

The Paradox of Education: Why Highly Educated Bulgarian Women Still Earn Less than Men in Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the gender pay gap (GPG) in Bulgaria is driven primarily by structural and institutional factors rather than individual-level choices. Drawing on descriptive statistical evidence, it contends that weak enforcement, limited political representation of women, legislative shortcomings, and gendered barriers in entrepreneurship collectively sustain the gap. The analysis highlights that women’s underrepresentation in Parliament, where they occupy only about one quarter of seats and where no gender-quota mechanisms exist, reduces the likelihood of advancing equal-pay legislation, childcare reforms, and pay-transparency measures. At the same time, men’s greater access to high-risk, high-reward entrepreneurial opportunities, supported by more favorable lending conditions and more forgiving second-chance rules, may result in income distributions that disproportionately benefit men. These structural dynamics, taken together, help explain why Bulgaria continues to display one of the wider gender pay gaps in the European Union despite formal legal protections. The article concludes by outlining policy implications related to institutional enforcement, political representation, pay transparency, and support for women-led enterprises, and calls for future empirical research to more precisely quantify each mechanism’s contribution to Bulgaria’s GPG.

Keywords: Gender pay gap; Bulgaria; equality bodies; political representation; pay transparency; entrepreneurship; labor market institutions

INTRODUCTION

In Bulgaria, women earn only about €0.87 for every €1 men earn. Although the gender pay gap (GPG) has narrowed slightly in recent years, it still lingers at around 13–14 %, leaving women one-eighth behind (1). What makes this gap particularly striking is that Bulgarian

women are now better educated than men. This is counterintuitive, given that, historically, economists have shown that wages and years of schooling are positively related, and that years of education have a causal link to earned income (2). In the Bulgarian economy, women’s tertiary-education attainment exceeds men’s by 14–15 percent (3). How can women’s superior educational achievement coexist with persistently lower earnings? This paper explores this question via descriptive analysis.

This paper argues that the visible earnings gap is linked to four structural mechanisms: weak enforcement of equality, low political representation of women, low bargaining coverage, and a male-dominated entrepreneurial environment. Bulgaria’s equality body,

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the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD), is a weak institution because it lacks a specific mandate to promote gender equality and cannot award compensation (4). Furthermore, pay transparency and equal pay provisions are weak or non-existent (5). On the social and political side, women occupy only around 27 % of parliamentary seats (6,7). Given that the National Parliament has no gender-quota laws (8), this limits its influence over gender-equality reforms. Entrepreneurship is also heavily male-dominated, with women less likely to run firms or take on higher-risk, higher-paid roles (9). Taken together, this legal and institutional environment shapes how men and women are distributed across the labor market. In Bulgaria, women are concentrated in lower-paid sectors, while men dominate higher-wage positions (10). As shown in Figure 1, Bulgaria’s unadjusted GPG ranks among the higher ones in the European Union and remains above the EU-26 average (the mean for the other 26 EU member countries, excluding Bulgaria) (6). In contrast, Figure 2 shows that Bulgaria has one of the largest gender gaps in tertiary-education attainment in Europe: women are

significantly more educated than men, and the female education advantage exceeds the EU average by several percentage points (3). Taken together, these two figures confirm the paradox: Bulgaria combines above-average female educational attainment with one of the wider pay gaps in the EU.

To study this paradox, the paper combines official statistics, sector-level data, and reports from equality bodies and EU institutions. The analysis uses these sources to describe how the four mechanisms outlined above operate in Bulgaria and to compare them with experience in other European countries. For each channel, the paper also discusses potential remedies, such as stronger equality bodies, pay-transparency laws, gender quotas, and support for women’s entrepreneurship, that could begin to close the gap between women’s higher educational attainment and their lower average earnings. The body of the article first reviews the relevant literature and data for Bulgaria and the European Union, then examines each of the four mechanisms in turn, and finally outlines policy remedies and directions for future research.

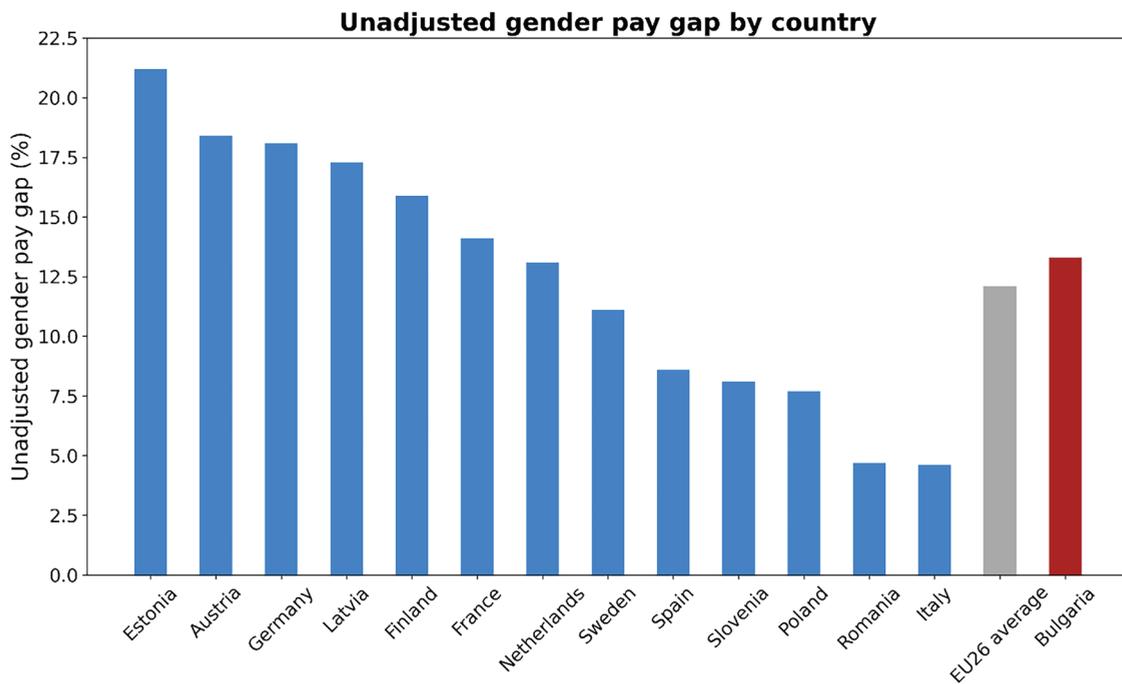


Figure 1. Unadjusted gender pay gap for 14 EU countries and the EU-26 average (excluding Bulgaria) in 2023, highlighting Bulgaria’s comparatively high gap. Bulgaria’s unadjusted GPG has changed only slightly between 2013 and 2023, so using 2023 provides a representative snapshot of the new long-run pattern. Source: Eurostat, “Gender pay gap in unadjusted form.” (1).

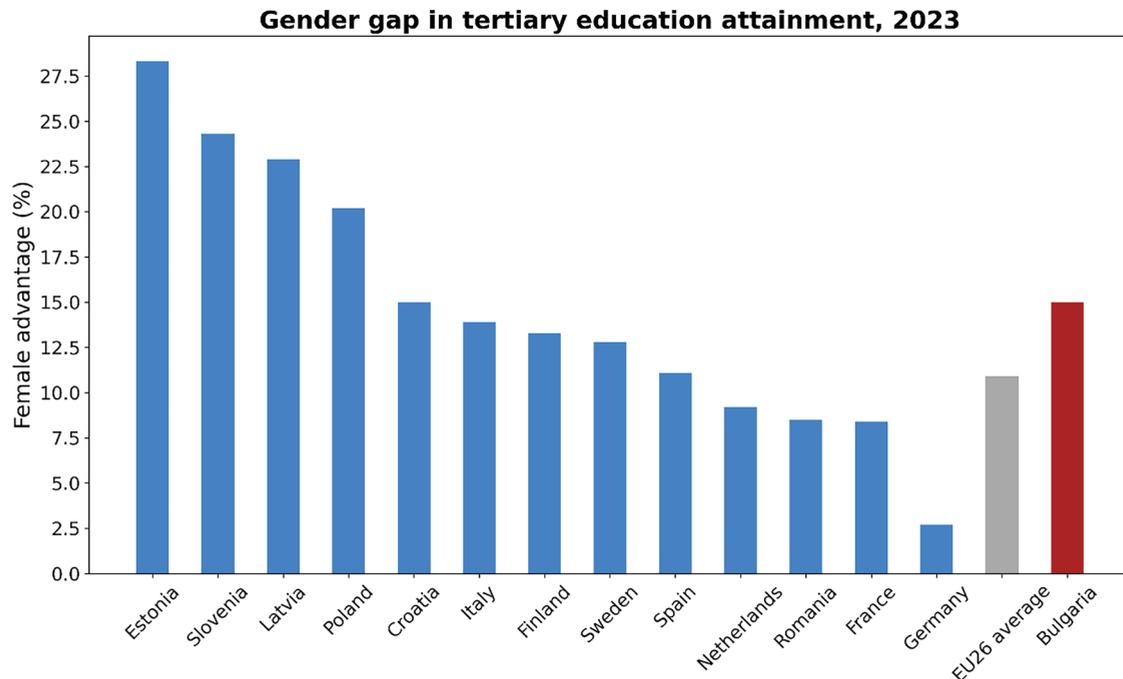


Figure 2. Female advantage in tertiary education attainment for 14 countries and the EU average in the most recent data, with particular attention to Bulgaria. The female advantage was broadly stable from 2014 to 2022 and increased slightly in the latest years, so the figure uses the latest available year to capture this recent rise and current levels. Source: Eurostat, “Tertiary educational attainment by sex.” (3).

COMPARATIVE AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section reviews the existing literature on the gender pay gap, situates Bulgaria within the wider European evidence, and briefly describes the data sources used in the analysis. Bulgaria’s gender pay gap is best explained through four channels. These are weak enforcement institutions, women’s political representation, wage-setting and pay-transparency rules inside firms, and the way entrepreneurship shapes the earnings distribution. Each channel has a concrete research analogue that can be adapted to the Bulgarian setting. In systems with an equality body similar to Bulgaria’s CPD, outcomes depend strongly on enforcement capacity. Using the universe of U.S. EEOC charges, Dahl and Knepper show that reporting behavior is sensitive to external options and institutional constraints, meaning that even when formal rights exist, weak remedies suppress detection and redress (11). Bulgaria’s limited remedial powers and slow timelines can be treated as the same enforcement-capacity channel. Large correspondence experiments also find that

discrimination is concentrated among a subset of large employers, underscoring why a capable public enforcer matters (12).

Women’s representation influences which policies are adopted and how resources are allocated. The clearest causal evidence comes from a randomized policy experiment in India, where female leaders redirected local investment toward goods that women prioritized (13). Related work links higher female representation to changes in spending and policy choices in Swedish municipalities (14) and to systematic gender gaps in policy preferences revealed in Swiss direct-democracy votes (15). These results carry over to Bulgaria’s parliament, where women still hold a minority of seats, and they motivate the expectation that low representation correlates with slower adoption of equal-pay and care policies. The analysis also draws on comparative research on quota diffusion in Latin America to show how institutional design can speed up change (16,17). Inside firms, wage-setting rules and transparency affect both pay levels and dispersion. A field experiment at the University of California showed that revealing peer salaries reduced satisfaction among below-median

earners and increased job search, which is one way transparency compresses pay (18). At the national level, Denmark's requirement for firm-level gender-segregated pay statistics reduced the gender wage gap, mainly by slowing men's wage growth (19). These insights are applied to Bulgaria's private, low-coverage service sectors by proposing tools that shift wages away from one-to-one bargaining and toward posted wage ranges. Salary-history bans in the United States raised earnings for job-changing women (20), and pay-range disclosure laws increased the share of jobs with posted wages and raised listed pay (21). As a complementary comparator, public posting of municipal salaries in California compressed top-end pays (22). These findings motivate policies that can reduce dispersion and narrow gaps in Bulgaria's high-variance sectors.

Entrepreneurship and the earnings distribution provide a second, complementary pathway. A meta-analysis finds that men take more risks on average (23), and experiments show that men choose competitive "tournament" pay roughly twice as often as equally able women (24). In real-world data, after business failure, men are more likely to re-enter entrepreneurship, with re-entry shaped by stigma and the surrounding ecosystem (25). The analysis connects these patterns to Bulgaria by documenting gender gaps in founding and scaling and by using bankruptcy-law evidence that institutions governing failure influence entrepreneurial selection and, in turn, the right tail of earnings (26). It also draws on recent work that links entrepreneurship, finance, and innovation to income concentration at the top (27).

The next subsection briefly outlines the data sources from which the indicators and institutional information used in this paper are drawn.

Data sources

This article uses only publicly available aggregate data and official reports. Quantitative indicators for Bulgaria and comparator countries are drawn mainly from Eurostat and the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (NSI). The analysis uses Eurostat's unadjusted gender pay gap, tertiary educational attainment by sex, self-employment by sex, and women's share of seats in national parliaments, together with NSI tables on the gender pay gap by economic activity and business demography. All of these indicators are reported at a country, aggregate, or sector level.

Institutional-enforcement measures are constructed from the annual reports and statistics of national equality bodies, as well as European Commission and

Council of Europe non-discrimination reports. Political representation is measured using Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women data on women in parliaments, complemented by Eurostat series. Wage-setting and pay-transparency conditions are described using sector-level gender pay-gap data together with approximate indicators of collective and statutory wage coverage drawn from European-level databases and reports. For entrepreneurship and access to finance, the paper uses Eurostat self-employment data along with summary statistics and figures from the World Bank, the European Investment Bank, the European Central Bank, and similar institutions.

Throughout the mechanisms and policy-remedy sections, the argument also draws on qualitative evidence from EU and national legal texts and policy documents, including Directive (EU) 2023/970 (28) on pay transparency, Directive (EU) 2019/1023 (29) on restructuring and second chance, the EU Equality Bodies Directives, Bulgaria's Protection Against Discrimination Act, and comparative legislation such as Spain's parity and equal-pay laws and Mexico's constitutional parity reforms. These legal sources provide institutional detail and reform models rather than additional numerical data. No surveys, experiments, or other studies involving human participants were conducted, and no individual-level or identifiable information is used.

These quantitative indicators and legal sources underpin the four mechanisms analyzed in the next section and the policy-remedy proposals that follow.

STRUCTURAL MECHANISMS BEHIND BULGARIA'S GENDER PAY GAP

This section presents descriptive evidence on Bulgaria's gender pay gap and the main institutional indicators that surround it. The findings are organized into four potential mechanisms: institutional enforcement gaps, political underrepresentation, legislative weaknesses in wage-setting and pay transparency, and entrepreneurship. For each mechanism, the paper presents descriptive patterns that are consistent with the idea that this channel could be contributing to Bulgaria's GPG.

Institutional enforcement gaps – first potential mechanism

The Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD) is Bulgaria's independent equality body, established under the Protection Against Discrimination

Act (PADA). It can hear discrimination complaints, issue decisions, and impose administrative fines, but it has no judicial power to enforce compliance or award compensation (4). According to the European Commission's 2025 Non-Discrimination Report, there are no reliable data on how often CPD decisions are implemented (30). When rulings are ignored, the CPD can only impose further fines. Moreover, Bulgaria lacks consolidated statistics on discrimination cases reviewed by administrative courts.

Figure 3 illustrates the outcome of this weak enforcement structure. Bulgaria records one of the lowest complaint rates to equality bodies among the countries in the sample: 322 complaints in 2022, or 4.8 per 100,000 people, compared with about 5–10 per 100,000 for the EU26 average and over 30 in Sweden. This gap suggests limited trust in the CPD and weak public engagement with the mechanisms for addressing discrimination. The CPD operates through 24 regional offices, although the European Commission has recommended full coverage in all 28 districts (4, 30). Limited regional accessibility

adds to the barriers victims face when filing complaints. More critically, the CPD cannot grant compensation (4), so victims must start a separate civil case in court. Court proceedings in Bulgaria are expensive and slow, which discourages most people from seeking redress (31).

According to the 2025 Non-Discrimination Report, fewer than 100 discrimination cases are filed annually under PADA, and only a handful pursue compensation. In 2022, the Sofia City Administrative Court registered 78 PADA cases, while CPD statistics report 322 complaints filed with the CPD in the same year (4, 32). These are small numbers for a country of Bulgaria's size and suggest that only a limited share of potential discrimination disputes ever reach either the equality body or an administrative court. Together with the low overall complaint rate, these points indicate a system that many people do not use because they doubt it will yield concrete results, and know the procedure is burdensome and time-consuming. The report also shows very few civil court claims under PADA: 23–26 establishment cases per year and just 0–2 compensation cases annually (2020–2023) (30). This

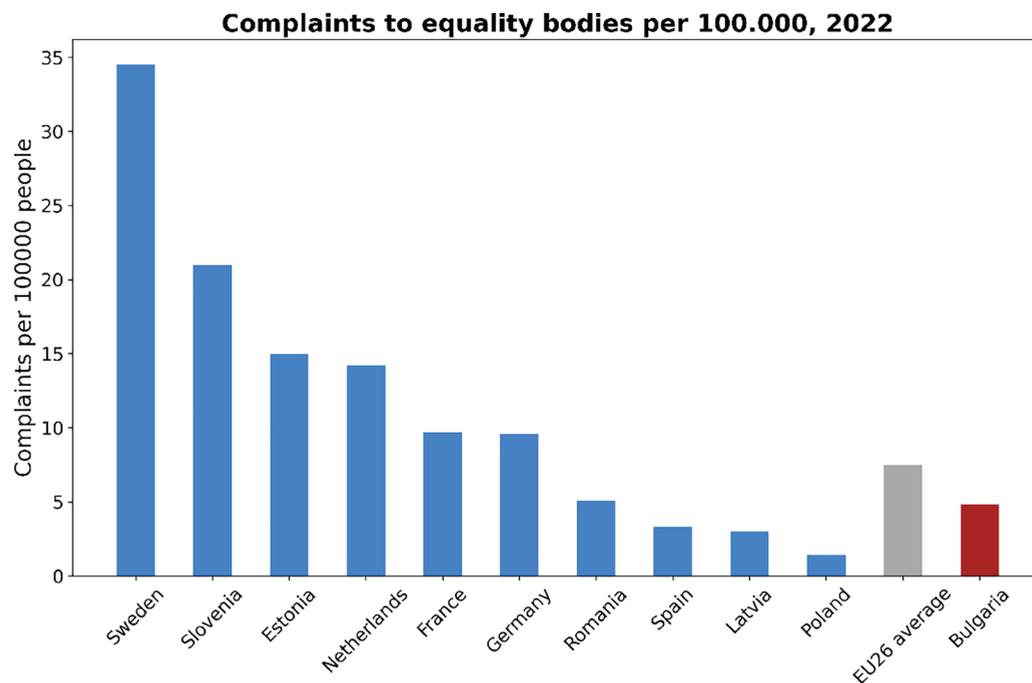


Figure 3. Number of complaints submitted to national equality bodies per 100,000 people in 2022 across 11 EU countries and the EU average, highlighting Bulgaria's notably low complaint rate. The year 2022 is used because complaint rates have been broadly stable over time, making it representative of the long-run pattern. Sources: Data on number of complaints comes from individual websites for each country. Websites with data on annual reports for each country can be found here: Bulgaria (34), Poland (35), Finland (36), Spain (37), Romania (38), Germany (39), France (40), Netherlands (41,42), Estonia (43), Slovenia (44), Sweden (45).

fragile flow of cases into civil courts, especially for damages, supports the idea that heavy bureaucracy, high costs, and lengthy procedures discourage victims from taking their claims further. Even when discrimination is alleged, most people stop at the complaint stage, and only a tiny number take the extra step of filing a separate civil claim for compensation.

Administrative complexity further contributes to the low number of complaints to the CPD, as seen in Figure 3. According to the CPD’s 2023 Annual Report, 39 % of complaints were dismissed for lack of evidence, and 18 % were left unexamined because of procedural mistakes (33). These figures indicate that the complaint process itself is challenging to navigate and that many potential victims abandon their cases before a decision is reached. At the same time, Figure 4 shows that about 40 % of CPD decisions confirm discrimination, higher than in Romania or Slovakia (under 20 %). This demonstrates that when complaints are properly filed and processed, the CPD can identify discrimination. Yet, because it cannot compensate victims, these outcomes have limited

practical impact, and offenders face only minor fines. The absence of meaningful remedies reduces both deterrence and public confidence.

Political underrepresentation - 2nd potential mechanism

Bulgaria elects far fewer women than the EU average. In 2023, just about a quarter of members of parliament (MPs) were women (6), compared with roughly 33 % EU-wide (Figure 5). Bulgaria still has no legislative gender quota, and women’s share of party leadership or committee chair posts remains low (8). This underrepresentation means fewer women legislators who might champion pay-equality measures. By contrast, EU countries with strong parity rules, for example, France, Italy, or the Nordic states, routinely see women holding 40–50 % of seats and tend to cluster at the lower end of the unadjusted pay gap, for example, France 14.1 %, Spain 8.6 %, Italy 4.6 % in recent years (see Figure 2)(3). In other words, Figure 2 suggests a negative correlation: countries with more women in power tend to have

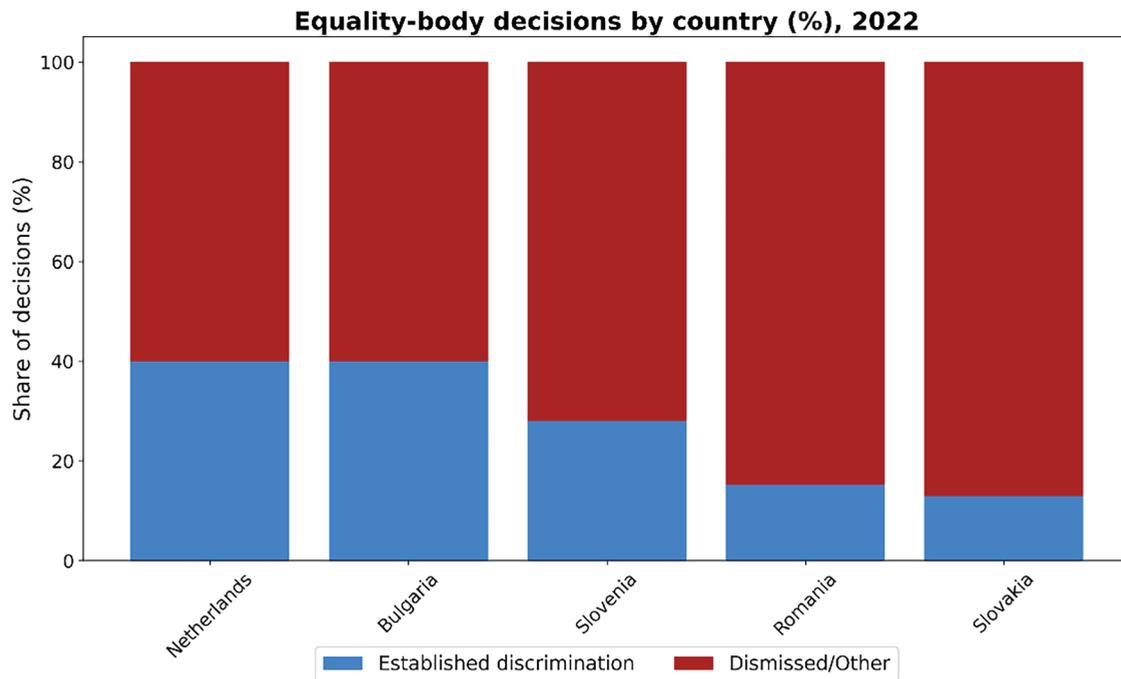


Figure 4. Share of equality-body decisions that established discrimination versus those dismissed or classified as other outcomes in 2022 for five EU countries, showing that Bulgaria has a mid-range share of confirmed discrimination cases. These 2022 outcomes reflect the typical pattern reported in recent years and thus provide a representative view of the long-run trajectory. Sources: Bulgaria – CPD Annual Report 2022 (4); Romania – CNCN 2022 Activity Report (38); Slovenia – Advocate of the Principle of Equality Annual Report 2022 (44); Slovakia – European Commission Non-Discrimination Country Report 2024 (46); Netherlands – NIHR Annual Report 2022 (41).

smaller average pay gaps. Research supports this pattern. Cross-national studies in the *American Economic Review* and in European Commission reports find that higher shares of female legislators significantly raise the odds of passing “women-friendly” laws on equal pay, anti-discrimination, childcare, and other family support (18). When fewer women serve in parliament or cabinet, proposals such as stronger pay transparency rules, indexed minimum wages, or expanded care benefits are more likely to stall or receive lower priority.

In Bulgaria, this dynamic is evident in stalled reforms. Bulgaria has so far failed to transpose the EU’s new pay-transparency directive (deadline mid-2026) (EC 2026 deadline notice) (28,5), which points to a lack of political drive. The government recently approved a significant minimum wage increase (+15.4% for 2025) (47). Still, the change mostly follows an automatic formula rather than a debate explicitly focused on reducing the gender pay gap. Because women make up over 60 % of minimum-wage earners in the EU (48), such decisions matter greatly for pay equality. Inside parliament, descriptive data suggest that women MPs remain under-represented in influential committees and in the party leadership that drafts pay

and labor laws (8). By contrast, in countries with more women MPs or ministers, the policy agenda tends to tilt towards gender equality (13, 14, 15). Analyses of Spain, France, and Italy find that gender quotas and parity cabinets led to more vigorous enforcement of equal-pay audits and rapid expansion of public childcare, and international surveys show that legislatures with more women spend more on family benefits, childcare, and (12). All these factors contribute to narrower gender pay gaps over time. Without at least a critical mass of female lawmakers, proposals for stronger equality enforcement are more likely to be postponed or watered down in Bulgaria.

The Mexican example shows how top-level representation can shift priorities. In late 2024, Mexico elected Claudia Sheinbaum as the country’s first female president, and her governing coalition holds strong majorities in Congress (49). Her government quickly put gender-equal pay and labor reforms on the agenda, including constitutional amendments on “equal pay for equal work” (50) and plans to raise minimum wages and expand social-protection coverage for gig workers (51). These initiatives are still new and largely untested, but

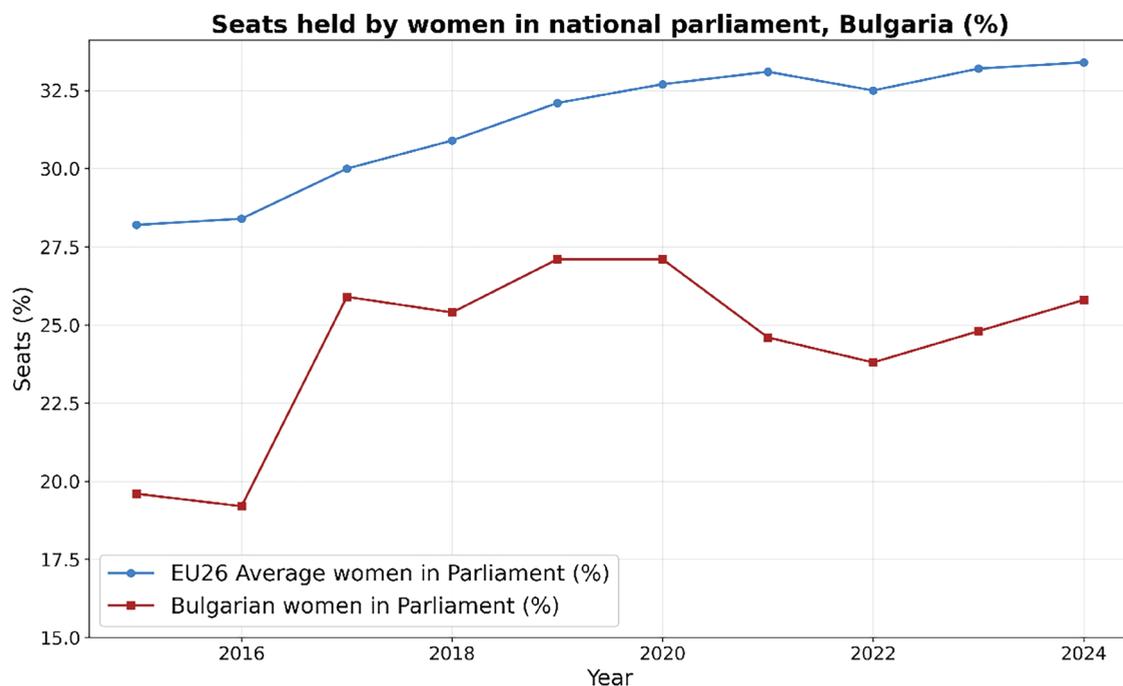


Figure 5. Share of seats held by women in national parliaments in Bulgaria and the EU-26 average, 2014–2024. The figure shows that women’s parliamentary representation in Bulgaria has remained persistently below the EU average despite modest gains, consistent with underrepresentation as a structural feature of the political system. Source: Eurostat, “Seats held by women in national parliaments and governments.” (52).

they already show how a woman in the top job can move pay-equality issues up the political agenda. By contrast, no comparable political driver exists in Bulgaria today, so gender-equalizing policies tend to arrive later and in weaker form, helping to explain why Bulgaria’s unadjusted pay gap remains above that of many EU peers.

Legislative weaknesses – 3rd potential mechanism

Bulgaria currently has no mandatory pay-gap reporting (5). Employers are under no legal duty to disclose salary ranges or gender-disaggregated pay data, so employees can usually check pay fairness only through court cases, which are costly, slow, and uncertain (5). This opacity leaves most private-sector pay settings invisible to workers and difficult to challenge. This legal weakness is already recognized at the EU level. The Pay Transparency Directive, Directive (EU) 2023/970 (28), requires member states to introduce rules such as gender-segregated reporting,

employees’ right to see pay information, and the inclusion of pay ranges in job advertisements. Bulgaria must transpose these measures by June 2026, yet as of 2024, no draft law had been tabled, which underscores how far current legislation lags behind EU standards (5). The consequences of this opacity appear clearly in the sector data. Where pay is individually negotiated and information is scarce, the gender pay gap is largest: information and communication (29 %), financial and insurance activities (28 %), manufacturing (23 %), and human health and social work (21 %). Where pay is structured and visible, the gap is much smaller: education (about 3–4 %) and public administration (13 %) as shown in Figure 6 (10). Figure 7 shows that these small gaps coincide with high collective or statutory coverage (around 80–90 % in education and public administration), while finance, ICT, and retail/hospitality have coverage often below 10 %. Middle-coverage sectors such as manufacturing (around 40 %) and transport (about 30 %) display mid-range gaps.

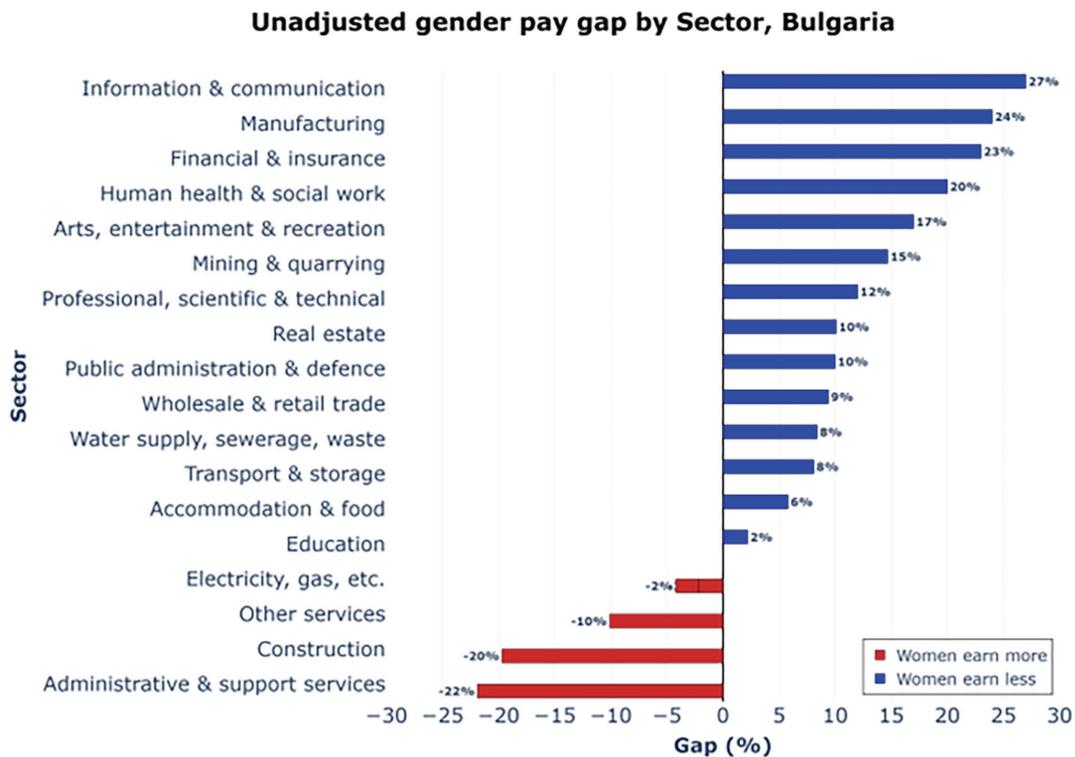


Figure 6. Bulgaria’s unadjusted gender pay gap by economic sector in 2022. Positive bars indicate sectors where women earn less than men (a positive gap), and negative bars indicate sectors where women earn more. Sectoral gaps have been broadly stable over the last decade, so 2022 provides a representative year for the persistent cross-sector pattern. Source: National Statistical Institute (NSI), “Gender pay gap by economic activity.” (10).

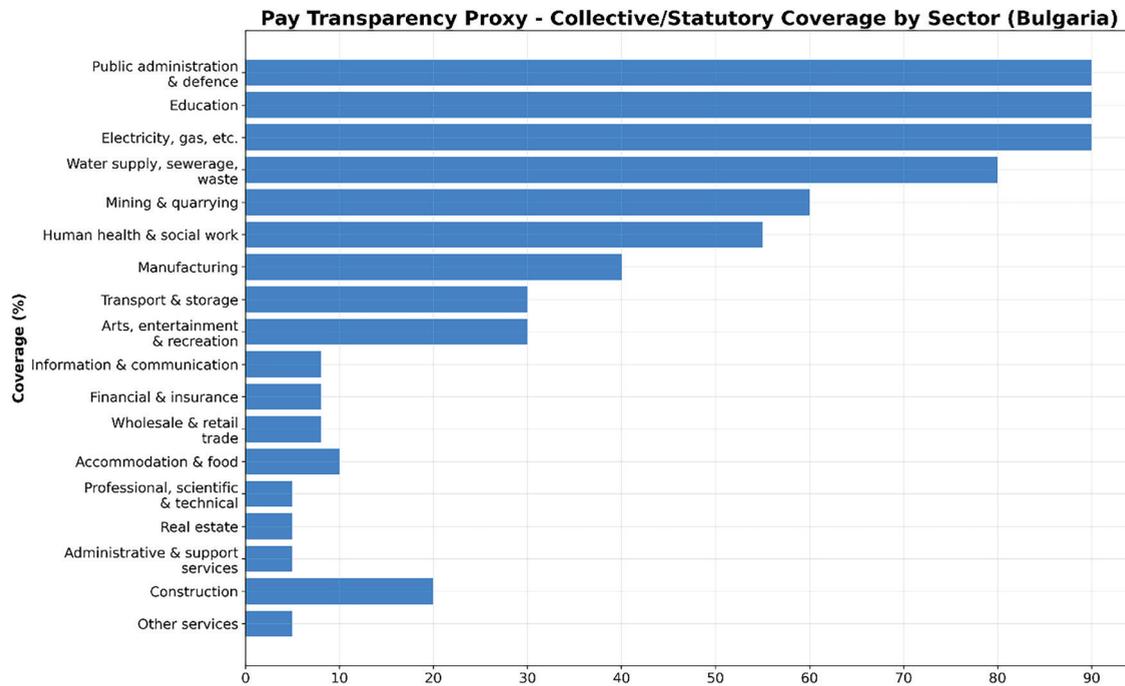


Figure 7. Collective or statutory pay-setting coverage by sector in Bulgaria in 2022, used as a proxy for pay transparency. Sector-level coverage levels and rankings have moved only modestly since the mid-2010s, so 2022 is representative for comparing coverage across sectors and linking it to long-run gender pay-gap patterns. Sources: Author’s calculations based on multiple sources. Websites can be found here: EU Participation (53), Etui (54), OECD (55), Eurofound (56), and ISP (57).

Opacity then helps to keep these gaps in place. Without accessible pay information, especially in low-coverage private services, women lack benchmarks to negotiate or to detect disparities. Discretion accumulates in annual raises, bonuses, and starting offers, and these discretionary elements tend to widen gaps where pay remains secret. A few “reverse-gap” outliers, such as construction (about -25%) and administrative and support services (around -17%), are explained by composition effects (women concentrated in better-paid sub-roles) and do not overturn the broader transparency pattern. This can be seen in Figure 6. Taken together, the sector map fits the mechanism: where pay is transparent and rule-based, the gender gap compresses, and where pay is opaque and individualized, it widens. Bulgaria’s lack of mandatory pay transparency is therefore a structural driver of the gender pay gap, especially in private, low-coverage sectors.

Mechanism 4: Risk-Taking, Entrepreneurship, and the GPG in Bulgaria

Men in Bulgaria are far more likely than women to be self-employed, as seen in Figure 8 (58). In 2022, roughly

one in eight employed Bulgarian men worked in self-employment, compared with only about one in thirteen employed women, a difference of about 5 percentage points (9). This matters because entrepreneurial incomes are highly variable. Most new businesses fail, but a few succeed spectacularly. These high-variance outcomes create a small group of very high earners that is disproportionately male (59,60). International evidence confirms that top income brackets are largely composed of business owners rather than wage earners (27). In short, men’s greater entry into entrepreneurship gives them more opportunities to achieve very high incomes, making the highest-earning group more male and widening overall gender differences in earnings.

Bulgarian data underscore the risk-reward trade-off in entrepreneurship. Only about 78% of businesses born in 2018 lived to their first birthday, and just 4.9% of those born in 2014 were still active in 2019 (59). This high “venture mortality” is on par with some of the most volatile markets. Men, nevertheless, appear more willing to face these odds. A large meta-analysis finds that men exhibit higher risk tolerance on average (23), and experiments show they are more likely to enter

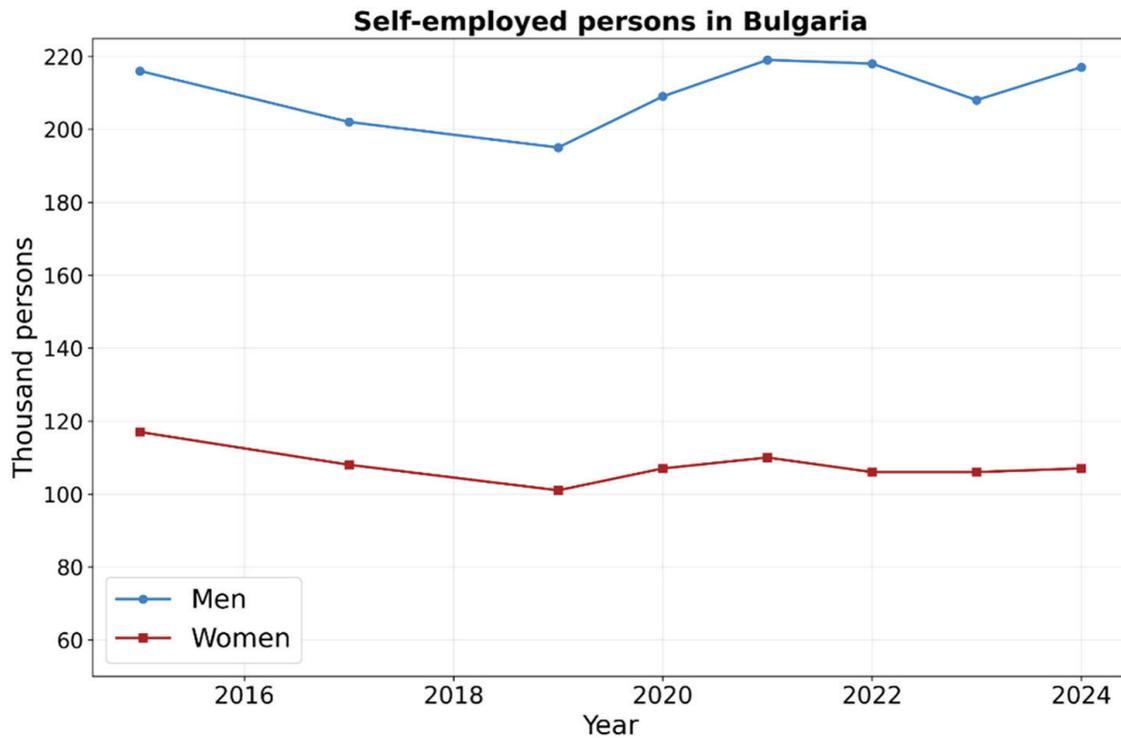


Figure 8. Number (or share) of self-employed men and women in Bulgaria, 2014–2024, showing a persistent male advantage in self-employment. Source: Eurostat, “Self-employment by sex, age and citizenship.”(58). Taken together, these four mechanisms help explain how Bulgaria can end up with a relatively wide gender pay gap even though women are, on average, more educated than men. Weak enforcement, low female representation in decision-making, opaque pay-setting, and gendered patterns in risk-taking and entrepreneurship all push women toward lower-paid jobs or limit their access to the highest-earning roles. The next part of the article explains why narrowing this gap is an economic priority for Bulgaria, before turning to concrete policy remedies for each mechanism.

competitive, high-stakes environments than women (24). Consistent with this, surveys find that women report greater fear of business failure and lower entrepreneurial intent (60). Studies of failed entrepreneurs in Europe also show that, after a business collapse, women are significantly less likely than men to re-enter entrepreneurship (25). Together, these findings help explain why more serial entrepreneurs are male and why men have a greater opportunity for one of their ventures to break out with large profits.

Meanwhile, women entrepreneurs in Bulgaria face financing frictions that can cap their upside. Women-led firms consistently report access to credit as a top growth obstacle (61, 62). Only about 29 % of formal firms in Bulgaria have a female top manager, and women-owned businesses tend to be smaller and concentrated in lower-margin sectors such as retail (52). Banks and investors may unconsciously favor male-run start-ups, and globally,

women-founded start-ups receive a disproportionately small share of venture capital funding (27). According to EU-wide surveys, female entrepreneurs rely more on personal and bank finance and less on equity investors, in part because of these barriers (62). Such financing gaps hinder women-owned firms from achieving the same spectacular success as some male-owned firms. In Bulgaria’s case, men’s dominance among larger business owners is reflected in credit data, because nearly half of Bulgarian firms have bank loans. Yet, women-led SMEs report smaller loan sizes and higher rejection rates (63). Although the unadjusted gender pay gap indicator covers only employees and excludes self-employment and entrepreneurship income, differences in entrepreneurship still matter for the overall GPG and income distributions. In Bulgaria, entrepreneurship and self-employment tend to widen the overall gender earnings gap, because men’s higher risk-taking and thus their more frequent

involvement in entrepreneurship projects, combined with structural finance gaps, produce more extreme positive outcomes for them. Male entrepreneurs in Bulgaria are both more numerous and more likely to achieve high earnings, which contributes to wider gender differences in labor income alongside the wage-based gender pay gap (58). Encouraging and enabling more women to pursue high-growth entrepreneurship projects and improving their access to capital could therefore help narrow the broader gender earnings gap in the long run.

Why narrowing Bulgaria's gender pay gap is an economic priority

Bulgaria is aging, talent-scarce, and losing skilled workers to emigration, so the country cannot afford to under-reward half of its human capital. In this analysis, a smaller gender pay gap is treated as an economic priority, not a slogan, because when equal skills receive unequal pay, firms misallocate talent, productivity and innovation fall, tax revenues weaken, and the risk of old-age poverty rises. The four mechanisms analyzed in this article (weak enforcement against discrimination, under-representation in decision-making, opaque pay-setting, and barriers to women's high-growth entrepreneurship) are essential because they are the concrete channels that turn equal capability into unequal earnings; tightening them raises effective labor supply without importing workers, lifts GDP per graduate, improves Bulgaria's signal to investors, and supports pension sustainability. The headline gap is a crude average that mixes hours, jobs, and regions. Even as a helpful signal in Bulgaria's ageing and tight labor market, the GPG highlights frictions these mechanisms directly address and shows why the reforms discussed here are prudent and efficiency-enhancing rather than mere optics.

Because the gender pay gap constrains Bulgaria's growth, tax base, and use of human capital, it cannot be treated as a side issue. The next subsection therefore sets out specific policy remedies that strengthen equality enforcement, raise women's representation in decision-making, increase pay transparency, and support women's high-growth entrepreneurship.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND REMEDIES

Remedy 1: Strengthening Enforcement: The Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD)

Bulgaria's CPD can hear discrimination complaints and impose administrative fines, but it cannot compel

compliance or award damages (4). Offenders may ignore its rulings, and victims rarely file separate civil claims for compensation. Complaint rates remain low by comparative standards, seen in Figure 3, suggesting limited trust and a weak expected payoff from using the system. Because these weaknesses are structural, reform must be institutional. Below are compact, proven models Bulgaria can adapt to strengthen the CPD's independence, accessibility, and enforcement bite.

France's model demonstrates how a robust, accessible equality body can boost uptake and early resolution. The Défenseur des droits (Defender of Rights) (64) is an independent authority with a ring-fenced, multi-year budget and a broad local presence. In 2023, it handled \approx 138,000 complaints and requests and 118,800 hotline calls(40). By contrast, Bulgaria's CPD processed only 322 complaints that year(33). This nationwide network and guaranteed resources lift public trust and promote early settlement. Bulgaria should follow suit by anchoring the CPD's independence in law, securing multi-year funding, and expanding its delegate and hotline system akin to France.

Sweden provides the enforcement model that Bulgaria lacks. The Equality Ombudsman has standing to bring cases, can request interim injunctions, and can seek conditional fines that are confirmed by an independent board (45). These tools raise the cost of non-compliance early, enabling disputes to be resolved faster. To replicate this, amend PADA to give the CPD standing in court, access to interim measures, and the power to impose conditional fines, all reviewed by an independent body. This package turns decisions into outcomes.

The EU's 2024 Equality Bodies Directives provide the legal framework for these reforms. They set binding minimum standards for equality bodies' mandate, independence, resources, tasks, and power. The rules require own-initiative investigations and court participation on behalf of victims. Bulgaria should transpose them above the minimum—cementing the CPD's autonomy, multi-year budget, and broad powers (from victim assistance to systemic inquiries). Revised PADA provisions should also oblige public institutions to cooperate with CPD investigations, bringing practice in line with EU expectations(65).

Together, these measures would close Bulgaria's enforcement gap. Updating PADA in line with the EU directives would give the CPD real power and resources to act fast, secure compliance, and make rights enforceable. Yet even perfect enforcement machinery cannot close the gender gap unless women themselves

help shape the rules. The next mechanism, therefore, turns from enforcement to representation, examining how the absence of women in parliament limits the political drive for pay equality.

Remedy 2: Increasing Women’s Political Representation

Bulgaria elects roughly one-quarter of its MPs as women under open-list proportional representation (240 MPs, 31 districts), with a ~7% preference threshold and no parity or zipper rules(6,8). This underrepresentation slows movement on childcare, parental leave, and equal-pay measures that directly influence the gender pay gap. To address this institutional imbalance, the section below sets out two law-ready remedies—Spain and Mexico—each integrated into Bulgaria’s legal architecture and tied to pay-gap reduction channels.

Spain: Parity with placement and list rejection

In Spain, Organic Law 3/2007 requires party lists to keep a 40–60 gender balance both overall and within each block of five consecutive positions (20). Election boards can refuse to accept a list until it is corrected, preventing parties from hiding women in unwinnable slots and helping keep representation near parity. This approach could be adapted in Bulgaria by amending the Electoral Code to set a minimum of 40% for each sex overall and in every five-name block. The Central Election Commission (CEC) would be required to return non-compliant lists for correction. To preserve the ratio after preference voting, lawmakers could slightly lower the personal-preference threshold or limit the number of candidates who may leapfrog the ordered list. The effect is to move women into electable ranks and keep them there, supporting progress on childcare, parental leave, and equal pay (8,9,13).

Mexico: Constitutional “parity in everything” with court enforcement

Mexico wrote legislative parity into its Constitution in 2014 and expanded it in 2019 to “parity in everything,” extending parity to cabinets, autonomous bodies, and sub-national offices; the electoral tribunal can invalidate lists or appointments that fail to comply (66). Scholars studying Mexico’s reforms show that this constitutional design, combined with judicial enforcement, durably institutionalizes women’s presence and broadens equality-oriented lawmaking (16,17). This approach can be adapted in Bulgaria by entrenching a constitutional principle of equal access to elected mandates and senior

public office, then passing implementing laws that require parity lists, empower the Central Election Commission (CEC) and administrative courts to void non-compliant submissions, and set expectations for gender-balanced cabinets and public appointments.

Progress should be monitored through women’s seat share, counts of corrected or rejected lists, and recorded subsidy deductions. With more women in electable positions and incentives aligned for compliance, the next lever is pay transparency and enforcement—audits, reporting thresholds, and sanctions—to convert political inclusion into firm-level pay equity.

Remedy 3: Closing Legislative Gaps and Mandatory Pay Transparency

Bulgaria has no mandatory employer gender-pay reporting, as established in mechanism 3. Large unadjusted gaps persist in opaque sectors, about 27% in information & communication, 23% in finance, and 24% in manufacturing (as shown in Figure 6) (10). The reforms below close the legislative gap by adapting proven European tools.

Directive (EU) 2023/970, transpose above the minimum

Bulgarian lawmakers should fully transpose Directive (EU) 2023/970 (28) and add practical rules to make it work. Employers would post salary ranges in job ads, stop using pay secrecy and salary history questions, and give workers access to comparator pay information. Evidence backs these two complements. Salary-history bans raise women’s earnings after job moves (67). Pay-range posting lifts posted salaries by about 3.5 percent (21). Both should be enforced through advert checks and fines. Firms would report gender-pay data on a regular schedule. When an unexplained gap of 5 percent or more remains, the employer would run a joint pay assessment with worker representatives. Breaches would trigger sanctions and compensation. To match Bulgaria’s firm-size structure, reporting should start earlier in high-gap sectors such as ICT and finance, at thresholds of 50 to 100 employees rather than waiting for the default EU phases (at least 250 employees in 2027 and 100 in 2031). Evidence from Denmark points to real effects. A pay-statistics law for firms with at least 35 employees cut the gender pay gap by about 2 percentage points, roughly a 13 percent decline relative to the pre-law level, mainly because men’s wage growth slowed once differences became visible (19). Evaluations also find no job losses or profitability declines and some gains in female hiring and promotion (19). A strong Bulgarian transposition can

narrow gaps in bonus-heavy private services by curbing discretionary pay drift without harming employment.

Spain's "equal-pay toolkit", make transparency operational inside firms. Spain's "equal-pay toolkit" makes transparency operational inside firms (68). Royal Decrees 901/2020 and 902/2020 require every employer to keep a remuneration register for each job classification, reporting average and median pay by gender and itemizing base pay, complements, bonuses, and extras. When any category shows a gap of 25% or more, the employer must record objective, gender-neutral reasons in the register. Firms with at least 50 employees must run gender-neutral job evaluations to establish equal value and complete pay audits within an Equality Plan that includes actions and timelines. Worker representatives are consulted before the register is finalized and have full access to the data, while labor inspectorates can review compliance and impose penalties up to €187,000; companies that lack a required Equality Plan can be excluded from public contracts (68). Bulgaria can adopt this framework for large employers in high-gap sectors by mandating detailed registers, job evaluation and audits, granting the General Labor Inspectorate full access and sanctioning powers, and setting a quantitative trigger, aligned with the EU rule, that requires a written justification and a corrective plan subject to inspectorate review.

The law can make wages visible and fairer for employees, but it cannot change the composition of top earners – the employers. Therefore, the following section studies entrepreneurship in Bulgaria and the policies that can raise women's participation in it.

Remedy 4: Supporting Women's Entrepreneurship and Risk-Taking

Men in Bulgaria are much more likely than women to be self-employed, especially as employers, so the very highest earners are disproportionately male (9,60). Because entrepreneurship is risky yet can generate very high incomes when successful, this pattern widens the GPG. This remedy focuses on policies that expand women's entry into, scale, and re-entry into entrepreneurship to narrow that imbalance.

Targeted credit guarantees (entry and scale)

Female-led SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) face higher rejection rates and smaller loans in Bulgaria's credit market (69). Bulgaria could set up a dedicated credit-guarantee program, run by the Bulgarian Development Bank in partnership with the European

Investment Fund under InvestEU. This would share risk with commercial banks and raise approvals for viable women-led firms that lack collateral. Similar schemes, such as EBRD's Women in Business, show that one euro of public guarantee can unlock several euros of private lending with good repayment (70). The scheme should publish approval rates by gender and prioritize first-time borrowers with limited collateral, so that support reaches entrepreneurs who could not otherwise borrow. As more women move from idea to financed employer firms, more of them will reach top-earnings outcomes and narrow the gender gap at the top of the distribution.

Second-chance reform (re-entry)

Women are less likely than men to try again after a failed venture (25), and punitive insolvency regimes deter re-entry (26). The EU Restructuring and Second-Chance Directive (EU) 2019/1023 (29) caps discharge for honest entrepreneurs at a maximum of three years. Bulgaria's new personal insolvency step is progress, but entrepreneurial debts still require explicit, rapid relief. Amend the Commercial Code (or the new law) to allow bona fide owners to discharge residual business debts within 1–3 years, with a simplified winding-up route for small firms, aligning with the Directive(29). A plain-language outreach campaign led by the Ministry of Economy can normalize learning from failure. Lower personal costs and faster resolution raise first-time entry and re-entry, multiplying women's "shots on goal" for right-tail outcomes.

Together, these levers, bank finance, and second-chance law shift the margins that feed the gender pay gap through entrepreneurship. By raising women's probability of reaching the top of Bulgaria's earnings distribution, the entrepreneurship channel of the gender gap narrows. The next section explains why narrowing Bulgaria's gender pay gap in this way is not only a fairness goal, but also an economic priority for the country.

CONCLUSION

This article examines why Bulgaria continues to have a comparatively large gender pay gap, even though Bulgarian women now attain tertiary education at much higher rates than Bulgarian men, with this difference well above the EU average. It argues that this gap is mainly driven by structural features of Bulgaria's institutions and labor market. These include weak and slow enforcement of equal-pay and anti-discrimination rules

by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD) and women's under-representation in key political decision-making positions. They also include weak pay-transparency rules and opaque pay practices, especially in parts of the private sector, alongside gendered patterns of sector choice and entrepreneurship that leave men concentrated in many of the highest-paid jobs and firms. For each of these mechanisms, the paper outlines concrete remedies that Bulgaria could adopt, such as strengthening the CPD's independence, investigative capacity, and sanctions; choosing ambitious implementation of EU pay-transparency requirements; increasing women's representation in elected bodies and senior public roles; and easing women's access to high-productivity sectors and entrepreneurship. Overall, the discussion frames Bulgaria's gender pay gap not as a problem of women investing too little in their own education, but as the result of how current rules, incentives, and power structures convert education into wages.

Future empirical work could test and deepen this argument by quantifying how strongly each mechanism is associated with Bulgaria's gender pay gap, using richer data to move from descriptive patterns to estimated effects. Even before such work is done, the mechanisms and remedies discussed in this paper already suggest that strengthening equality enforcement, building real pay-transparency regimes, and

supporting women's access to leadership and high-growth sectors are promising directions for policymakers to explore, even if their precise impact still needs to be measured. If Bulgaria wants the strong human capital of its young women to translate into equal pay and faster growth, rather than frustration and loss of talent, it will need institutions and labor-market rules that reward men and women on the same terms and allow that human capital to drive the country forward.

Limitations and future research

This paper has important limitations. It relies on descriptive patterns in publicly available aggregate data and on qualitative readings of institutional and legal sources, so it cannot identify causal effects or precisely measure how large each mechanism's impact on Bulgaria's gender pay gap actually is. Because the analysis uses country- and sector-level indicators rather than micro-level wage data, it cannot separate composition effects from within-job pay differences or observe firm-level practices. Key concepts such as weak enforcement, low representation, low coverage, and entrepreneurship

are measured with relatively few indicators (for example, complaint rates or self-employment shares), which cannot capture every institutional nuance, so some mechanisms may only be partially reflected in the data. Even with these limitations, the framework still helps to organize the evidence and identify which institutional levers look most promising for narrowing Bulgaria's gender pay gap.

These limitations point to several concrete directions for future research. One priority is to build micro-data-based studies that link individual earnings to institutional and sectoral indicators, so that the contribution of each mechanism to Bulgaria's gender pay gap can be quantified more precisely over time. A second priority is to develop the entrepreneurship channel in more detail, by linking gender gaps in self-employment, firm growth, bankruptcy outcomes, and access to finance directly to earnings distributions and pay gaps. In this way, future work can move from the descriptive, mechanism-mapping approach of this article toward a more fully quantified assessment of how institutional reforms narrow Bulgaria's gender pay gap and which levers are most effective. Beyond these econometric extensions, further studies could also broaden the international literature on the gender pay gap—for example, by linking pay gaps to women's long-term pension income or mental health, or by analyzing how new forms of work and the spread of AI technologies affect gender differences in pay and career progression. These broader projects would complement the Bulgaria-focused evidence by situating its mechanisms within global trends in work, technology, and social protection.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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