel in the late 1950s (Lurol, 2001), the Handbooks on labour sociology during the 1960s almost totally ignored the whole issue. As stressed by M. Maruani (2001: 44), "going through the tables of content of the review *Sociologie du travail* is from this point of view quite revealing: Over the entire period covered, from 1959 (when the journal was founded) until 1999, entries on 'Women', 'Gender', 'Social relations of sex' or 'Sexual division of labour' do not appear anywhere in the thematic indexes".

Long after its introduction into the English-speaking world, the concept of "gender" made a late entry into France, particularly in historical studies (Riot-Sarcey, 2010). Researchers took a focused interest in the gendered nature of "history" – even though the use of the concept was not always explicit, and its ambiguities not always resolved. The first contemporary lecture in women's history, organised by Michelle Perrot at Paris 7 was entitled "Les femmes ont-elles une histoire?" did not emerge until the 1970s in an intellectual context that was conducive to the emergence of new questions: the pioneering research into the sociology of women's labour, the development of the anthropology of the family, the introduction into the historical discipline on the workers' history" (Thébaud, 2003: 76–77).

At the end of the 1970s (*Critique de l'économie politique* in 1978) the first analyses on domestic work appeared in the context of the debates and demands of the feminist movements but also nurtured by the sociology of the family. "The private is political: by defining free domestic work as the material basis of patriarchal exploitation, the women's movement opened a breach (...). This intrusion of (unpaid) domestic work into the field of sociology forced us to rethink the definition of work" (Maruani, 2001: 47). At the same time, the idea that the professional and family spheres were intertwined was particularly central concerning Danièle Kergoat's research (1978). Her research combined the variables of class and gender, exploitation and domination to

2 For a historical perspective from 1890 to 1940 on the obstacles to the academic and scientific recognition of women in the French social sciences, see Charron, 2014. On the issue of women within the Durkheimian tradition in France, see Lallement, 2022.

explore working and living conditions of female workers, and later on broadening its perspective by including also their relationship to trade unionism and collective action. The first essential factor in the emergence of the gender issue was political: “the feminist movement, by questioning the past and looking for the roots of women’s oppression or revolt, gave a decisive impetus and prompted sympathisers in the research and teaching” (Thébaud, 2007). Yet this impact of feminist movements is notably complex to delineate (Bereni et al., 2012). During the 1970s, activists of the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF) advocated for the development of theories that integrated intellectual and practical approaches: “conducting research on women with women as women.” The second-wave feminism (during the 1960s-1970s) was instrumental in challenging the traditional gender roles within the family and fostering the development of more egalitarian norms. Consequently, this movement encouraged women to pursue education and careers, amidst a backdrop of changing context, particularly marked by increased access to contraception and the legalisation of abortion thanks to legislation introduced by Simone Veil in 1974. A first step taken towards the institutionalisation consisted in the 1982 conference held at the University Toulouse-Le Mirail, organised by different feminist groups with the support of the Ministry of Research, the Ministry for Women’s Rights and the CNRS. It gave rise to the first research programme within the CNRS “Recherches féministes, recherche sur les femmes” as well as to the creation of regional associations and then, in 1989, to the *Association nationale des études féministes (Anef)*. The Anef has aimed to develop, disseminate and promote teaching and research “on feminism, women and gender relations” (ANEF, 2014).

However, a long-standing debate existed concerning the role to be “given”, one the one hand, to women’s social and political engagement, who alone were supposed to be able to express their own oppression and, on the other hand, to the gradual process of institutionalisation of these research fields. To impose feminist themes and approaches in research institutions, researchers had indeed to eventually assume the logic of academic work and criteria. Some of them refused to do so – as for example the controversy surrounding the international conference organised as part of the preparations in France for the World Conference in Beijing has demonstrated in 1995 (ANEF, 2014: 7–8). Gender studies emerged as a result of a confrontation and ultimately a compromise between feminist demands and academic requirements. “For a long time, the positions between militant loyalty and academic integration seemed irreconcilable. However, it was undoubtedly in this ‘in-between’ that this institutionalisation was consolidated” (Pavard et al., 2020: 377).

The bicentenary of the French Revolution gave rise to a range of scientific events and publications at a time when the fight for political parity was gaining in intensity. In political science, it was precisely the rise of the issue of ‘women and power’ that was to encourage the disciplinary acclimatisation of the field of research (Achin and Bereni, 2013), which occurred at the time of the mobilisations, from the early 1990s onwards, and then the debates on the parity law of 2000, which were accompanied by the organisation of conferences (“Gender and Power” in 2002). The movement for

parity in politics has had a significant impact not only on French politics but also on French political science (Jenson, 2003). More generally, this context has encouraged a new upsurge in feminist studies, as evidenced by the creation of new journals devoted to these issues: *Les Cahiers du Mage* (Marché du travail et genre) were created in 1995 (now known as *Travail, Genre et société*), the relaunch in 2001 of *Nouvelles questions féministes*, then *Genre, sexualité et sociétés* in 2009.

Following this pioneering phase, the 1990s witnessed a dual development (Maruani, 2001). This period was characterised by research programmes supported by the CNRS and various universities; although the number of PhD dissertations defended on this topic increased, it remained relatively low (Lallement, 2003).<sup>3</sup> First, this era marked a shift in research focus from examining women's conditions at work to a broader analysis of women's work in general, eventually evolving into the study of gender as an employment issue. This transition reflects the movement from women's studies to gender studies (Lurol, 2001). For a long time, sociologists in France spoke of 'sex relations' before adopting the term 'gender' to analyse differences in wages, careers and working hours. Second, against this background, there was a discernible shift in the research themes addressed. With the increasing number of women entering the workforce, studies began to focus on employment inequalities, unemployment, under-employment, and job insecurity. Additionally, the long-term dynamics of female employment were analysed more comprehensively (Maruani, 2000, Maruani and Méron, 2011). In this respect, part-time work, the diversification of working hours and the question of how to combine social times (work and family) became major issues.<sup>4</sup> The rise in female employment also reflects the increase in women's levels of qualification, a topic particularly investigated by the sociology of education in the early 1990s (Duru-Bellat, 1990; Baudelot and Establet, 1992). This development prompted questions regarding the gendered value of qualifications and the training-employment relationship, for instance for engineers (Marry, 2004). At the same time, it was shown that the valuation of qualifications in industrial sectors varies significantly according to gender (Baudelot and Gollac, 1993).

A third phase of the institutionalisation process started in 2010 with the arrival of a new generation of researchers. In spite of the attacks against "gender theory" from 2012 onwards which happened in the wake of the "Manif pour tous" and of the "Printemps français" movements<sup>5</sup>, the field of gender studies kept expanding, e.g. with the creation of several Master degrees, while a *Groupement d'Intérêt Scientifique* (a

3 An investigation of the doctoral thesis database (<https://theses.fr/?domaine=theses>) reveals that it was not until the 2010s that the number of theses adopting a gender-based approach truly began to rise, primarily in the fields of sociology and history.

4 See below part 2.

5 "La Manif pour tous" and "Le printemps français" are French protest groups fighting against the Taubira law. This law, named after the French Minister of Justice, Christiane Taubira, was adopted in April 2013, legalizing same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by same-sex married couples (Morabito, 2013). Eventually, a similar "wind of reaction" would be raised against the intersectional approach around 2020 (Lépinard and Mazouz, 2021 and below part 2.).

network bringing together around thirty institutional partners involved in gender and sexuality research), called *l'Institut du genre*, was set up at the CNRS in 2012 (Pavard et al., 2020: 384).

### *Internationalisation of scientific production and reappropriation of Anglo-Saxon research: the example of (labour) economics*

A second factor consolidating the gender issue in French social sciences is the internationalisation of scientific production, and particularly the reappropriation of the Anglo-Saxon research. In this context, we focus particularly on the influence US research has had on (socio-)economists in France and their research on the gender issue. For a long period of time economics had neglected the contribution of women to the economy while completely ignoring the gender issue. This can be attributed to the discipline's historical academic consolidation based on a dual movement: the understanding of human beings to individual economic rationality and the equation of rationality with the masculine. This is evident in both the prevalent hypothetico-deductive methods and the use of gendered statistics as empirical material (Talahite, 2014). Moreover, economics is a paradoxical field: the differences between women and men (conceived as "natural") were introduced into the discipline through a very 'orthodox' school of thought, the Chicago School. This school of thought proposed an analytical framework for understanding sex-based inequalities, particularly regarding the access to the labour market and the division of labour within the households.

In the late 1950s, Gary Becker published "The Economics of Discrimination" (1957), which coincided with the enactment of two major American anti-discrimination laws: the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII). Becker introduced several innovations that significantly influenced the understanding of sex differences within the discipline of economics (Sofer, 2003; Talahite, 2014): By generalizing the maximization calculation to a broad spectrum of human behaviours and interactions, including familial and matrimonial strategies, and by developing the theory of human capital, Becker provided a new framework. By conceptualizing the consumer as a producer who combines market goods and time to obtain non-market goods, he enabled economic theory to incorporate domestic work and the labour supply of women into its analyses. The basis of this approach is the focus on the individual and the rational behaviour of agents. If men can obtain higher wages in the labour market and women have higher productivity in domestic tasks, this configuration aligns with the traditional division of labour. Consequently, the differences between men and women are explained by 'preferences' and/or specialisation within households. This paternalistic approach is evident in Becker's early models of family decision-making (Sofer, 2003).

This theoretical perspective reached France in the 1970s, exemplified by Catherine Sofer's PhD dissertation "Essai sur la théorie économique de la division du travail entre hommes et femmes" (Essay on the Economic Theory of the Division of Labour Between Men and Women), defended in 1982. Sofer is one of the very first economists

in France to work in this field. She adopts the Beckerian theoretical framework and, by excluding its blatant sexism, she modernises the neo-classical economics approach on gender by focusing her research on wage discrimination and the inequalities within households. In particular, she introduces an original new approach regarding discrimination (Havet and Sofer, 2002) including, more recently, the impact of stereotypes (Couprie, Cudéville and Sofer, 2019). She formulates a model for labour supply choices within households, including sharing rules and domestic work (Sofer, 2003; 2012).

Another important US source consists in Claudia Goldin's work – a former student of Gary Becker, honoured with the 2023 Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel. Goldin significantly enriches the Beckerian analytical framework by placing it within a long-term historical perspective supported by extensive data accumulation. As she wrote in 2006: "It would not be much of an exaggeration to claim that women gave 'birth' to modern labour economics, especially labour supply" (Goldin, 2006:3). Her research primarily examines how (American) women's individual behaviour in the labour market responds to external shocks or incentives. Much of Goldin's work has focused on the role of education, technology and contraceptives methods as well as their interactions. These factors have transformed women's time horizons, identities, and decision-making processes, thereby explaining the "quiet revolution" that has significantly increased women's labour participation and employment since the 1960s. Goldin's work on women's participation in the labour market and discrimination (Goldin and Rousse, 2000) has had a genuine influence in France, not least because it attracted the critical interest of some French feminist economists, among them Françoise Milewski and Hélène Péribier (2018) at the *Observatoire français des conjonctures économiques*; who in 2010 established the *Programme de Recherche de d'Enseignement des Savoirs sur le Genre* (PRESAGE) at Science Po Paris. This cross-disciplinary network of research centres has played a major role for the development of interdisciplinary gender research as well as supplying a wide range of new gender focused courses for higher education.<sup>6</sup>

While isolated feminist researchers had already started challenging the neo-classical approach in the 1970s, significant publications that explicitly claimed a feminist economic approach emerged only from the 1990s onwards. The International Association for Feminist Economics was founded in 1992, publishing the *Feminist Economics* journal and the manifestos *Beyond Economic Man* I (Ferber and Nelson, 1993) and II. In this context, two main themes played a key role (Nelson, 2015): the deconstruction of the established economic theory, its paradigms and methods, as well as the elaboration of a new research programme to address this issue.

This feminist economic theory has seen little conceptual development in France, apart from Christine Delphy's work linking "the over-exploitation of women in paid work to patriarchy" and "the exploitation of most women in the private sphere" (Del-

6 See <https://www.sciencespo.fr/gender-studies/fr/programme/presentation/>.

phy, 1998).<sup>7</sup> In fact, the academic field in France has largely remained unequal from a gender point of view, as illustrated e.g. in 2000 through a manifesto (“L’économie est-elle une science des hommes?”) published by female researchers protesting against a conference dedicated to the “working poor”, because no women had been invited.<sup>8</sup>

Heterodox economists, who have often focused on labour market and employment issues, have for a long time remained rather indifferent to the issue of gender (Silvera, 2001). The theory of labour market segmentation, which emerged in the United States in the late 1960s from the work of institutionalists and ‘radical’ economists, was originally based on observations of black ghettos in American cities. In France, the segmentation paradigm, and its extensions with the “occupational markets” approach as well as the “transitional labour markets” research programme have remained for a long time silent on gender issues (Michon, 2003). Only the research of Jill Rubery and the creation of the journal *Gender, Work and Organization* in 1994 changed the deal by integrating gender issues within this paradigm. Several studies have shown that segmentation is also gendered, with women being particularly concentrated in certain branches and professions (Lemière and Silvera, 2014). This approach has also highlighted the interdependence between the spheres of economic production and social reproduction, which plays a central role in explaining job segmentation (Ledoux, 2020). Broadly speaking, the gendered division of labour and the dynamics of gender inequality have to be understood with regard to the functioning of society, institutions, and the legal framework. This is why methodological convergences between institutionalism and feminism have explicitly been pointed out (Morel, 2007). “This theoretical framework provides the possibility to analyse the evolutionary nature of institutions (family, social assistance, etc.) and their role in recomposing gender inequalities” (Périvier, 2018, 24).

Indeed, in France, only the development of a socio-economic approach has eventually challenged the predominant orthodox paradigm on gender issues within the economic discipline. In this regard, from a historical perspective, two institutional sets have had a major influence (Pavard et al., 2020: 379–380). First, the Gedisst (*Groupe d’étude sur la division sociale et sexuelle du travail*) was created at the University Paris 8 and later on transformed into the Gers (*Genre et rapports sociaux*). It remained for a while the only research unit explicitly focused on gender studies. The journal *Cahiers du Gedisst* (later renamed into *Les Cahiers du genre*) was launched in 1991

7 More recently, Hélène Périvier (2020) has produced a comprehensive synthesis on the contributions of feminist perspectives to the renewal of the economic theory including their implications for public policies.

8 See <http://hussonet.free.fr/poors.pdf>. A recent study, based on a database containing 96 % of PhD theses defended between 1985 and 2021 in the field of economics in France, shows that, after a phase of narrowing tendencies in gender gaps, over the last two decades stagnation has persisted. Nowadays approximately only one third of all PhD candidates are female and only a quarter female dissertation supervisors. While young women constitute a majority among students when beginning studies in economics, they reach the doctorate level less frequently than their male counterparts (“leaky pipeline” effect). The low representation of women among PhD supervisors appears to result from a “tiny pipeline” effect, meaning that the pool of potential female supervisors is too small (Sagot, 2023).

in this context. Second, created in 1995 thanks to the initiative of Margaret Maruani and with the support of the European Commission (see below) and of the Service des droits des femmes (SDEF), the Mage (*Marché du travail et genre*) was the first CNRS research network dedicated to gender issues. Its main objectives have consisted in the dissemination of research through a journal launched in 1999, *Travail, genre et sociétés*, and in the organisation of scientific events. This network has also contributed to the internationalisation of French research on gender.

As shown by many articles published e.g. in *Travail, genre et sociétés*, this socio-economic approach<sup>9</sup> generated a wealth of work on issues related to training and employment, inequalities in access to management positions, and occupational segregation (Lemière and Silvera, 2014; Duru-Bellat, 2014). Concurrently, many studies have focused on issues of professional (in-)equality and discrimination from various points of view: employment, unemployment, working hours, wage gap, and career trajectories (Milewski, 2004; Ponthieux and Moeurs, 2015; and *below*).

Finally, the internationalisation of North American research has also played a key role in the deployment of the intersectional approach in France.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, it was inappropriately criticised for applying to France analyses that would only be relevant to the United States (Lépinard and Mazouz, 2021, 53–54).

### *European integration: law and cognitive frameworks*

A third explanatory factor for the emergence of the gender issue is linked to the consequences of the European integration which can be understood as based on two pillars of unequal importance: the implementation of gender equality by and through the law (non-discrimination principle) on the one hand, positive action and gender mainstreaming on the other hand. As historical studies have shown, the European Union has played a key role in addressing gender issues by producing legislation on equality and other public policies (Briatte et al., 2019). This European framework has had a major influence on national policies in terms of content, debates and evaluation of public policies. Like in other European member states, it has also provided direct support for gender research networks in France.

Equal pay for women and men is one of the few social provisions included in the Treaty of Rome (Art. 119). Like many other social legal provisions, it has to be understood in the context of preventing “distortions of competition”. This article can be explained more specifically in the context of France’s fears concerning its competi-

<sup>9</sup> In comparison to the usual approach in economics, the socio-economic approach considers economic facts as “*faits sociaux*” in the sense of Durkheim. It combines economic and sociological theories with the aim of explaining social facts by using a broader concept of social rationality which also includes beliefs and values. Additionally, this approach introduces power relationships, institutional frameworks as well as public policies as important and complementary factors to explain “social reality”. See a. o. Steiner, 2011. However, the “Household Economy” approach, à la Swedberg (2011) – one of the most acknowledged proponents of this approach – has received rather little attention in France.

<sup>10</sup> See below part 2.

tiveness (Frader, 2019). The text thus had a limited objective, linked to competition law. Yet, this article introduced into the Treaty of Rome a principle which was eventually to undergo considerable development while paving the way for one of the major achievements of social Europe (Rodière, 2013).

Directives adopted in the 1970s and 1980s and the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) have extended the scope of equal treatment over the entire working life (employment, training, social security) and to all persons concerned. (including self-employed individuals). The "Agreement on Social Policy," annexed to the Maastricht Treaty and later incorporated into the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997, added provisions to combat discrimination by granting the Council the power to take "appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex (...) or sexual orientation" (current Article 19 of the TFEU). The same Treaty of Amsterdam made gender equality an objective of the EU (Articles 2 and 3). Subsequently, at the turn of the century, the launch of the European Employment Strategy gave visibility to the issue of inequalities between women and men in the labour market (Behning and Serrano Pascual, 2002). In this context, the promotion of professional equality became a tool for raising the employment rates of women (Lisbon Strategy) (Périvier and Verdugo, 2018).

From the 1990s onwards, it became evident that gender equality could no longer be confined to work and employment policies. The gender approach needed to be mainstreamed across all public policies. "Gender mainstreaming", initially advocated by NGOs, was endorsed by the European Commission following the Beijing Conference in 1995. This approach, described as an "ardent obligation", however without binding legal force (Jacquot, 2013), led to the establishment of action programmes and *ad hoc* institutions at various levels, including certain EU Commission directorates and international networks of experts supported by the Commission (Senac, 2003).

Against this background, the European integration has had three main consequences for French research and teaching on gender. First, major scientific works have been devoted to analysing the content and impact of the European Union's policy in this area, from a historical (Briatte et al., 2019) as well as from a political perspective in sociology (Jacquot, 2013a). In this respect, the development and limits of the "gender mainstreaming approach" at the EU level have turned into a key area of research investigation (Senac, 2003; Jacquot, 2009 and 2013b). Second, the implementation of several European directives into the French legislation – from equal pay to parental leave (Collombet and Math, 2019) – just as the evaluation of the European Employment Strategy from a gender perspective, have given rise to a wide range of topic specific evaluation studies.<sup>11</sup> Third, from the 1980s onwards, in order to build support for its proposals, the European Commission took an active role in structuring interest group participation and developing networks of experts on the gender issues (transposition and implementation of equality directives, equal opportunities in education or decision-making, childcare, etc.). This has led to the construction of what A. Woodward

11 See Périvier and Verdugo (2018) and below, part 2.

(2004) has called a “velvet triangle” between “feminist bureaucrats” at the European level, “trusted academics”, and “organized voices in the women’s movement”; these “actors” “developed histories of mutual dependence and exchange”. Then, even more deliberately, European institutions funded research programmes explicitly integrating the gender perspective. In this way, the European Union was directly involved in the development of teaching and research on gender in France (ANEF, 2014), initially on the basis of a Community Action Programme in 2000, financed by the European Social Fund (Pavard et al., 2020: 382). A network of project managers in higher education establishments was set up. Universities were encouraged to include actions in favour of gender equality and to create new courses on gender at all levels of the curriculum.

This additional involvement of the EU contributed simultaneously to an early Europeanisation for gender specific issues as well as to the legitimisation of certain disciplinary sub-fields, which at that time were still being marginalised in many of the member countries – in France specifically the sociology of work as well as the sociology of gender (Jacquot, 2013a).

## *2. In what ways has the consideration of gender renewed our understanding of the dynamics of employment and inequality in France?*

Gender analyses do not simply ‘add a variable’ to traditional theoretical conceptualisations or offer an additional area of knowledge. They provide “keys for revisiting the concepts, methods and canonical objects of traditional disciplines and their intersections” (Achin and Bereni, 2013:13). Moreover, thinking in terms of gender allows analytical shifts, the exploration of new research subjects, the development of new concepts, and the introduction of new methods. In the second part we present an overview of French research on gender issues and the labour market by methodologically opting for an approach centred *on research questions* with a focus on employment development and gender inequalities from the 1990s onwards. It takes a look at the ways in which this gender approach in economics and sociology research led to, firstly, revisiting the canonical objects of investigation; secondly, to producing analytical shifts; thirdly, to incorporating an intersectional approach.

### *Revisiting the concepts, methods and canonical objects of investigation: dynamics of employment, increase in qualifications and enduring inequalities*

A first set of studies has focused on the gender dimension of employment trends in France: Increasing women’s level of qualification has long been at the heart of overall employment growth in France. However, activity and employment rates have tended to stagnate for recent cohorts of birth and women’s employment in France remains concentrated in certain sectors and occupations.

### *Female employment at the heart of employment growth*

Inspired by a socio-economic approach as presented above, a set of research has focused on the gendered patterns of employment growth in France, particularly in comparison with Germany (Giraud et Lechevalier, 2013; Lechevalier, 2018). Over the last twenty-five years, France and Germany have experienced similar economic growth, averaging 1.5 % per annum excluding inflation. Yet, Germany has created 7.4 million jobs from 2004 to 2023, an increase in employment of over 20 % compared with 16 % in France. This “employment miracle” (Burda and Seele, 2020) is even more paradoxical given that the overall volume of labour (the number of millions of hours worked each year in the economy) has grown by less than 5 % since the turn of the century compared with plus 13 % in France. In both cases, female employment was at the heart of the growth in total employment but in different ways.

In France, between 1982 and 2021, 87 % of the 4.7 million jobs created were female employment, that is an increase of two-thirds in female employment since the 1980s. Despite the decline in the female employment rate for those aged 15–24 and 60–64, the overall female employment rate increased by more than 10 percentage points. In contrast, male employment rates stagnated over the same period and the overall male employment rate initially fell before returning to the same level in 2021 as it was twenty years earlier. The growth in female employment has differed significantly between the two countries. In Germany, this increase is primarily due to the rise in part-time jobs among women. By 2022, nearly half of all female employment in Germany was parttime, compared with only one-third in 1995 and 41 % in 2004. In contrast, France has seen a different trend: 80 % of the 4 million jobs created since 2004 have been full-time jobs. Consequently, the proportion of women working part-time in France decreased from 31 % to 26 %, demonstrating the resilience of the full-time employment norm for French women. However, part-time work is still often the main form of employment for the least qualified French women (Maruani, 2017). If we look at the main reasons why women work part-time, caring for dependent persons emerges as the primary reason (Toffanin, 2024). Yet, despite the differences in terms of “raw” rates of employment, in full-time equivalent terms the employment rate for women is actually very similar in both countries (Lechevalier, 2018).

While in France the activity rate for women has increased since the 1970s, this increase has not been the same across generations: activity rates by age have increased gradually over the generations, from those born in 1935 to those born in 1975, but has stagnated since then (Afsa et Buffeteau, 2006). This is also the case for the proportion of part-time jobs (at a given age), particularly for women (Briard and Calavrezo, 2016). Two recent additions have come to light (Martin, 2022). First, this stagnation must now also be extended to the activity rate. In France, at the age of 40, employment and activity stopped increasing for the generations of women born after 1975. At the age of 30, the point of inflexion concerns the generations of women born after 1980. The second observation relates to the ages of 59–64, which is usually close to the end of working life: the downward trend in activity and employment rates has been

completely reversed for the generations born after 1940. From the generation born around 1925 to those born in 1955 the employment rate at age 59 rose from 28 % to almost 60 %. These cohorts have been progressively affected by the extension of the insurance period required to receive a full pension (1993 and 2003 reforms) and by the increase of the legal retirement age from 60 to 62 (the 2010 reform, which concerns people born after 1951). Nevertheless, the process of catching up between women and men in terms of activity and employment rates, which was very rapid for the generations born between 1925 and 1955, has been markedly slowing for the generations born after 1965. Moreover, whereas for the generations born before 1970 this catching-up process was mainly the result of rising rates for women, the slow convergence of female and male employment rates is now primarily due to the decline in the overall male employment rate. A European comparison confirms that, with a few exceptions (Spain in particular), for most European countries (Germany, Austria, Finland, France) women born at the end of the 1970s have lower full-time equivalent employment rates than women born at the end of the 1950s (Périvier and Verdugo, 2018).

Two additional variables were used to refine the understanding of these trends: the level of qualification and the number of dependent children (Martin, 2022). For women with the lowest levels of education, the rise in activity rates has mainly been reflected in part-time employment. For example, for low-skilled women at the age of 40 the activity rate increased by 10.4 percentage points from the generation born in 1945 to that born in 1975 while the full-time equivalent employment rate rose only by 4.6 percentage points. On the other hand, for the most highly educated women the increase in employment rates was almost entirely reflected in full-time employment.

Women's growing participation in the labour market has also remained strongly determined by the number of dependent minor children within the household. The increases in activity and employment have been weak for women without dependent children; moderate for those with just one dependent child; and more marked for women with two or more dependent children, even though these increases have been more markedly reflected in part-time employment. Despite the rise in their level of qualifications compared to men, women are still more likely to find themselves in any situation other than full-time employment, and particularly in less visible situations such as inactivity or the unemployment halo (Guergoat-Larivière and Lemière, 2018). The "all other things being equal" analysis confirms the huge differences between women and men when young children are involved. Mothers of young children have a low probability of full-time paid work (36.5 %, almost 40 points lower than men), a 26.9 % probability of being included in the "inactive population" (23.2 points higher than men), 9.7 % and 10.6 % respectively of working long or short part-time (Martin, 2022).

The evolution of the "female labour income share" (FLIS) in France confirms the stagnation in activity and employment rates for the most recent cohorts and the persistent inequalities in pay and employment between men and women (Neef and Robilliard, 2021). In Western European countries female labour income share has

grown since the turn of the century. However, the region exhibits substantial heterogeneity in trajectories. According to the data of the World Inequality Database, this share grew in France from 34 % to 40 % during the first decade of the century and it has stagnated since then. This is the result of the evolution of the two components of the FLIS: the labour force participation of women compared to men and, conditional to participation, the gender earnings ratio illustrated by the underrepresentation of women at the top of the wage distribution (vertical segregation). In France, in addition to the stagnation in activity rates, this trend can be explained by the weak increase of women at the top of the wage distribution from 2010 onwards (Neef and Robilliard, 2021).

### *Changes in qualification levels and female carriers*

Women have attained increasingly higher levels of qualifications, with the gap between women and men widening with each successive cohort. For instance, in 2020, 53 % of French women aged 25–34 had achieved tertiary education, compared with 46 % of men in the same age group. Notably, women are also more likely to obtain an academic qualification (two years post-Baccalauréat); 39 % of women aged 25–34 held such a qualification, compared with 33 % of men in the same age group, resulting in a 6-point gap (in contrast to less than a 3-point gap among those aged 45–54) (Roussel, 2022). Over the last four decades, the rise in the average employment rate for women (from 52 % to 66 %) conceals sharp contrasts depending on the level of education. The overall trend has been driven by the most highly educated women (tertiary education), while the employment rate for women with secondary education has stagnated, and that for women with only primary education has declined.

In the sociology of education, the paradoxes linked to the rise in women's qualification levels and the slow progress in gender equality in the workplace have led to the demonstration that the school system remains the primary vehicle for occupational segregation and continues to maintain stereotypes. (Duru-Bellat, 2014). Despite a higher level of academic attainment at secondary school – girls' results are higher than those of boys in French and in Life and Earth Sciences (LES) and comparable in mathematics – girls still prefer LES leading them more towards careers in the medical and social field, health or humanities, to the detriment of mathematics, which later generally allows access to the most selective courses. So far, they still account for a lower proportion of enrolments in preparatory classes for *the grandes écoles* (30.8 % in scientific classes compared to 73.2 % in literary classes) and only 28.9 % in engineering schools (up 2.4 points on 2010–2011, however) (Chabanon and Jouvenceau, 2022).<sup>12</sup> While the level of education of girls is increasingly higher than that of boys, the

12 In the French higher education landscape about 250 *grandes écoles* are being considered as elite institutes – a.o. they request tuition fees, that are much higher than those charged by public universities. Less than 5 % of all French students attend the *grandes écoles* to be trained for top job positions in business management as well as to become senior civil servants.

implicit assumption of previous studies that the value of qualifications is identical for both sexes, particularly in terms of access to skilled professions, must be called into question when trying to explain the persistence of pay gaps, which translates into a significant loss of income for all women of working age (Gadrey and Gadrey, 2019).

One of the consequences of their different educational backgrounds is that women and men do not work in the same sectors: women are much more represented in the service sector (88 % of employed women, compared with 66 % of employed men) (Roussel, 2022). However, higher qualifications provide access to more skilled jobs. In 1982, only 4 % of employed women held professional and managerial positions ("les cadres"); by 2020, this figure had risen to 18 % (for men, from 10 % to 23 % over the same period). As a result, women accounted for 43 % of all managerial and professional jobs in 2020, with their share doubling since 1980.

Yet, women's employment is still concentrated in certain sectors and professions in France. Since the end of the 1990s, the distribution of women and men in the various professions has tended to become more homogenous. However, gender-based occupational segregation has remained strong: In the years 2013–2016, out of the 87 occupational families that describe all occupations, 10 account for almost half of all female employment (Briard, 2019). Men are slightly more evenly distributed with 17 occupations accounting for half of all male employment. This degree of horizontal segregation of female employment in France is slightly less pronounced than the EU average.<sup>13</sup> In 2020 45 % of women worked in the public administration, education, human health and social work sector compared with 19 % of men. This sectoral concentration of women's employment has changed little over time. Therefore, female and male employees do not face the same working conditions: Men are more often exposed to physical hardship, while women are more frequently exposed to psychosocial risks (Briard, 2022).

The factors put forward to explain the continued low gender mix in certain occupations and the concentration of female employment, relate – as we have just seen before – to the educational choices made just as well as to the matching processes on the labour market and to the individual working conditions. Certain professions make it particularly difficult to reconcile family and professional life and are therefore predominantly occupied by men (Lemière and Silvera, 2014).

Studies devoted to the highly qualified professions, particularly in the civil service, have shown that the feminisation of this kind of professions has not eliminated the obstacles women face in reaching the highest levels of power, prestige, and remuneration. This 'glass ceiling' phenomenon is evident in higher education, where the increase in the number of female lecturers across various disciplines does not prevent significant

13 On average in the EU, half of all women are employed in just seven occupational groups, and almost two-thirds work in ten occupational groups. In contrast, the ten occupational groups with the highest proportion of men account for a smaller share (53 %) of male employment. There are country-specific differences due to varying levels of women's participation in the labour market and the specific feminisation of certain professions at the national level (Amossé and Méron, 2013).

gender inequalities from persisting as one moves up the hierarchy of academic bodies, positions of power, and selection committees (Musselin and Pigeyre, 2008; Buscatto and Mary, 2009; Marry et al., 2017). From a longitudinal perspective, it has been shown that the persistence of disparities in professional careers between men and women (those born in 1962 compared with those born in 1946) can be explained by new forms of inequalities with the sharp rise in female long careers with low or very low wages coexisting with the rise of carrier's heterogeneity for both sexes, notably with the decline of the traditional women career as well as the growing importance of female careers marked by precarity (Berton, Huiban and Nortier, 2011).

### *Analytical shifts and the exploration of new research topics: Fresh insights into gender inequalities in the labour market*

Reconsidering social science through a gender lens has not only led to a fresh look at traditional research topics. It has also led to the investigation of new areas of research which have often gone hand in hand with the invention of new approaches and new tools. We will now review a number of studies on inequalities on the labour market, particularly in terms of wages, and then look at the role of public policy in this area.

#### *New insides on gender inequality on the labour market*

In sociology, numerous studies have helped to show that women are at the centre of all major changes in the labour market, with a shift in the fields of investigation towards e.g. diversity policy, glass ceiling, workforce management mechanisms (Buscatto and Marry, 2009). In (socio-)economics, it is first and foremost empirical research on social inequalities that the gender approach has renewed. A great deal of work has been done on issues of professional inequalities and discriminations from various angles: inequalities in access to employment, unemployment, working time, careers and wages – their origins and the means to reduce them (Milewski, 2004, 2019; Milewski and Périvier, 2011; Moeurs and Ponthieux, 2015).

Research done specifically on the pay gender gap in France began to take shape in the 1950s and 1960s with surveys carried out by institutions such as the National Institute of statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) and the Ministry of Labour and expanded in the 1980s and 1990s. The issues dealt with have been diversified over time, incorporating new dimensions such as employment segregation, the “motherhood penalty” and the impact of family policies as well as analyses by birth cohorts. A variety of econometric methods for breaking down the gender pay gap have been used to assess the weight of the different factors explaining the pay gap: qualification level, professional experience, working hours, sector of activity, type of job (Moeurs and Ponthieux, 2006). It is supposed to provide a pay gap, all other things being equal, i.e. with equal characteristics, and it identifies a residual unexplained part which is considered as pure discrimination. The monthly pay gap between women and men stagnated in the 1990s and after the turn of the century, despite an increase in the level

of women's qualifications and legislation on reduction in collective working time in 1998 and 2000. This was due to persistent differences in the occupations performed, sectors of activity and working time (Moeurs and Ponthieux, 2006). In France, in 2021 women earned (net wage) on average 23,5 % less than men over the course of a year in the private sector (Godet, 2023). One third of this gap is due to the difference in annual working time. On average, women's annual working time was 10 % lower than that of men in 2022. For the same working time, the remaining average gender *hourly* pay gap of 15 % in the private sector, which is in line with the EU average (but 21 % in Germany), can be explained by three main factors. First, even if women have on average a higher level of qualification than men, they do not follow the same types of secondary and tertiary education (see before) and are less often working as senior managers ("cadres"); second, they are over-represented in the low-paid sector; and third, their careers are characterised by more interruptions and part-time work than men's (Périvier, 2020).

From 1995 to 2022, the hourly pay gap (22 % in 1995) has decreased by a third (Godet, 2023). However, the difference in earnings between men and women is even more pronounced among parents: not only do mothers work significantly fewer hours than fathers, but their full-time equivalent earnings are also much lower, with the disparity increasing with the number of children (*ibid.*). In this respect, motherhood remains a significant obstacle to wage convergence from a gender perspective. While men's careers are hardly affected by fatherhood, the arrival of the first child leads to an average relative decline in mothers' total wage income of 40 % in the year of the birth and 30 % thereafter (Moeurs and Pora, 2019). This decline in income is attributed to three factors: a reduction in participation (career breaks), a lasting reduction in paid hours (with a significant drop in the year of childbirth due to maternity leave), and a penalty in terms of hourly pay, which appears later and can be interpreted as the result of less time spent in employment. This is especially true at the lower end of the wage distribution. This finding was confirmed by a comparison of cohorts of young adults entering the labour market according to their level of education (Bazen et al., 2021). All other things being equal, there remains a residual pay gap of approximately 5 % between men and women, which could be attributed to pure discrimination.

Inequalities in employment have been analysed from new perspectives: women are over-represented in jobs paying the minimum wage (SMIC) and face more precarious employment contracts and working conditions. Their career paths remain much more heterogeneous (part-time work, underemployment, parental leave, etc.) than those of men (Guergoat-Larivière and Lemière, 2018).

Yet, over the last 40 years, women's social mobility relative to their mothers has increased. Despite a slowdown from 1993 onwards, the rate of social mobility for women has risen steadily since the late 1970s (Collet and Pénicaud, 2019). In 2015, 71 % of French women aged between 35 and 59 who are in work or have a job belong to a different socio-professional category than their mothers; this is 12 percentage points higher than in 1977. This rate of intergenerational social mobility for women

was 6 percentage points higher than for men in 2015, whereas it was 5 percentage points lower 40 years earlier.

In a European context shaped by several directives and recommendations on equality, particularly concerning the reconciliation of work and family life, this key issue has been revisited in various ways. Research has shown the involvement of other stakeholders, particularly companies (Périvier and Sylvera, 2010), and the issue has been extended to the articulation of social times (Fusulier and Nicole-Drancourt, 2015), highlighting European models of gender-based social contracts that differ in terms of social time frames and the actors involved in shaping them (Sylvera, 2010).

Finally, building on the research of Orloff (1998) and Walby (2004), and from a European comparative perspective, several studies have explored the notion of "regimes" for "reconciling work and family (Letablier, 2009; Giraud and Lucas, 2009). In order to understand the contrasting paths of female employment in Germany and France since the turn of the century in comparative terms, the notion of *Employment Gendered Regimes* was proposed. It was conceived as a set of interdependent variables concerning, first, the situation of women/mothers on the labour market -mainly the evolution of rates of employment and working time – with the aim of particularly capturing women's financial autonomy; second, state role in regulation of gender relations, mainly through the objectives and instruments of employment and family policies, which convey, reproduce and fuel lasting differences in the gendered division of work and family responsibilities; third, social norms regarding the prevailing familial arrangements in a society with a focus on the fertility behaviour of women in order to understand the tensions between work and family<sup>14</sup> (Lechevalier, 2018).

### The reconsideration and evaluation of employment and other related public policies from a gender perspective

The reconsideration and new evaluation of several (fiscal, social and employment) public policies from a gender perspective, which emerged in the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian worlds at the end of the 1980s (Dauphin, 2011), has been one of the most dynamic fields of research in France in recent years. Indeed, public policies themselves produce gendered representations (Engeli and Perrier, 2015). Employment policies were the first to be re-examined in connection with the influence of the European Employment Strategy on them (Silvera and Behning Uthe, 2002).

Analysed in interaction with other (fiscal, family) public policies, their contribution to the unequal division between women and men has become the subject of systematised analysis. The consequences of employment support schemes in terms of occupa-

14 "What happens within the household, especially regarding the allocation of time to paid and unpaid work, is central to the understanding of the gender gap in economic outcomes. (...) Labor market institutions (...) public policies, and social norms, however, also play a major role in shaping male and female behavior, constraints, and opportunities" (Ponthieux and Meurs, 2015, 984).

tional segregation and job quality for women have been the subject of overviews and original investigations (Lemière, 2013; Perrier, 2015).

The analysis of means-tested benefits and activation policies by means of individual financial incentives to reintegrate into the labour market has become another important issue from a gender perspective. The risks and limits associated with this activation policy from the point of view of women's social rights, particularly for "single mothers", have been highlighted as well as the key role of non-monetary obstacles for their return to employment (Eydoux, 2012). Over the past few decades one of the most notable changes within the French society has been indeed the growing number of single-parent families: out of the 8 million households with children under 18 years of age 2 million were single-parent households in 2020, that is almost a quarter of all concerned households, 83 % of whom are single mothers. This proportion has risen sharply since 1990 when it stood at 12 % and most among women with the lowest levels of education (Acs, Lhommeau and Raynaud, 2015). Against this background, the gendered consequences of the introduction of the *Revenu de Solidarité Active* (RSA) in 2009 have been the subject of several investigations (Périvier and Silvera, 2009).<sup>15</sup> The RSA includes an increase in minimum income for single parents.<sup>16</sup> Women account for 96 % of all recipients of this increased RSA and three out of five have more than one dependent child (Cabannes and Chevalier, 2023). A third of single-parent families are constrained to live below the poverty line compared with 13.2 % of households with children. This poverty rate of single-parent families rises as the number of children increases from 28.4 % for single-parent families with one minor child to 45 % for single-parent families with two or more children, when at least one of whom is a minor.

This high poverty rate was attributed to the fall in employment rates that followed the introduction of support for lone parents in the 1970s. To avoid this poverty trap, it was decided, in line with the European Employment Strategy, to gradually include single mothers in 'social expenditure activation programmes'. Following this paradigm shift, the employment rates of lone parents have increased. However, these policies have not been effective against poverty. Their poverty rate has not fallen. They now work less than mothers living with a partner, whose overall employment rate has

15 The *revenu de solidarité active* (RSA), introduced in 2009, provides a means-tested minimum level of income, which varies according to the composition of the household. It has replaced two other means-tested social benefits: the *Revenu Minimum d'Insertion* and the assistance scheme for single parents (*Aide aux Parents Isolés*). The main innovation of the RSA scheme is that it has improved the work incentive: During the first three months of employment, the beneficiary receives the full amount of their income from employment and their benefit, as they did before the reform. For the following months, and for an unlimited period, they receive 62 % of their income from work (RSA "activité") plus the RSA "basic" allowance (RSA "socle").

16 This increase is being granted to single parents until the third birthday of their youngest child or for 12 months if they have no children under 3 years of age.

risen. (Lanseman, 2024).<sup>17</sup> Randomised trials have shown that certain return-to-work programmes based on the social investment paradigm may have a very negative impact on the labour market participation and disposable income of single mothers (Heim, 2024, chap. 3). Despite having a higher elasticity of labour supply to their wages than men (Briard, 2020), women have been doubly disadvantaged by this “activation strategy”: on the one hand, their gains from returning to employment are very low and, on the other hand, their opportunity of progressing in career are generally limited. Based on the assumption that employment is the most effective bulwark against poverty, activation policies have trapped single mothers in low-quality and involuntary part-time jobs (Devetter and Lanseman, 2023). The support policies of social workers and employment agencies, where they exist, push single mothers in particular into sectors where there are shortages, mainly care work, which requires skills that are traditionally considered ‘feminine’. In this sense, anti-poverty policies reproduce gender relations (Dauphin and Domingo, 2014). Otherwise, the availability of childcare facilities has remained the most important – if not the only – obstacle for returning to a full-time job. The way in which the system for allocating childcare places (crèches) – when they are available – is organised gives a big advantage to stable families, i.e. stable couples with stable jobs who know well in advance what their childcare needs will be. (Heim, 2024, chap. 2). Therefore, the exit rates out of the RSA are lower for single mothers than for other recipients (Boyer, 2023).

Against a background of stagnating activity and employment rates for cohorts that have recently entered the labour market, the key role of family policies has been highlighted because their conception and implementation have become more and more driven by the fight against unemployment (Lewis and al., 2008, Martin 2010). New family benefits were introduced in the 1990s aimed to increase employment in the service sector (childminders) as well as to boost the retirement of (low skilled) mothers out of the labour market. They were successful in this regard with the high decline in labour market activity rates for married women with two children and more, at least one of whom was aged under three years (Piketty, 1998). They were merged in 2004 into a single new benefit by the *prestation d'accueil du jeune enfant* (PAJE), which includes a universal basic allowance until a child reaches the age of 3, as well as a *complément de libre choix du mode de garde*, which is supposed to enlarge the freedom of choice in childcare for the parents and their choice regarding the working time. Parents of a young child are given the opportunity to work only part time – increasing the inequalities between women on the labour market (Lemière 2014) – or to limit their activity; a device that has proven to be successful (Marical et al. 2007).

The rhetoric of free choice has led to a shift towards cash benefits (‘cash for care’); more broadly, it has led to a system that primarily aims at enabling families to purchase individually required services on the market (Letablier 2009). Since the early 1990s, the

<sup>17</sup> In 1990, 68 % of single mothers were in employment, compared with 59 % of mothers in couples. In 2019, their employment rate was 67 %, compared with 75 % for mothers in couples.

number of formal childcare places has increased.<sup>18</sup> However, this is largely due to the promotion of childminders (*assistante maternelle*), the cost of which has been heavily subsidised since the 2004 reform. By 2021 childminders were caring for more than a quarter of young children for varying lengths of time. More than 250.000 childminder jobs had been created, even though these numbers have fallen in recent years. As a result, in 2021, 56 % of children were still cared for by their parents (the vast majority by their mothers). Overall, 60 % of children were not in a 'formal' childcare arrangement. The remaining 40 % were cared for by childminders (20 %), crèches (18 %) or a paid carer at home (3 %) (ONAPE, 2023). Significant differences however still exist in the access to formal care according to activity status and income level of the parents (Boyer and Martin, 2019). Indeed, the logic of "free choice" is at odds with the fact: low-income households cannot afford a similar use of formal childcare facilities as can the well-being households. Between 2006 and 2017 the number of beneficiaries of paid parental leave dropped from around 600.000 to 279.000 by 64,3 %. These results can mainly be explained by the missing financial attractiveness of the benefit (about 430 euros) as well as by the low level of care sharing between parents, which has become mandatory since the reform adopted in 2014. Whereas before the reform, the same parent could take parental leave until the child was three years old, both parents must now share the leave to cover the same period. This corresponds to a reduction in the maximum length of leave for mothers from three to two years. It is worth noting that the participation of fathers has remained very low – 2 % for the fathers of two children in this field are paid to men. While mothers' income from employment has on average increased, not all of them have returned to work, as evidenced by the growing amount of unemployment benefits paid after parental leave (Périvier and Verugo, 2021).

In recent years, at EU level there has been a tendency to reduce gender inequalities in employment to a single issue, the issue of the gender pay gap and, even more so, the issue of "pay transparency" (Jacquot, 2023). In this context, in September 2018, in France a series of measures on professional equality were adopted as part of the law "on the freedom to choose one's professional future" (*loi pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel*). From 2019 onwards, all private companies with more than 50 employees have been required to calculate a professional equality index each year.<sup>19</sup> The results of the index have to be made public in the spirit of a "name and shame" policy. This policy aims at constraining companies from achieving a minimum score on this index. When failing this obligation they may be subjected to penalties. Yet, first evaluations show a very imperfect coverage of the index overall, just as they show that the average percentage of companies reporting to the index is very high, therefore hiding real inequalities between women and men. Moreover, so far the introduction

18 One of the special features of childcare in France is that all children aged three and over attend nursery schools (*écoles maternelles*).

19 This index is made up of several indicators: gender pay gap, pay mobility indicator, pay increases for women after maternity leave, number of women and men in the top ten of the best earners within the company.

of the index has had no detectable effect on gender inequalities in the concerned companies (Breda et al., 2023).

### Intersectionality and discriminations in pay and recruitment

Among the most significant contemporary developments in terms of approaches and issues new research programme on intersectionality is one of the most interesting. Yet, there are two main reasons for the rather late, even controversial, reception of this new paradigm in France (Gallot et al., 2020): first, a certain conception of republican “universalism”<sup>20</sup> and, second, France’s problematic relationship with its colonial past (Zancarini-Fournel, 2020). Moreover, in France, despite of their conflicts, ‘materialist’ feminism and feminism of ‘difference’ agreed to give sexual difference a virtual monopoly in theoretical analysis and to consider women as a homogenous category (Lépinard, 2005). As a result, the theme of racialisation was initially marginalised in French feminist research. In fact, it was not until the ‘third generation’ of feminism that sexual as well as racial issues were politicised and theoretically investigated based on new issues and new cleavages (Bessin and Dorlin, 2005). More recently, intersectionality has been criticised for using the “racial identity” dimension, because it was accused of leading to the “essentialization” and “reification” of the “race” concept. Also, the centrality of the social class cleavages for sociological analysis would have been lost. Indeed, it was to avoid the pitfalls of analyses which categorise social groups primarily along a single identity axis or a single power relationship – gender *or* class, race *or* class – that the concept of intersectionality was invented for (Lépinard and Mazouz, 2021).

Indeed, the intersectional approach calls into question the primacy of sexual differences over other social characteristics like ethnic origin, place of residence or sexual preferences. One of the issues at stake is the “interaction effect” produced by the articulation of these several social variables. This articulation can be either over-additive, neutral or under-additive. “Over-additivity means that social relations of power interact increasingly to the disadvantage of individuals”(Ait Ben Lmadani et al., 2008). Yet rather than being an accumulation of disadvantages, this articulation may in fact produce compensatory phenomena or even sub-additivity between disadvantages (Jau-nait and Chauvin, 2013).<sup>21</sup> This is also a key issue from the point of view of public policy and targeting, since it involves accurately determining the characteristics of the

20 Statistics on ethnic origin are still banned in France. However, in some official statistics surveys, it is possible to identify French people with immigrant origin – and therefore those born in France of immigrant parents – on the basis of their parents’ place of birth and nationality, and to reconstruct their migratory and geographical origins.

21 “If  $\alpha$  is the penalty suffered by a woman in a given field and  $\beta$  is the penalty suffered by a person of foreign origin, the question is to determine whether women of foreign origin suffer a penalty different from  $\alpha + \beta$ . In the empirical literature, this is also referred to as an interaction effect (or joint effect) and a distinction is made between cases of strict additivity (the penalty suffered is exactly  $\alpha + \beta$ ), over-additivity (the penalty exceeds  $\alpha + \beta$ ) and under-additivity (the penalty is less than  $\alpha + \beta$ )”. (Chareyron et al., 2023, p.2).

populations which are victims of discrimination as well as determining the extent of the harm suffered by them (Chareyron et al., 2023).

Discrimination based on origin, particularly racial discrimination, has already for a long time been identified as a decisive issue for the labour market, especially when dealing with access opportunities to employment (Brinbaum, Safi and Simon, 2015). Yet, it is only recently that some empirical studies have explored inequalities by crossing gender *and* origin (or place of residence) issues. Some conclude that there is an accumulation of inequalities of gender and origins on the labour market for women of North African origin, or even a “double discrimination”; others find more mixed results depending on origin (Brinbaum, 2022).

From a methodological point of view, there are three main ways to measure discrimination: first, testing (which consists of sending two identical CVs, with the exception of one characteristic, such as gender, origin, name, etc., which constitutes the discriminatory criterion to be tested); second, to use a measure that statistically estimates the differences between the situation of potentially discriminated populations and the rest of the population, unexplained differences, that is the residual, being attributed to discrimination; third, a subjective measure based on people's own declarations, which provides an idea of how discrimination is experienced (Brinbaum, 2022). We will now present three studies using these three methods.

An empirical analysis using the *Formation Qualification Professionnelle* survey, set up by the French National Institute of Statistics (Insee), and the second method (“differences in situations”) concludes that the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity is sub-additive in terms of wage discrimination – that is gender and ethnicity interact decreasingly at the advantage of individuals. It is supposed to be super-additive in terms of participation to the labour market – meaning gender and ethnicity interact increasingly to the disadvantage of individual. While wage discrimination has remained mainly related to ethnicity more than to gender, discrimination concerning labour market participation can currently be mainly attributed to gender (Ait Ben Lmadani et al., 2008).

Other studies on discrimination in hiring process are based on the *Génération* survey carried out in 2013 by the *Centre de recherche et d'études sur les qualifications* (CERÉQ), which interviews people who left the educational system three years before (Brinbaum, 2022). The original aim of the survey was to study the conditions under which young people enter the labour market by crossing gender and ethnic origin issues.<sup>22</sup> The experience of discrimination is slightly higher for women than men (12 % vs. 9 %). Yet, according to migratory origin it varies significantly more. It is the highest among young people of North African origin (34 %), followed by those of sub-Saharan African or Turkish descent (24 %). Gender differences according to origin overall are rather small – except for the descendants of North African immigrants, for whom the intensity and frequency of discrimination vary markedly according to

22 One question asked concerned discrimination in recruitment encountered since leaving initial training (during the first three years of working life).

gender to the detriment of young men. Moreover, discrimination varies according to the respective level of education and social background. When compared to the non-migratory population, the discriminatory effects of origin remain much higher for men than for women – particularly for people of North African origin (Brinbaum, 2022).

Another body of research on discrimination in access to employment uses multi-criteria discrimination tests to cross-reference the effects of gender, origin and place of residence of job applicants. These tests can be done in response to job offers or unsolicited requests for information from a representative sample of local recruiters. This is the case of a recent statistical analysis carried out in the context of the only national public policy that explicitly addresses the issue of combating discrimination, namely urban policy (Cheyron et al., 2023). Within this framework, an ‘open employment’ scheme (*emplois francs*) allows an employer to receive a subsidy if it hires a resident of a priority area (*Quartier prioritaire de la de la politique de la Ville*), as defined by the urban policy.<sup>23</sup> Discrimination on the basis of North African origin appears to be significant at a level comparable to the results previously obtained in France. Considering cross-effects, discrimination based on origin exists for men living in ‘priority areas’, but not for those living in other areas. Living in a priority area is an advantage for applicants of French origin because of the recruitment bonus linked to the “*emplois francs*” scheme. However, this bonus does not benefit candidates of North African origin, who are the only ones penalised for living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood (Cheyron et al., 2023).

### *Conclusion*

Social sciences have long remained androcentric – with only rare exceptions – in their issues, methods and authors. This paper has focused on identifying three major driving forces which have gradually contributed to change the deal in French research on gender and labour market: the feminist movement, the internationalisation of research, the European integration. Against this background, we analysed the extent to which research in French sociology and economics has been enriched and transformed by the gender issue, initially focusing on women’s work and subsequently on their employment conditions. We set out to look at the ways in which – since the 1990s – this issue has led to a revaluation and revisiting of traditional subjects of academic investigation, as well as to empirical and conceptual innovations which have greatly furthered the understanding of some of the major dynamics and transformations in employment in France.

Furthermore, a variety of innovations have emerged from the intersectional approach, which has provided a more complex and comprehensive understanding of

23 The subsidy amounts for 15000 euros over three years for a open-ended employment contract and 5000 euros over two years for a fixed-term contract.

discrimination in employment and pay, not only from a gender perspective but also concerning ethnic origin and place of residence.

While there have been some successes in terms of parity in politics or in company boards in France, the contemporary research on gender issues actually highlights the extent to which gender inequalities have persisted in the French labour market, this is even more true when looking at the inequalities at the intersection of gender, race or place of residence. Contrary to a widespread perception in Germany of the French situation on these issues, in France over the last three decades, e.g. in the context of the family policy as well as the policy implemented against the gender pay gap or discriminations in employment, only few public policies have been implemented to effectively reduce the gender inequalities (Silvera, 2020) still initially produced by the education system (Cour des comptes, 2025), the inequalities in pay and careers, just as the inequalities concerning the reconciliation of work and family.

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