

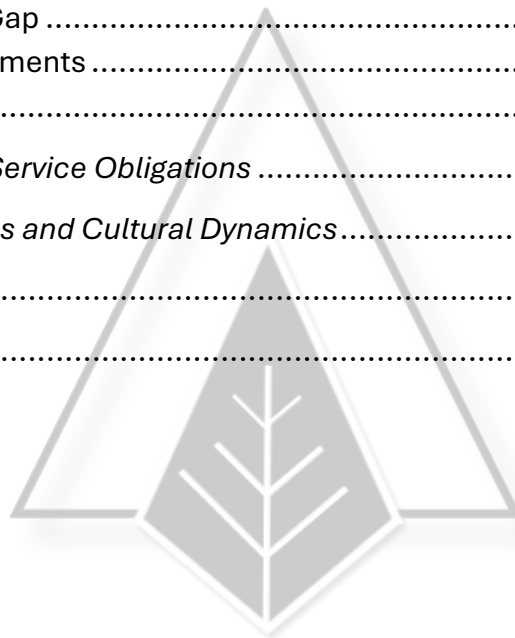


Gender roles and structural differences between men and women in Germany

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Table of content

1. Introduction	3
2. Legal Equality.....	3
4. Family, Children, and Parental Leave.....	5
4.1 Division of Parental Leave	5
4.2 Gender Care Gap	5
4.3 Political Instruments	6
4.4 Evaluation	6
5. Military and Civil Service Obligations	6
6. Social Role Models and Cultural Dynamics.....	7
7. Conclusion	8
8. References	8



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1. Introduction

The equality of men and women is one of the core values of modern democracy. Germany is considered an international pioneer in legal equality, yet social reality still reveals differences in income, career choices, parental leave, and societal expectations. While women have historically faced structural disadvantages in the labor market, men today encounter specific disadvantages in certain areas — such as military service, maintenance obligations, and family role expectations (Allensbach, 2013).

This study aims to empirically examine the actual equality of genders in Germany. It focuses on legal, economic, and social structures that factually lead to differences between the sexes. A distinction is made between *formal equality* (legal equality) and *real equality* (equal opportunities and outcomes in everyday life) (Bünning, 2021).

2. Legal Equality

With the adoption of the German Basic Law in 1949, Article 3, Paragraph 2 established that “men and women shall have equal rights.” The state is obligated to actively eliminate existing disadvantages (Federal Republic of Germany, 2023). This principle has been further specified through numerous reforms in labor, family, and civil service law.

The *General Equal Treatment Act (AGG)* of 2006 is the central instrument of German anti-discrimination law. It prohibits any form of disadvantage based on gender (§1 AGG) and allows, under §5 AGG, so-called *positive measures* if they are suitable for reducing existing inequalities (Frahm, 2023). This means that women may be given preference in male-dominated fields if they have equal qualifications. The provision

follows the constitutional mandate to promote actual equality without generally excluding men.

Rulings by the *Federal Constitutional Court* have repeatedly confirmed that gender equality policy includes both the promotion of women and protection against discrimination of men, as long as such measures remain proportionate (BVerfG 1 BvR 420/09, 2010). Therefore, there is no structural legal disadvantage for either gender — differences arise mainly from the way social roles are implemented.

3. Labor Market and Career Choice

3.1 The Gender Pay Gap

According to the Federal Statistical Office (2024a), women in 2023 earned on average 18% less per hour than men (unadjusted gender pay gap). The adjusted difference — when considering the same occupation, qualification, and experience — was 6%. About two-thirds of this gap can be explained by differences in industry structure, working time models, and employment interruptions.

3.2 Occupational Segregation

Women are more frequently employed in social, caregiving, and educational professions that are socially essential but economically undervalued. Men, on the other hand, dominate technical, industrial, and logistical occupations, which are typically better paid (Federal Foundation for Gender Equality, 2024). This *horizontal segregation* explains the majority of the income gap. From a *vertical* perspective — that is, in leadership positions — the proportion of women in 2023 was 28.7% (Federal Foundation for Gender Equality, 2024).

3.3 Evaluation

These differences result less from discrimination and more from social preferences, role perceptions, and working-time choices. Women more often choose part-time employment, while men are more likely to take on overtime and physically demanding tasks. When women pursue the same professions as men, they often receive targeted support today — for instance, through quota regulations or women’s advancement programs (Frahm, 2023).

4. Family, Children, and Parental Leave

4.1 Division of Parental Leave

According to data from the BMFSFJ (2024), in 2023, 65% of mothers but only 28% of fathers took parental leave. Men who do take leave do so for an average of just two months — mostly to use the so-called “partner months.” Women, on average, stay at home for 10–12 months.

This unequal distribution has far-reaching consequences: during this time, women lose work experience, career opportunities, and salary prospects. According to calculations by the DIW Berlin (2022), five years after the birth of a child, women’s income loss amounts to around 30% on average, while men experience hardly any financial decline.

4.2 Gender Care Gap

According to the Federal Statistical Office (2023), women perform around 52% more unpaid care work per day than men. This includes childcare, caregiving, and household tasks. The so-called *Gender Care Gap* directly affects economic equality, as unpaid work limits professional opportunities.

4.3 Political Instruments

To promote a more balanced sharing of responsibilities, *Parental Allowance Plus* and the *Partnership Bonus* were introduced. According to an evaluation by the BMFSFJ (2022), these measures slightly increased fathers' participation but did little to change the fundamental structure: women remain the primary caregivers for family and household work.

4.4 Evaluation

Formally, parental rights are gender neutral. In practice, however, the combination of biological parenthood, societal expectations, and economic conditions leads women to interrupt their careers more frequently — resulting in long-term income disadvantages. Men, in turn, face greater pressure to maintain the family's financial stability. Thus, both genders carry structural burdens of different kinds (Bünning, 2021).

5. Military and Civil Service Obligations

Historically, Germany maintained a conscription duty that applied only to men. According to Article 12a of the Basic Law, “men can be required to serve in the armed forces.” Women were exempt and, until 2001, were not permitted to perform armed duties (ECJ C-285/98 – *Kreil*, 2000).

Conscription was suspended in 2011 but remains enshrined in the constitution. A reactivation would once again affect only men. In 2025, President Steinmeier called for an examination of a gender-neutral service obligation that would also include social service options (Steinmeier, 2025).

Legally, this means that as long as conscription remains suspended, there is no actual inequality. However, if it were reinstated, it would need to be extended to both

genders in order to maintain equal rights (LTO, 2025). Thus, men were historically disadvantaged but are currently no longer obligated.

6. Social Role Models and Cultural Dynamics

Despite legal equality, traditional gender roles continue to shape behavior and expectations. Men are still more often perceived as providers, while women are seen as the primary caregivers for family and children. According to Allensbach (2013), 71% of men feel pressured to be financially responsible, while only 60% of women expect this from their partners.

In partner selection, women tend to emphasize economic stability, whereas men place greater value on physical attractiveness (ElitePartner, 2022). These patterns are socially learned rather than biologically determined. Studies show that partner preferences converge in countries with higher levels of gender equality (Zentner & Mitura, 2012).

In digital contexts such as dating apps, a shift in dynamics can also be observed: due to a surplus of male users, women enjoy greater freedom of choice (Topinkova & Diviak, 2025). Men, in turn, experience increased competition, while expectations for emotional maturity and partnership-oriented behavior among men are rising.

These developments point to an ongoing social transformation: traditional role models are dissolving, while new forms of pressure and expectations are emerging on both sides.

7. Conclusion

Germany has largely achieved legal gender equality. Today, differences between men and women primarily stem from social structures, labor market mechanisms, and cultural expectations — not from discriminatory laws.

Women are formally equal but continue to take on a disproportionate share of care work, resulting in income losses. Men are also legally equal but still bear historical and social burdens — such as compulsory military service, the provider role, and lower recognition when taking parental leave.

True equality depends less on legislation and more on cultural change. Only when paid and unpaid work are shared equally can genuine gender equality be achieved. A gender-neutral service obligation, flexible parental leave models, and the revaluation of social professions are important steps toward that goal.

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