

INVISIBLE BARRIERS: WOMEN'S INEQUALITIES IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES Between Creativity and Inequality: The Role of Gender in the Cultural Sector

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the persistent structural barriers confronting women in the cultural and creative sectors (CCS), focusing on unequal access to resources, professional networks, institutional recognition, and the influence of gendered perceptions of risk in perpetuating inequality. Drawing on a systematic review of academic literature and regulatory frameworks, conducted in line with PRISMA guidelines and complemented by searches of major scientific databases and institutional sources, the analysis identifies a consistent gap between advanced legal frameworks and their implementation in practice. The findings reveal that progress towards gender equality in the CCS remains uneven. To address these challenges, the study proposes inclusive public policies, including gender-focused creative hubs, support for women-led events and festivals, campaigns to promote female creative work, gender-sensitive funding mechanisms, and intersectional training in creative management. These measures aim to enhance equity, increase visibility, and expand leadership opportunities for women, thereby strengthening innovation and the long-term sustainability of creative economies.

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1. Introduction

The creative industries, widely recognised as one of the most dynamic and strategically important sectors of the contemporary economy, remain undervalued, particularly due to persistent gender inequalities that constrain their transformative potential (Carr & Van Raalte, 2025). Although the sector is frequently portrayed as a “fair, creative, and egalitarian” field, this perception conceals considerable gender disparities and the precarious nature of creative work, which is marked by systemic inequalities and subtle forms of sexism (Dent, 2020; Parsley & Johansson, 2025).

These inequalities, which intersect with gender, class, and race/ethnicity, impede the full development of the sector (Gill, 2014). The workforce is frequently described as “young, white, male, and middle-class”, and even highly accomplished women often encounter substantial gender-based barriers (Parsley & Johansson, 2025). The sector is characterised by discrimination, harassment, a gendered division of labour, informal hiring practices, and limited access to funding, with women remaining underrepresented in leadership positions (Carr & Van Raalte, 2025; Gill, 2014).

Recognising the importance of integrating a gender perspective to fully harness human resources and drive economic growth (Kamberidou, 2020), this study has the following objectives: (i) to identify patterns of structural inequality within the creative and cultural sectors; (ii) to analyse the institutional and social mechanisms that perpetuate these inequalities; (iii) to compare the effectiveness of measures across different national and supranational contexts; and (iv) to propose inclusive public policy recommendations that advance gender equity in these sectors.

2. Challenges and Gender Policies in the Creative Industries

The creative and cultural industries constitute one of the fastest-growing global sectors, propelled by innovation, creativity, and talent (Gustafsson & Lazzaro, 2021). Yet, behind this appearance of dynamism and modernity, substantial barriers persist that constrain the full participation and success of women.

2.1. Obstacles and Challenges Faced by Women in the Creative and Cultural Sector

Despite its dynamism and innovation, the creative sector is not immune to gender inequalities. It is necessary to analyse the obstacles and challenges faced by women, including underrepresentation in leadership positions, pay disparities, the devaluation of their work, and difficulties in accessing funding (Carreño & Villarroja, 2021; Ginis, 2023). These factors indicate that inequality is deeply embedded in the sector’s structures, cultures, and daily operations (Gill, 2014). By examining these barriers, the objective is to demonstrate that addressing them is crucial for the growth and sustainability of the sector as a whole.

The culture of the creative industry is highly masculinised, as creativity is often perceived as a male-dominated profession, associated with traits such as “strength, resilience, and competitiveness” (Ramos-Serrano et al., 2022). This perception is reinforced by the myth of the “creative genius”, the notion that genuine creative talent is innate, exceptional, and historically embodied by male figures (Conor et al., 2015; Miller, 2016; Villarroja & Barrios, 2022). This archetype, often characterised by temperamental or childish behaviours celebrated as talent, upholds gender hierarchies that marginalise women, relegating them to support roles and framing them as risky hires (Carr & Van Raalte, 2025). Consequently, women encounter contradictory expectations: they are expected to embody masculine-coded norms of leadership while simultaneously conforming to feminine ideals of submissiveness, a tension that contributes to their underrepresentation in prestigious roles (Carr & Van Raalte, 2025; Wang, 2025). Such normative assumptions, which link leadership, rationality, and competitiveness to men, and kindness and meticulousness to women, permeate the creative industries, shaping career choices, promotion opportunities, and institutional recognition (Wang, 2025).

Women face multiple barriers to accessing leadership positions in the creative and cultural industries, frequently described as a “glass ceiling”, which are invisible obstacles that limit professional advancement (Alvarado-López & Martín-García, 2020; Carreño & Villarroya, 2022; Izquierdo-Castillo & Torres-Romay, 2023). Despite possessing higher levels of academic education and equivalent competence to their male colleagues, women continue to receive lower salaries, occupy fewer management positions, and are concentrated in roles with limited responsibility (Alvarado-López & Martín-García, 2020; Carreño & Villarroya, 2022; Ramos-Serrano et al., 2022). The source of these inequalities does not lie in women's education, experience, or technical ability, but in institutional, cultural, and structural barriers deeply rooted in the creative and cultural sector (Parsley & Johansson, 2025). These include discrimination, exclusion from decision-making networks, and biased perceptions of female competence and authority (Parsley & Johansson, 2025).

A primary source of gender inequality lies in the unequal distribution of domestic labour and childcare, which continues to impose a predominant burden on women (Ginis, 2023). The challenge of reconciling the demanding schedules of managerial positions with family life compels many women to choose between career progression and family commitments, particularly during the phase of professional consolidation (Alvarado-López & Martín-García, 2020; De-Miguel et al., 2017; Ginis, 2023; O'Brien, 2024). This phenomenon, described as a ‘multitasking whirlpool’, highlights the pressure to manage professional, familial, and personal responsibilities simultaneously (Kamberidou, 2020). Within this context, women ‘have to strive to manage both gender identity and professional identity’, increasing emotional stress and the risk of invisibility within the sector (Parsley & Johansson, 2025).

Motherhood further reduces the time and energy available for creative practice, leading to professional invisibility and emotional exhaustion, and necessitating greater effort to maintain a visible professional profile (Carr & Van Raalte, 2025; Ginis, 2023). Consequently, a dynamic of gendered visibility and invisibility emerges, whereby women are recognised through the lens of gender yet remain invisible as creative professionals, perpetuating discrimination and constraining leadership opportunities (Ginis, 2023; O'Brien, 2024; Parsley & Johansson, 2025).

Structural barriers within the sector exacerbate these inequalities. Dependence on informal networks, homophily, and limited access to funding present significant obstacles for women and minorities lacking sufficient social capital (Parsley & Johansson, 2025; Ramos-Serrano et al., 2022). The absence of formal protective and regulatory policies increases women's vulnerability to exclusion and exploitation, while recruitment practices rooted in personal networks reinforce patterns of privilege and marginalisation (Carr & Van Raalte, 2025; Gill, 2014).

Thus, despite the glamorous and aspirational image of the creative industries, they conceal a reality of profound instability and structural exploitation, described as “privileged precarity” (Carr & Van Raalte, 2025). The expectation of “doing what one loves” often masks precarious working conditions, including irregular schedules, low pay, and unpaid labour (Carreño & Villarroya, 2022; Miller, 2016). Combined with the disproportionate burden of domestic and caregiving responsibilities, the absence of formal protections renders women particularly vulnerable to exclusion, limits their advancement to leadership positions, and perpetuates their underrepresentation within the creative and cultural industries (Dent, 2020; Miller, 2016; Wang, 2025).

2.2. Institutional and Regulatory Policies for Gender Equality in the Creative Industries

The formulation and implementation of institutional and regulatory policies play a central role in mitigating gender inequalities within the Creative and Cultural Sectors (CCS) (Gustafsson & Lazzaro, 2021; Wang, 2025). Such policies function both as mechanisms to correct historically entrenched structural asymmetries and as instruments to promote inclusive and sustainable working environments. At the regional level, across the Iberian Peninsula and the European Union, a diverse range of strategies and programmes has been developed, reflecting measurable

progress. However, evidence indicates that the effective implementation of these policies remains uneven and fragmented.

In Portugal, the National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination (Estratégia Nacional para a Igualdade e a Não Discriminação, ENIND) seeks to ensure the full and equal participation of women in both public and private spheres, with a particular focus on achieving 40% female representation in senior management positions within Public Administration by 2030 (Portugal, 2018). Structured around the transversal integration of the gender perspective, referred to as gender mainstreaming, the adoption of positive action measures, and targeted funding, ENIND is articulated in conjunction with European instruments and aims to eliminate structural barriers to equality (Portugal, 2018). Despite these national efforts, marked gender segregation persists in higher education. According to the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (Comissão para a Cidadania e a Igualdade de Género, CIG) (2024a), in the 2022/23 academic year women constituted the majority of students and graduates in Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, and Journalism and Information, whereas men remained overwhelmingly dominant in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), where women continue to be significantly underrepresented. This educational divide reinforces structural inequalities that subsequently shape labour market dynamics and leadership opportunities within CCS.

Particularly significant is the approval of the Statute for Professionals in the Cultural Sector (Decree-Law No. 105/2021), which introduces improvements in labour regulation, social protection, and measures to combat harassment, while also establishing a formal register to inform public policies directed at the sector (Portugal, 2021). In addition, the Action Plan for Equality between Women and Men in Culture and Communication (Plano de Ação para a Igualdade entre Mulheres e Homens na Cultura, PAIMH) introduces measures relating to training, funding, and the promotion of cultural works that prioritise gender equality, marking an important milestone in aligning cultural policies with the equity agenda (Portugal, 2018). At the level of international cooperation, the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa, CPLP) adopted the Strategic Cooperation Plan for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, which integrates the gender dimension into national and multilateral policies and reinforces Portugal's commitment to strengthening female representation in decision-making processes (CPLP, 2010).

In Spain, the promotion of gender equality in the creative and cultural sector has been consolidated through a combination of regulatory frameworks, strategic plans, and sectoral initiatives. The First Equality Plan in Culture 2024 to 2026, launched by the Ministry of Culture, represents a significant step by integrating a transversal and intersectional gender perspective across cultural policies, combining mainstreaming measures with specific targeted actions (Ministry of Culture, 2024). Key objectives include reducing precarity and the economic gap, incorporating gender criteria into competitive grants, ensuring inclusive language in official norms and communications, and fostering community cultural participation, including projects aimed at women in prison as well as migrant, racialised, and rural artists (Ministry of Culture, 2024). The plan also promotes the visibility of historical and contemporary women creators through collaborations with museums, thematic exhibitions, and symbolic initiatives such as the *Ellas Crean* festival (Ministry of Culture, 2024). Furthermore, it includes internal training for Ministry staff and systematic data collection disaggregated by sex and intersectional variables (Ministry of Culture, 2024). A dedicated section addresses the prevention of male violence, establishing protocols for sectors including the audiovisual industry, libraries, and video game events, reflecting an integrated approach to cultural and social justice (Ministry of Culture, 2024).

At a broader level, the Third Strategic Plan for the Effective Equality of Women and Men 2022 to 2025 (III Plan Estratégico para la Igualdad Efectiva de Mujeres y Hombres, PEIEMH) includes a specific axis devoted to culture and sport, strengthening the analysis of inequalities through the Gender Equality Observatory in the Field of Culture (Observatorio de Igualdad de Género en el Ámbito de la Cultura). Measures include gender-balanced juries and evaluation committees, the recognition of previously marginalised women authors and artists, and direct support for women creators through acquisitions, exhibitions, and dissemination initiatives (Institute for Women,

2022). These measures seek to reposition Spanish cultural policies within a framework of greater equity and representation.

Nonetheless, structural challenges persist, particularly in the audiovisual and advertising sectors. Despite measures implemented by the Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts (Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisuales, ICAA), including financial incentives for projects led by women directors and gender parity criteria in committee selection, national reports continue to highlight the underrepresentation of women in large-scale productions and senior positions (Alvarado-López & Martín-García, 2020). The advertising sector exhibits a similar pattern: the 2007 Equality Law has yet to eliminate barriers such as horizontal and vertical segregation (Alvarado-López & Martín-García, 2020). In this context, independent initiatives play a critical role. For example, the platform Más Mujeres Creativas (2016) compiled a comprehensive census of women creatives and promoted gender parity in festival juries. The Más Mujeres a Seguir awards (2014), alongside academic and professional studies such as the Elephant in the Spanish Ad-Land study and the Dircom Report (2018), have contributed to mapping existing inequalities and identifying pathways for change (Alvarado-López & Martín-García, 2020).

At the European level, programmes such as *Creative Europe* (2014–2020) have promoted gender equality by addressing imbalances and creating opportunities for women in leadership positions (European Education and Culture Executive Agency [EACEA], 2021). The European Commission has increasingly integrated gender perspectives into cultural, innovation, and entrepreneurship policies, emphasising women as key drivers of technological and creative progress (Kamberidou, 2020). Across Member States, measures include Sweden's *ONE of THREE* quotas in film directing, Italy's *Legge Franceschini* funding criteria, Germany's *Pro Quote Regie*, and France's inclusion of equality clauses in cultural funding (EACEA, 2022). European initiatives such as *MEWEM EUROPA*, the EWA Network, Germany's *Music Industry Women*, and *Centre Stage Online* further support women's leadership and mentoring in the cultural and creative sectors (EACEA, 2022).

Although visible progress exists, genuine effectiveness requires tackling structural informality and exclusion from professional networks. Only through robust policies, equitable financing, and affirmative action will it be possible to cultivate a truly inclusive sector.

3. Design and Methodology

The present study seeks to investigate the principal structural obstacles encountered by women in the cultural and creative sectors (CCS), analysing them through the lens of public policies and institutional mechanisms that either perpetuate or attempt to mitigate such asymmetries. The focus is on the processes of formulation, implementation, and effectiveness of regulatory measures designed to promote gender equality, particularly within the European and Iberian contexts. This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach, incorporating explanatory elements, to examine gender inequalities within the CCS.

3.1. Research Design

The methodology employed in this study is primarily qualitative, utilising a descriptive and comparative approach grounded in a systematic review of scientific literature and current regulatory frameworks. Its purpose is to deepen understanding of the institutional and social mechanisms that perpetuate gender inequalities in the creative industries. In particular, it analyses and compares the effectiveness of equality measures implemented in Portugal, Spain, and across the European Union.

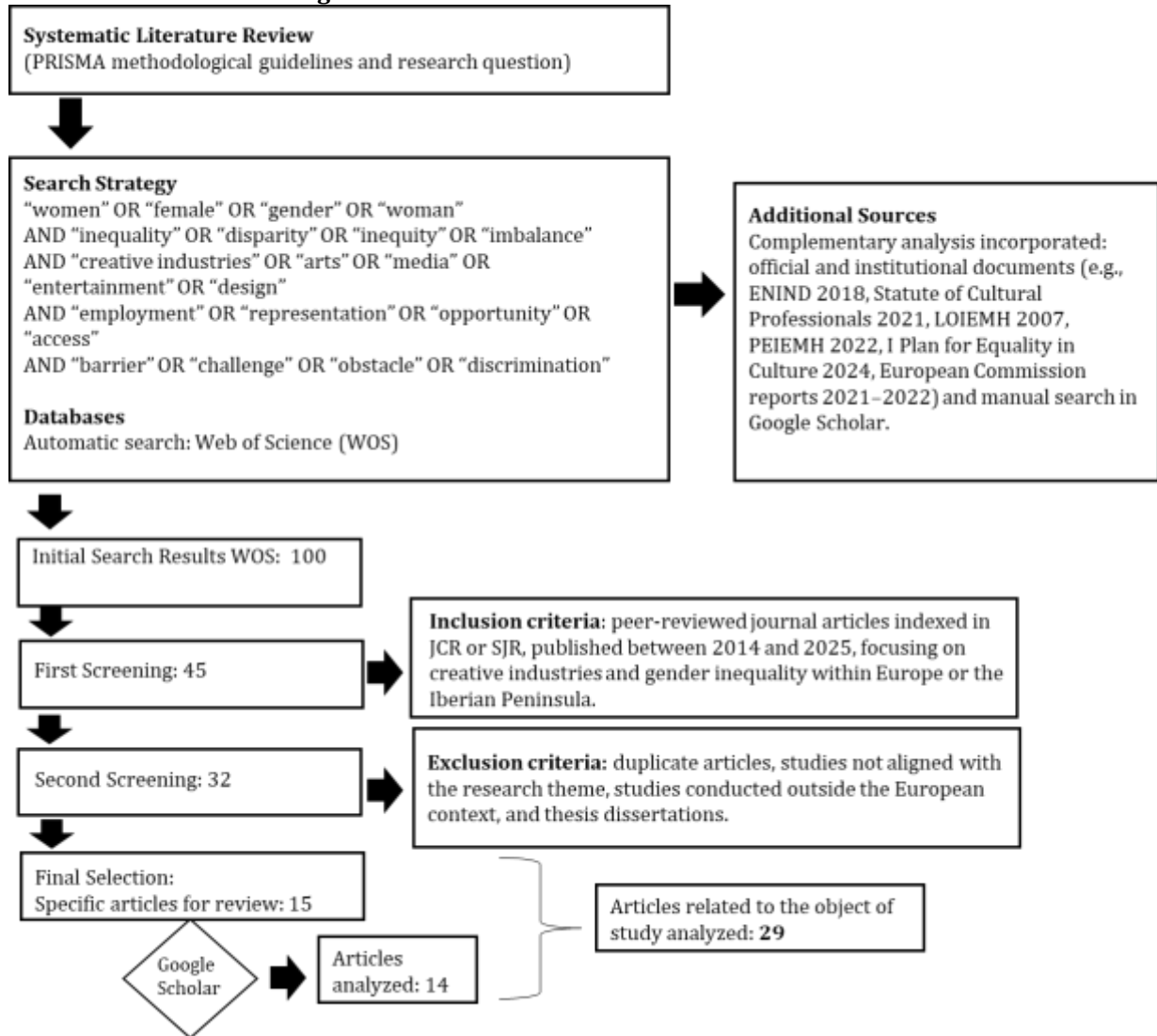
The systematic literature review followed PRISMA guidelines, structured into three main phases: planning, execution, and presentation of results. This process enabled the identification of previously studied contexts and facilitated the synthesis of key findings, limitations, implications, gaps, and directions for future research. This approach is essential for addressing the central research question: How do institutional and regulatory policies, alongside structural and social challenges, influence gender inequalities in the cultural and creative sectors, and how effective are existing measures in addressing these issues? Consequently, the methodological

framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the current state of gender inequalities within these sectors and clarifies the extent to which policies in the Iberian Peninsula and Europe may mitigate or reinforce such inequalities. This empirical foundation underpins the development of inclusive and transformative public policy recommendations, which are elaborated upon in subsequent chapters.

3.2. Methodology

To conduct a systematic review of the literature, we adhered to the PRISMA methodological guidelines (Page et al., 2021). During the planning phase, we developed a search strategy alongside specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological rigour. Boolean operators were used to combine key terms as follows: (“women” OR “female” OR “gender” OR “woman”) AND (“inequality” OR “disparity” OR “inequity” OR “imbalance”) AND (“creative industries” OR “arts” OR “media” OR “entertainment” OR “design”) AND (“employment” OR “representation” OR “opportunity” OR “access”) AND (“barrier” OR “challenge” OR “obstacle” OR “discrimination”).

A publication-date filter was applied to restrict results to studies published between 2014 and 2025, thereby ensuring the inclusion of the most recent and relevant evidence. Peer-reviewed articles were retrieved from Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, prioritising high-impact journals indexed in JCR and SJR, and cross-referenced with the controlled vocabulary of the European Education Thesaurus (ERIC).

Figure 1. Source Selection and Evaluation Flowchart

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

The screening process began with an initial identification of 100 records (figure 1). After removing duplicates and applying our predefined criteria focused on creative industries, gender inequality, the Iberian Peninsula, and Europe within the 2014 to 2025 timeframe, 45 records remained for closer examination. Studies outside the European context or presented in non-article formats, such as theses, were excluded, leaving 32 full texts for eligibility assessment. A further evaluation to remove off-topic or redundant papers yielded a final set of 15 publications that directly addressed our research questions and formed the core of the qualitative synthesis. Additionally, a manual search was conducted on Google Scholar using the same methodology and selection criteria applied to the WoS and Scopus databases, resulting in a further 14 articles. In total, 29 peer-reviewed publications were analysed. To complement these findings, official and institutional documents were also incorporated into the analysis. These included Portugal's ENIND (2018) and the Statute of Cultural Professionals (2021), Spain's LOIEMH (2007), PEIEMH (2022), the Plan for Equality in Culture (2024), and European Commission reports from 2021 and 2022. These documents provided essential contextual and policy information that enriched the interpretation of the peer-reviewed literature.

The primary aim of this study was to diagnose existing gaps and inequalities within the cultural and creative sectors. The data collection and analysis strategy relied on an exhaustive review of literature, institutional reports, and current regulatory frameworks. This encompassed not only indexed academic articles but also official documents and institutional reports from

entities such as the European Commission, the Instituto de las Mujeres (Ministry of Equality, Spain), and the Ministry of Culture of Spain. Reviews focused on documents addressing gender equality broadly, as well as materials focused specifically on the cultural and creative sectors. Overall, the materials demonstrate the existence of national and international strategies and plans for gender equality, along with detailed investigations and action plans targeting gender inequalities in sectors such as performing arts, advertising, journalism, and the audiovisual industry. While there is widespread recognition of the necessity for robust and comparable quantitative data, the sources also underline the importance of qualitative analysis, which is essential for understanding causal relationships and the transformative impact of culture, often not captured by numerical indicators. Data analysis was primarily qualitative, employing thematic analysis to identify patterns, recurring narratives, and gaps in gender policies within the CCS. To ensure reliability and consistency, methodological triangulation was employed, cross-referencing various databases and types of sources, both academic and institutional.

4. Results

The combined analysis of academic literature and regulatory documents reveals that, although the Cultural and Creative Industries are often perceived as spaces of progress and innovation, significant gender inequalities persist within them. The literature further indicates that the sector's inherent informality is a critical driver of inequality, enabling recruitment and selection practices shaped by gender bias. According to Wang (2025), the advancement of women creators in the creative industries depends on three interrelated forces: institutional support, social advocacy, and individual agency, emphasising the responsibility of governments and sectoral organisations to establish conditions that effectively counter gender disparities. Similarly, Gustafsson and Lazzaro (2021) examine the role of European public policies in strengthening the Cultural and Creative Industries, highlighting the European Parliament's promotion of a coherent EU strategy focused on employment, skills development, education, digitalisation, and access to finance. The European Commission's priorities include addressing shifting skill requirements, supporting the mobility of artists, reforming regulatory environments, and expanding access to markets and investment objectives advanced through initiatives such as the Creative Europe programme and the Cultural and Creative Sectors Guarantee Facility (Gustafsson & Lazzaro, 2021).

4.1. Challenges: Iberian Peninsula and European Union

4.1.1. Exclusion and Underrepresentation in High-Prestige Positions

Despite significant social progress and ongoing activism for women's rights, gender inequalities in leadership within the cultural and creative sectors remain deeply entrenched across Europe. For example, women hold fewer than one-third of senior management positions in European media organisations and only 16% of CEO roles, despite representing nearly 70% of graduates in arts and humanities (EACEA, 2022).

In Spain's advertising industry, women occupy only 24% of general management positions (Ramos-Serrano et al., 2022). In the performing arts, while women constitute 73% of production roles, they hold just 29% of directing and managerial positions (Carreño & Villarroja, 2022). Similarly, female leadership in audiovisual streaming productions stands at 33.6%, and women continue to be underrepresented in cinematography direction (Izquierdo-Castillo & Torres-Romay, 2023). The persistent 'glass ceiling' is particularly evident in advertising, the performing arts, and journalism, where women dominate operational roles yet remain underrepresented in strategic and executive positions. Portugal presents a similar paradox. Although women account for 52.2% of the population and demonstrate higher educational attainment and graduation rates, they continue to be a minority in economic, political, and academic decision-making roles (CIG, 2024a, 2024b).

Moreover, in terms of job quality, the most prestigious and creatively valued positions are more likely to be held by men, whereas women are disproportionately concentrated in roles focused on production, care, and routine coordination (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015). In the

creative sector, where subjective judgements and personal networks play a crucial role, gender bias can severely restrict women's opportunities and undermine their confidence (Hamdani et al., 2023). This underrepresentation extends beyond numerical disparities; it is rooted in persistent stereotypes that associate creativity and leadership with masculine traits such as creative genius, rationality, and competitiveness. These narratives limit women to supportive roles and perpetuate the belief that motherhood undermines their creative autonomy (Alvarado-López & Martín-García, 2020; Carr & Van Raalte, 2025; Conor et al., 2015; Dent, 2020; Ginis, 2023). Such stereotypes shape not only social expectations but also the distribution of prestigious roles in cultural and creative industries. Women are often perceived as more caring, communicative, and organised, which directs them towards coordination or support roles, while men are frequently associated with creativity and a perceived lower adherence to rules (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015).

Entrepreneurship provides one avenue for women to challenge these patterns, allowing them to apply their creativity independently and achieve greater professional autonomy. Technology can support this pathway by offering flexibility and improved conditions for managing the boundaries between professional and personal life, a crucial factor for overall well-being (Lepeley et al., 2019). Nonetheless, female leadership in entrepreneurship continues to face structural barriers, as traditional assessment metrics, such as profit growth, scalability, and employee expansion, remain oriented towards a male paradigm, often disregarding the economic and social contributions generated by women (Filimonau et al., 2024). Recognising these contributions is essential, as women entrepreneurs act as key agents of change capable of addressing gender inequalities and promoting sustainable development (Filimonau et al., 2024).

In the digital context, innovation requires the strategic integration of diverse knowledge and skill areas, a process of fusion that combines creative and design expertise with technological competence. Leadership must therefore actively foster this convergence to broaden the reach and impact of women-led creation (Snowball et al., 2022).

4.1.2. Labor Precarity and Gender Inequality

Labour precarity is one of the most persistent challenges in the cultural and creative industries, disproportionately affecting women. They constitute the majority of the unpaid workforce and receive a significantly smaller share of global income (Lepeley et al., 2019). Precarious employment, characterised by the segregation of women into lower-value roles, reduced wages, temporary contracts, intermittent careers, extended working hours that disrupt work-family balance, and the invisibility of certain forms of labour, disproportionately impacts women (Carreño & Villarroya, 2022; Izquierdo-Castillo & Torres-Romay, 2023; Ramos-Serrano et al., 2022; Villarroya & Barrios, 2022). Even when performing the same functions and holding qualifications equivalent to men, women tend to receive lower pay and are more susceptible to informal employment. In Portugal, the gender pay gap stands at 13.2% in base salary, increasing to 26.3% among those with higher education (CIG, 2024a, 2024b).

Evidence from the Netherlands indicates that having a migrant background and being a woman negatively affects earnings in the creative industries, where gender income inequality is extensive. This disparity is less pronounced in subsectors such as literature, music, and the visual arts, but particularly severe in fields such as film and photography (Been et al., 2024). These barriers to building and sustaining a career also affect working-class and minority groups, constituting a persistent problem (Brook et al., 2020). Estimates suggest that 44% of creative and cultural work in the Netherlands is unpaid, posing a significant obstacle for women and ethnic minorities who may lack the economic capital to endure unpaid internships or prolonged periods of job insecurity (Been et al., 2024).

In many contexts, self-employment and entrepreneurship offer alternatives to waged employment, providing flexible, and in theory, more favourable conditions for balancing family responsibilities. However, this pathway is often demanding, complex, and in many cases, a forced response to structural precarity (Filimonau et al., 2024; Lepeley et al., 2019). Female self-employment is particularly high in countries with less generous social-protection systems, such

as Spain, where women may be compelled to start their own businesses due to limited access to unemployment benefits or childcare services (Filimonau et al., 2024; Lepeley et al., 2019). Gender income inequality remains extensive and pervasive, less pronounced in literature, music, and visual arts, but severe in film and photography (Been et al., 2024). Quantitative studies indicate that women, lower-class workers, and ethnic minorities systematically earn lower incomes across all cultural industries. This is particularly relevant in creative work, which often involves unpaid labour or post-salary arrangements, as creative professionals devote substantial time to artistic production despite chronic precarity and low, irregular, or even non-existent pay (Alcovska, 2022). Banks (2020) identifies the emergence of a “crisis-induced economic infrastructure” characterised by “payment and promise, barter and donation”, and “mutual aid” among peers and colleagues. The so-called “Netflix economy” has flourished, while global providers of cultural technology, logistics, and home entertainment, such as Amazon and Facebook, have profited substantially (Harvey, 2020).

These broader shifts in the cultural economy directly affect labour dynamics within the CCIs. Short-term and project-based work has become the norm, making social networks, or social capital, a crucial resource for professional success. This dynamic favours middle-class individuals and contributes to precarious employment, marked by unpredictable income and unstable working conditions (Been et al., 2024; Snowball et al., 2022). Unpaid labour remains common, and although digital technologies offer flexibility and remote work opportunities for salaried professionals, they have also intensified precarity. Gig economy workers and others in unstable employment face dismissals without visible support mechanisms during times of crisis (Harvey, 2020; Snowball et al., 2022). Consequently, the CCIs have become a veritable testing ground for digitally driven precarity, where flexibility often translates into financial and occupational insecurity (Been et al., 2024; Snowball et al., 2022).

Policy documents in both Portugal and Spain acknowledge the precarious and informal working conditions experienced by women in the cultural and creative sectors (España, 2007; Instituto de las Mujeres, 2022; Ministerio de Cultura, 2024; Portugal, 2018, 2021). These documents emphasise the need to reduce temporary and part-time contracts, alleviate overall labour precarity, and promote a safe and secure working environment. However, a 2020 study found that Spain’s 2007 Equality Law had little noticeable impact on the advertising sector, with 60% of professionals reporting they were unaware of any gender equality plan within their organisations (Alvarado-López & Martín-García, 2020). This highlights that legal frameworks alone do not ensure change without effective implementation and a shift in professional attitudes. While public policy documents and strategic plans in the Iberian Peninsula have laid significant groundwork for addressing labour precarity, most are recent legal frameworks that primarily establish a foundation for future action and monitoring. Currently, there is limited evidence of measurable outcomes in effectively reducing precarious employment.

4.1.3. Work-Life Balance Challenges

Disparities related to motherhood, caregiving, and work-life balance constitute a significant barrier for women in the cultural and creative industries (Carreño & Villarroya, 2022). Women are often expected to assume the majority of unpaid caregiving responsibilities, frequently forcing them to choose between personal and professional commitments (Ginis, 2023; Ramos-Serrano et al., 2022). Many women report feelings of guilt when dedicating time to their creative activities, perceiving that they should prioritise family obligations. This reinforces the social expectation that children are solely the responsibility of women, while ignoring that men are also parents capable of thriving in their professional roles (Ginis, 2023; Gill, 2014; Miller, 2016). Dent (2020) emphasises that pregnancy and maternity leave can lead to disconnection from professional networks and the loss of projects, resulting in reduced income for women. In the Netherlands, many women, particularly mothers, work part-time to better balance professional responsibilities with childcare (Been et al., 2024). Social expectations surrounding maternal presence and caregiving can push women towards precarious, freelance, or part-time arrangements, restricting access to stable leadership positions (Carr & Van Raalte, 2025).

Entrepreneurship within the cultural and creative industries offers a significant avenue for empowering women and mothers, providing opportunities for professional growth and greater autonomy (Filimonau et al., 2024; Lepeley et al., 2019). However, recognition and visibility for female entrepreneurs continue to lag behind that of their male counterparts (Villarroya & Barrios, 2022). Many of these women, nonetheless, become role models and mentors, inspiring subsequent generations to pursue entrepreneurial aspirations. Supporting their success is therefore not only a matter of equity but a strategic imperative for economic development (Ajiva et al., 2024; Snowball et al., 2022). Raising awareness of the inequalities faced by female entrepreneurs is essential to expand their businesses and access broader markets within the CCIs (Filimonau et al., 2024). Moreover, entrepreneurial experience fosters the development of psychological resilience necessary for professional success (Ciptono et al., 2023). Promoting gender equality is therefore crucial not only for social justice but also for fostering creativity and diversity within the sector (Wang, 2025).

In general, professionals in CCIs tend to develop an entrepreneurial mindset, characterised by creative thinking, problem-solving skills, networking, risk-taking, and resilience (Gustafsson & Lazzaro, 2021). Technological advancements, globalisation, and changing cultural attitudes enhance female entrepreneurs' access to new markets, tools, and support networks (Lepeley et al., 2019; Purnomo et al., 2021). However, it is important to recognise that entrepreneurship and self-employment can mask deeper structural inequalities. Motherhood often remains a key factor limiting women's full participation and success, even when they pursue entrepreneurial pathways (Dent, 2020; Gill, 2014; Gustafsson & Lazzaro, 2021).

Carreño and Villarroya (2022) emphasise that the absence of measures to facilitate the reconciliation of professional, family, and social life constitutes a critical obstacle, recognised by both genders. Although public policies in the Iberian Peninsula are actively developing and implementing initiatives to improve work-life balance for women, current documents primarily detail the plans and structures for action. Proposed measures include the equalisation of parental leave, flexible work arrangements such as teleworking, and the elimination of maternity bonuses that perpetuate gender roles (España, 2007; Instituto de las Mujeres, 2022; Ministerio de Cultura, 2024; Portugal, 2018, 2021). Nonetheless, implementation remains a challenge, highlighting the need for public policies that actively promote men's co-responsibility in caregiving and ensure accessible support services, such as universal childcare (EACEA, 2022; Instituto de las Mujeres, 2022). As a result, outcomes and evaluations of these initiatives on women's lives are not yet included in these documents but are anticipated in future monitoring reports. Despite institutional progress, research demonstrates that policies alone have not eliminated the cultural and structural mechanisms that sustain inequality (Alvarado-López & Martín-García, 2020).

The primary inequalities identified include access to the labour market and leadership positions, wage disparities and job precarity, gender stereotypes, inequalities in caregiving and work-life balance, and multiple forms of discrimination. Consequently, the issue does not reside merely in the absence of legislation but in the fragility of its implementation and the persistence of informal structures that continue to reproduce gender inequalities, particularly within the advertising sector and the creative industries more broadly.

4.1.4. Comparison: Iberian Peninsula and European Union

Academic literature emphasises the persistent gender inequalities in the cultural and creative industries. Examination of gender equality policies within this sector further highlights notable differences between Portugal, Spain, and the broader European Union (EU) framework. While all three contexts share the objective of reducing structural gender inequalities, they differ markedly in the scope, instruments, and monitoring mechanisms employed to achieve this goal. Collectively, these approaches illustrate three distinct models of governance. Spain exemplifies a sector-focused model, with clear objectives, dedicated resources, and strong institutional oversight. Portugal, in contrast, adopts a transversal strategy, integrating gender equality into broad national frameworks. The EU functions as a strategic influencer, shaping agendas and providing resources.

Spain has implemented a particular and comprehensive strategy, exemplified by the I Equality Plan in Culture 2024 to 2026. This model stands out for its rigorous diagnosis of inequalities, concrete and budgeted actions, and a defined timeline. Its strength lies in translating legislative commitments into targeted interventions, underpinned by dedicated monitoring mechanisms such as the Gender Equality Observatory in the Field of Culture (Observatorio de Igualdad de Género en el Ámbito de la Cultura) (Ministerio de Cultura, 2024). By contrast, Portugal's approach is transversal. Culture is integrated into a broader national equality agenda through the National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination (ENIND 2018 to 2030) and complemented by general measures such as the Statute of Professionals in the Cultural Sector (Portugal, 2018, 2021). Although these initiatives address precarious working conditions, the absence of an autonomous cultural-sector plan limits targeted interventions and detailed monitoring.

At the supranational level, the EU functions as a strategic architect and facilitator. Through instruments such as the Gender Equality Strategy 2020 to 2025 and funding programmes like Creative Europe, the EU provides guidance and financial support (EACEA, 2022). Its role is to steer Member States rather than mandate national sectoral plans. Despite these differing strategies, a central problem emerges: the gap between policy and practice. Limitations in the collection of disaggregated data and the ineffectiveness of monitoring mechanisms constrain policy evaluation (EACEA, 2022; Instituto de las Mujeres, 2022). At the European level, fragmentation and the inadequacy of comparable data undermine the ability to track progress consistently (EACEA, 2022). In Portugal, educational segregation and reliance on transversal strategies limit sectoral impact. Even in Spain, despite its detailed plan, implementation remains a challenge. Evidence indicates that inequalities persist in sectors such as audiovisual and advertising, where barriers such as vertical and horizontal segregation continue despite existing legislation (Alvarado-López & Martín-García, 2020; Carreño & Villarroya, 2022; Izquierdo-Castillo & Torres-Romay, 2023). This analysis leads to a key finding: the principal issue is not the absence of legislation but the fragility of its implementation and the real-world outcomes that result.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study confirms that women continue to face persistent structural barriers in the cultural and creative industries, despite the existence of legal frameworks promoting gender equality and the growing visibility of the issue. A central contradiction emerges: while the cultural sector is frequently associated with innovation and diversity, it simultaneously reproduces mechanisms of exclusion and precarity that disproportionately affect women.

Although Portugal, Spain, and the European Union have established robust regulatory and strategic frameworks for gender equality, their effective translation into tangible changes remains limited. Research demonstrates that gender inequalities continue to manifest in subtle yet deeply entrenched ways, through phenomena such as the “glass ceiling” and the persistence of stereotypes. These dynamics are further complicated by intersectional factors such as race, age, disability, and socio-economic status, which exacerbate the challenges faced by women. Consequently, these disparities reinforce traditional gender roles and lead many women to abandon their careers due to unequal expectations within the sector.

The results highlight key factors underpinning these inequalities: (a) weak implementation of equality policies, characterised by insufficient monitoring and a lack of comparable indicators; (b) labour precarity, including temporary contracts, informal employment, and low wages, which particularly penalises women, especially mothers and carers; and (c) persistent gender stereotypes, which associate creativity and leadership with masculine attributes, limiting the recognition of women's work and their advancement to positions of power. Moreover, female entrepreneurship, while offering a degree of autonomy, often masks structural inequalities and reinforces individualistic narratives of success, neglecting the necessity for institutional support.

To address these challenges, this study proposes the following strategic recommendations, which are directly aligned with the key findings presented above:

Table 1 – Strategic Recommendations Aligned with Key Research Findings

Key challenges	Strategic Recommendations
Exclusion and Underrepresentation in High-Prestige Positions	• Adopt inclusive language guidelines across institutional communication, public calls, and creative-sector projects. • Launch campaigns to valorise female creative work and provide targeted support for women-led festivals and events. • Develop gender-sensitive funding mechanisms that prioritize diversity and directly support women creators and entrepreneurs. • Establish national and European observatories to monitor gender representation and publish disaggregated data on leadership gaps.
Labour Precarity and Gender Inequality	• Implement protocols against gender-based violence and harassment in the cultural sector, ensuring clear reporting channels and victim support. • Strengthen independent and continuous evaluation of equality plans, with well-defined indicators of impact and outcomes. • Integrate gender-equality criteria into public subsidies and procurement processes, making funding contingent upon diversity commitments. • Ensure inclusion of the CCI sector in Eurostat and EIGE databases, enabling rigorous policy evaluation and comparative analysis.
Work-Life Balance Challenges	• Enact legal and policy measures to guarantee equal parental and caregiver leave for all genders, along with flexible work arrangements. • Actively involve NGOs, trade unions, and creators' associations in the design and monitoring of policies addressing caregiving burdens. • Establish gender-focused creative hubs that provide support networks, resources, and visibility for women balancing creative careers and family responsibilities.

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

As evidenced by the findings, structural transformation in the CCI depends not only on legal frameworks but also on their integration into sector-specific policies, supported by adequate funding, clear indicators, and active stakeholder engagement, including public institutions, civil society organisations, professional associations, and creative agents themselves. Cultural change is equally essential: challenging masculine-coded ideals of the “creative genius” and embracing inclusive leadership models is key to dismantling symbolic barriers.

Future research should explore the practical implementation of gender equality policies through comparative case studies of cultural institutions across different national contexts. Such analysis would help identify success factors, institutional resistance, and the real impacts on women's professional trajectories. In conclusion, while the convergence of international and national frameworks marks important progress, it remains insufficient. Advancing gender equity in the CCI requires more than policy; it demands cultural transformation, institutional accountability, and sustained commitment. The recommendations outlined here extend beyond the Iberian Peninsula, offering a broader call for governments, cultural institutions, and civil society to build inclusive ecosystems where creative potential is equitably recognised and shared. Gender equity is not only an ethical imperative but a strategic engine for innovation, diversity, and shared prosperity.

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