UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO

Ph.D. in *International and Public Law, Ethics and Economics for Sustainable Development (LEES)*

XXXV ciclo

Dipartimento di Diritto Pubblico Italiano e Sovranazionale

STRATEGIC LITIGATION FOR WOMAN 'S RIGHTS AT THE WORKPLACE: A LAW AND ECONOMICS PERSPECTIVE

SSD GIUR-11/B GIUR-05/A

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2024-2025

I. Introduction

Does the client have a claim under civil law? This is the typical question when it comes to initiating civil proceedings. Strategic litigation, on the other hand, is about more than civil claims, it is about eliminating injustice and changing and creating law. It is not about the individual, it is about everyone, about society. It is about the kind of society we live in and the kind of society we want to live in.

The fact is that today we live in a society in which women earn less than their male colleagues, in which employers tend to give male employees a pay rise and in which it is necessary to pass laws to give women a place on company boards and in management positions. The question arises as to why there are still disparities between women and men in pay progression, pay raises and bonuses today? Are women not sufficiently protected by the legal framework? And if so, why is a legal framework needed to achieve equal treatment for women and men? Does today's society even want equality between women and men in the world of work?

This work addresses these questions and discusses whether the use of strategic litigation can help to strengthen women's rights in the world of work. To this end, the institution of the Strategic litigation is first examined and the areas in which it can be used are described. In addition to the civil law and strategic prerequisites for the implementation of a strategic litigation process, the legal situation in the area of equal treatment in the world of work is also discussed and the gender pay gap is examined. Furthermore, it is analyzed whether the creation or expansion of the existing legal situation can reduce or even eliminate the current unequal treatment or whether other factors also create and even promote unequal treatment.

II. Origin and Scope of Strategic Litigation

1) History of Strategic Litigation

Strategic litigation is a powerful tool for change in jurisprudence and can set precedents that can have a lasting impact on the legal system. By setting legal standards, precedent-setting cases influence not only the immediate parties, but also future decisions and expand rights and protections throughout society [1].

The history of strategic litigation shows that it can shape society and play a key role in driving change. Landmark cases such as *Somerset v. Stewart* (1772) [2] and *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) [3] illustrate that strategic litigation not only contributes to the development of case law, but can also directly influence the perception and development of human and civil rights.

The 18th-century case of *Somerset v Stewart* was one of the first strategic litigation cases to enforce human rights. The case involved James Somerset, an enslaved African brought to England, who challenged his slave status in the British courts. In the historic judgment, Lord Mansfield found that slavery was not supported by English common law. While this decision did not end slavery across the British Empire, it created an important precedent that inspired the abolitionist movement and established fundamental principles for human rights.

Similarly, in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the US Supreme Court challenged racial segregation in US public schools. By stating that 'separate but equal' institutions are inherently unequal, this case not only changed the legal interpretation of equality under the US Constitution, but also became a catalyst for the American civil rights movement. Oliver *Brown* created a legal precedent that at least led to systemic discrimination being questioned and publicly discussed. The use of strategic litigation not only influenced future rulings on equality, but also led to social and political reforms over time.

The case shows how strategic litigation can make deeply rooted social injustices visible to the public and politicians, and thus change legislation and jurisdiction.

These two cases show that strategic litigation can challenge unjust social norms and thus not only improve human rights but also change social structures. Strategic litigation is a social catalyst that is used to raise public awareness and promote collective action for human rights.

a) The Somerset v. Stewart case (1772)

The *Somerset v. Stewart* case, decided in 1772, marks a key moment in the history of the abolition of slavery and strategic litigation, and illustrates the complex interaction of law, economics and morality. In the 18th century, the British economy was heavily reliant on slave labour. However, in Great Britain itself, the legality of slavery was unclear, as there was no explicit law to legitimise it. This legal vacuum allowed opponents of slavery to challenge the institution in the courts [4].

Granville Sharp was one of the key figures in the case. He was not only a barrister, but also the founder of the British abolitionist movement. His role in the Somerset case shows that individual commitment can influence legal history. He was convinced that the law could be used as an instrument for social justice and therefore, in addition to his legal role, he also mobilised and raised public awareness. He managed to build a network that pushed for the abolition of slavery. He based his legal argument on the fact that enslaved people brought to Great Britain should automatically gain their freedom because English common law would not recognise slavery [5].

The case of *Somerset v Stewart* is an early example of legal activism in conjunction with a well-organised social campaign. The parties involved in the lawsuit were aware that more than just legal arguments were needed to abolish slavery. To bring about legal and social change, they needed the support of the public. As part of their public relations work, leaflets were distributed, public meetings were held and newspaper articles were published. In this way, the participants tried to influence public opinion and activate the empathy of society. One of Sharp's main arguments was that slavery could not be tolerated in a country based on freedom and the rule of law [6].

By attracting public interest in the slavery case, the parties involved in the dispute were able to exert pressure on the judiciary. The English court recognised that there was a lack of formal legal basis for allowing slavery. It can be assumed that the involvement of the media contributed to the fact that the judicial authorities, which were pursuing the case, were also influenced. The actions of slavery opponents made it clear that social mobilisation can help to increase the importance and visibility of the issue [7].

In its judgment in the case of *Somerset v. Stewart*, the Court ordered the release of James Somerset on the grounds that slavery as an institution could not be justified politically or legally and that there had never been a law allowing slavery. The decision of Lord Mansfield, Chief Justice of the King's Bench, was a milestone in British legal history. Mansfield's famous ruling was: ‘The state of slavery is such that it cannot be introduced on moral or political grounds, but only by a positive law (Somerset v Stewart, 1772).

Although the ruling did not lead to the abolition of slavery, it did provide a basis for people who had been enslaved upon their arrival and demanded their release. Furthermore, the decision set an important moral and legal standard and provided the basis for the abolition of slavery [8].

b) Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)

After the abolition of slavery, strategic litigation was used again in a different area. In its landmark decision Plessy v. Fergusin (1896), the United States Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation would allow for the prescription of separate facilities for black and white citizens, as long as they had equal rights. However, instead of establishing equality, the ruling confirmed the legality of racial segregation, since the facilities to which African Americans had access were generally inferior. This led to an increase in the poverty of African American society [9].

In the decades following the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took a comprehensive legal strategy against racial segregation. Led by prominent attorney Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP's legal arm sought to demonstrate that ‘separate but equal’ facilities, particularly in education, were inherently unequal and that segregation caused profound psychological harm to African American children. The NAACP took a strategic approach to desegregation. Over a period of years, they filed lawsuits, pointing out disparities in school funding, teacher qualifications, and inadequate infrastructure [10].

The NAACP's legal strategy in *Brown v. Board of Education* was an innovative and effective approach to desegregation. Recognising that legal arguments alone would not be enough, the NAACP, under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall, included social science research to give the issue a human dimension. One of the most compelling pieces of evidence was the ‘puppet test’ conducted by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark. This study, a key psychological piece of evidence, sought to demonstrate the adverse effects of segregation on the self-esteem and social development of African American children. In the experiment, African American children were presented with black and white dolls and asked to attribute characteristics to each doll. Disturbingly, many black children attributed positive characteristics, such as beauty and intelligence, to the white dolls, while attributing negative characteristics to the black dolls. This response was interpreted as evidence of internalised racism and a sense of inferiority, and showed that segregation created a harmful psychological environment for African American children [11].

Alongside the ‘Puppet Test’, other sociological studies submitted by the NAACP provided further insights into the pervasive harms that segregation caused. These studies argued that segregated schools limited black children's access to quality education and hindered their social mobility, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage. The NAACP used psychological and sociological evidence to support its arguments against segregation, showing that ‘separate’ facilities could never be ‘equal’ because segregation itself inflicted harm beyond the physical inequalities. This interdisciplinary approach was groundbreaking because it was one of the first times that social science research was used in support of constitutional arguments in a Supreme Court case. The inclusion of this evidence illustrated the NAACP's ability to develop a multidimensional argument that linked the law to human experience to challenge entrenched social injustices [12].

The ruling led to mass protests in the following years, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the March on Washington in 1963 and ultimately to legislative change. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, followed by the Voting Rights Act in 1965, which provided for the participation of African Americans in US elections [13].

2) Key areas for Strategic Litigation

Strategic litigation has evolved over the centuries and is now used in many areas to bring about change in social thinking, in politics and in case law. It addresses important issues in environmental law, the right to asylum and violence against women [14].

In the area of environmental law, strategic litigation is used in particular to hold the government and businesses accountable for environmental damage and harmful behavior. Court cases against businesses and the government are often the last resort when the legislature remains inactive and political change is lacking. Environmental litigation in this area has focused on issues such as air quality, deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions. Environmental NGOs have increasingly turned to the courts to force governments and companies to meet their obligations under international agreements, particularly the 2015 *Paris Agreement*, which sets global targets for limiting greenhouse gas emissions. As legislative bodies have often faced difficulties or delays in adopting effective climate policy, the judiciary has become an important tool for enforcing responsibility and accountability in the environmental sphere [15] [16].

A landmark case in this movement is *the Urgenda Foundation v. the State of the* Netherlands lawsuit, a pioneering example of how strategic litigation can drive government action on climate. The Dutch NGO Urgenda filed the lawsuit in 2013, arguing that the Dutch government's failure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions posed an existential threat to its citizens. The legal argument focused on the government's duty to protect its people, citing international obligations and the scientific consensus on the effects of climate change. In his landmark ruling in 2015, the Netherlands District Court found in favor of Urgenda, ordering the government to reduce its emissions by at least 25% of 1990 levels by 2020. The decision was upheld on appeal, with the court of appeal affirming that the government has a duty to protect the welfare of Dutch citizens from the foreseeable harms of climate change (Urgenda Foundation v. the State of the Netherlands, 2019) [17] [18] [19].

Another area in which strategic litigation has become fundamental is asylum rights. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has played a crucial role in shaping strategic litigation related to the right to asylum across Europe. In numerous cases, the ECtHR has held European governments accountable for violating the rights of asylum seekers and refugees and has condemned practices amounting to inhuman or degrading treatment. These judgements have had a significant impact, forcing governments to reform their asylum procedures, improve reception conditions and ensure compliance with human rights standards as set out in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) [20] [21].

In this field Strategic Litigation is often used to challenge restrictive immigration policies [22]. Organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have increasingly turned to the courts to challenge these measures. They argue that such measures violate the *1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* and other international obligations that protect people fleeing persecution and violence. Strategic litigation in asylum rights has led to significant legal victories ensuring that states uphold the fundamental principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the return of refugees to countries where their lives or freedom would be seriously threatened. This principle, enshrined in Article 33 of the Geneva Convention, is a cornerstone of international refugee law. Legal action is often taken against measures such as mass deportations or the rejection of asylum applications on the basis of nationality quotas, which circumvent the individual examination required under international law. By securing court rulings that compel governments to uphold this protection, strategic litigation helps to protect the lives of those who are most at risk and sends the clear message that refugee rights cannot be disregarded based on political expediency or national security concerns [23]. The high-profile nature of asylum proceedings also serves advocacy by drawing public attention to the plight of refugees and influencing public opinion. Strategic litigation can result in media coverage that humanizes the refugee experience and shifts the narrative from abstract policy debates to the personal stories of people fleeing violence and persecution. This advocacy component often puts pressure on policymakers to adopt more humane and rights-compliant approaches and to recognize the moral and ethical dimension of the right to asylum. As a result, strategic litigation not only enforces existing protections but also cultivates a social and political environment that is more receptive to refugee rights [24] [25].

In conclusion, strategic litigation on behalf of asylum seekers enhances the role of the judiciary in upholding human rights standards and provides crucial scrutiny of restrictive immigration policies. By ensuring compliance with international law, challenging procedural barriers, and influencing policy reform, these cases are instrumental in shaping a fairer and more responsible asylum system.

In addition to the environment and the right to asylum, violence against women has been a focus of strategic litigation for decades. These cases are not only about protecting the individual, but also about addressing systematic problems in the treatment of gender-based violence within a legal system.

A landmark case illustrating this approach is *González et al. (‘Cotton Field’) v. Mexico*, heard by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2009. Known as the ‘Campo Algodonero,’ the case concerned the murders of several young women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, a city notorious for its high rate of femicide. The plaintiffs argued that the Mexican authorities had systematically failed to address the epidemic of violence against women in the region by failing to prevent these murders and conducting inadequate investigations that left the perpetrators unpunished. The Court found that Mexico had failed to protect victims' rights to life, personal integrity and equality, and emphasized the state's negligence in preventing gender-based violence and ensuring justice for victims and their families (IACHR, 2009).

The González ruling was a significant milestone in international human rights law, as the Inter-American Court established that when gender-based violence is enabled or exacerbated by state inaction, it constitutes a violation of human rights. The ruling required Mexico to implement sweeping reforms, including improving investigation protocols, conducting training to raise awareness among law enforcement officials, and establishing prevention programs. These guidelines emphasized the responsibility of governments to not only respond to incidents of violence, but also to actively prevent such crimes and address the underlying societal factors that enable gender-based violence [26] [27].

Equally significant was the case of *Jessica Lenahan (Gonzales) v. the United States*, which was brought before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. This case centered on the failure of local law enforcement authorities to enforce a restraining order, which led to the tragic death of Jessica Lenahan's three daughters. The Commission found that the United States had violated her human rights by failing to take due care to protect her from domestic violence (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2011). This case, the first domestic violence complaint against the

US by a domestic violence survivor before an international human rights body, received extensive media coverage, sparking conversations about the systemic issues in addressing domestic violence.

Such cases not only draw attention to individual injustices, but also expose broader institutional failures and encourage society to challenge and question the cultural and social norms that allow gender-based violence. Greater awareness can lead to greater public support for victims, higher reporting rates, and collective demands for sustainable political and social change. By bringing these critical issues to the fore, strategic litigation fosters an environment in which gender equality can be more actively pursued and achieved [28].

3) Special features of strategic litigation

Strategic litigation differs from other forms of legal action not only in its objectives but also in its structure and approach. In contrast to typical lawsuits, which focus exclusively on resolving individual disputes, strategic lawsuits aim for broader social, legal and political change. The following section examines the specifics of strategic litigation, including its ability to influence case law and legislation, the crucial role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), methods of managing high legal costs, public engagement and the impact of public pressure.

a) Impact on case law and legislation

One of the defining characteristics of strategic litigation is its potential to significantly change both case law and legislation. By challenging existing legal interpretations, these cases often create legal precedents that impact the entire legal system and influence future cases involving similar issues. In cases related to environmental justice or human rights, for example, a positive court decision can force legislators to reform outdated or inadequate laws and align them with modern standards and international commitments. In this way, strategic litigation acts not only as a corrective force within the judiciary, but also as a catalyst for legislative innovation that closes protection gaps and ensures that the legal framework evolves with societal needs [29].

Legal systems, particularly in common law jurisdictions like the United States and the United Kingdom, are often characterized by a conservative approach to change. Precedents established in previous rulings can lead to judicial inertia, as courts traditionally rely on established case law to guide their decisions. This adherence to precedent ensures stability and predictability but can also make it challenging for legal systems to adapt to evolving societal needs. Strategic litigation directly challenges this conservatism, urging courts to reevaluate outdated standards and consider more progressive interpretations of the law that reflect modern values [30]. In modern times, environmental litigation has demonstrated the capacity of strategic cases to compel governments to adopt more stringent policies [31].

Strategic litigation thus serves as both a tool for advocacy and a check on legislative inertia. By leveraging the courts to drive systemic change, these cases demonstrate that legal action can pave the way for meaningful reforms, pushing lawmakers to adopt policies that uphold justice, equity, and sustainability [32].

b) The role of NGOs and other interest groups

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other advocacy groups play a crucial role in strategic litigation. They provide important legal and financial support and carefully select cases that have the potential to bring about significant social change. Unlike typical litigation, which is primarily concerned with resolving the grievances of individuals, strategic litigation aims to have a broad impact, often reshaping policy or setting precedents that benefit a larger community. Non-governmental organizations use their expertise, resources and networks to ensure that these cases are not only successful in court, but also contribute to societal progress [33].

c) Selection of high-impact cases

NGOs conduct a rigorous selection process when identifying cases for strategic litigation, focusing on issues that are likely to have broad resonance and highlight systemic problems. Cases are selected not only on their legal merits, but also on their potential to challenge unjust laws, bring visibility to underrepresented groups, and spur legislative or policy reform. For example, organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Amnesty International select cases that deal with human rights violations and often address systemic issues such as discrimination, immigration rights or access to healthcare. By focusing on cases that reflect broader social issues, these organizations maximize the impact of their legal action and transform isolated injustices into opportunities for comprehensive reform [34].

aa) Criteria for the selection of an SL case

One of the most important criteria for selecting cases is the *potential social impact* they have. Cases are selected if they have the power to set precedents that can benefit large groups, sometimes entire communities or populations. For example*, the Brown v. Board of Education* mentioned earlier was strategically selected because it addressed the widespread practice of school segregation in the United States. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) recognized that a successful ruling in this case would not only improve conditions for the plaintiffs, but also eliminate a fundamental structure of racial discrimination, potentially changing the lives of millions of African Americans. Such cases illustrate how NGOs focus on issues with broad societal relevance and ensure that a single case ripples throughout society, influencing policy and spurring further legal reform.

Another crucial factor is the *ability of a case to generate media coverage*. Cases that attract public attention amplify the message and reach a wider audience, building support and pressure for change. Environmental lawsuits brought by Greenpeace, for example, often use media attention to raise public awareness of critical issues such as deforestation, climate change and marine conservation. Similarly, legal challenges by organizations such as Amnesty International in relation to refugee rights highlight the human impact of restrictive migration policies, educating the public and influencing opinion towards humane solutions. Media coverage serves as a multiplier, allowing strategic cases to go beyond legal victories, reaching public opinion and fostering a culture of awareness and empathy for complex issues.

By strategically selecting cases, NGOs transform isolated incidents into powerful stories that also can resonate with the public and influence policy makers. By focusing on cases with high social impact and media impact, these organizations ensure that each lawsuit not only delivers justice, but also contributes to a broader movement for justice, environmental sustainability and human rights.

bb) Psychological support

Recognizing the emotional and psychological burden of protracted and often risky litigation, NGOs also offer psychological support to plaintiffs. Legal cases, particularly those involving sensitive or traumatic experiences, can be emotionally draining as they expose claimants to public scrutiny, relive harrowing events and must cope with the uncertainty of the outcome. Non-governmental organizations often connect claimants with mental health professionals who provide counselling and support to help them cope with the stress and anxiety that can accompany strategic litigation.

This psychological support is vital as the wellbeing of plaintiffs directly impacts their ability to participate effectively in the process. By addressing mental health needs, NGOs help plaintiffs to approach litigation resiliently and confidently, ensuring that their voices are heard with the clarity and strength necessary to make a compelling case. Through this holistic approach, NGOs not only advocate for justice, but also plaintiffs a supportive environment in which claimants can approach their challenges with dignity and courage, emphasizing the fundamental humanity at the core of strategic litigation.

cc) Building broader advocacy campaigns

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often integrate Strategic Litigation into broader advocacy campaigns, using high-profile cases to draw public attention to pressing issues and mobilize support for change. For example, environmental litigation by organizations such as Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund is often accompanied by public awareness campaigns, social media lobbying and community engagement. This approach not only strengthens the case by framing it as part of a larger social problem, but also amplifies its impact by increasing public and political pressure for reform. By combining litigation and advocacy, NGOs create a multidimensional strategy that extends the influence of their legal actions beyond the courtroom and fosters a climate in which political change is more likely [40]

Non-governmental organizations are central to the success of strategic litigation. Many of these organizations provide essential support, from funding to research and advocacy, enabling strategic litigation that individuals could not otherwise pursue alone. NGOs often have the expertise and resources to frame cases in terms of broader societal issues rather than individual grievances. Organizations such as Amnesty International, the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) and CRIN (Child Rights Information Network), for example, often support legal action that challenges human rights violations by the state or focuses on issues such as immigration policy, gender-based violence and environmental degradation. These organizations bring both legal expertise and financial resources to the table [35] [36].

4) Provision of legal and financial support

Funding is one of the most critical aspects of strategic litigation; without adequate resources, even the strongest case can struggle to make an impact. Strategic litigation is often complex, long-running legal battles that require extensive resources, from expert witnesses and specialized teams of lawyers to court fees and appeals. Given these high costs, NGOs and other stakeholders supporting strategic cases need to carefully consider funding strategies to ensure that cases can be taken to conclusion [37].

A common approach is to make use *of legal aid* or *public interest* funding. Legal aid programs, where they exist, provide financial support for individuals who cannot afford legal representation, thereby enabling vulnerable groups to access justice. In some jurisdictions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can apply for legal aid on behalf of plaintiffs, ensuring that critical cases do not stall due to financial constraints. However, access to legal aid can be limited as public funds are often scarce and the criteria for eligibility may exclude cases of strategic importance or complex high-profile litigation [38].

To overcome these challenges, NGOs often seek alternative funding methods such as *crowdfunding* or grants from philanthropic organizations that promote social justice. Crowdfunding allows supporters of a particular cause to contribute directly to the costs of proceedings and to build a network of funders invested in the success of the case. In addition, grants from foundations working to promote human rights, environmental protection or social justice provide important financial support, especially for cases of high social importance [39].

Working with private law firms that are willing to work on a pro bono or reduced fee basis is another valuable funding opportunity. By working with these firms, the NGOs gain access to high-quality legal services without incurring the full costs, enabling them to continue to pursue cases even when their financial resources are limited. This model of cooperation not only enables the pursuit of strategic litigation, but also fosters a broader culture of social responsibility within the legal profession, as law firms contribute their expertise to advance issues of public interest [40].

Through these various funding strategies, NGOs and advocacy groups alleviate the financial burdens of strategic litigation, enabling the pursuit of cases that would otherwise not be viable. This financial support ensures that critical cases are not constrained by budgetary limitations, allowing strategic litigation to realize its potential as a force for systemic change and societal progress [41].

5) Duration and Complexity

Strategic litigation is often a lengthy and intricate process, with cases stretching over multiple years and sometimes requiring appeals to higher courts or even supranational bodies. This extended timeline not only increases costs but also demands resilience from plaintiffs and their supporting organizations. The case of *Juliana v. United States* serves as a compelling example of the protracted nature of strategic litigation. Filed in 2015, this environmental lawsuit, brought by a group of young activists seeking government accountability for climate change, has encountered numerous legal obstacles, appeals, and scientific testimonies. At the end of March 2025, Juliana's appeal was rejected and the case was finally decided after 10 years.(Fussnote)

The case exemplifies how strategic litigation, particularly on complex issues like climate policy, can face procedural delays and legal challenges that extend far beyond initial projections, thereby increasing costs significantly [42].

The duration and complexity of such cases underscore the financial and organizational stamina required to carry them through to resolution. Often, strategic litigation necessitates not only a substantial initial investment but also ongoing funding to address unexpected expenses that arise as cases move through different judicial levels. This reality highlights why securing financial support—through legal aid, donations, or pro bono partnerships—is critical to the sustainability of strategic litigation efforts [43].

6) Public engagement

Public engagement is another hallmark of strategic litigation. By drawing attention to widespread problems, strategic litigation can mobilize public support and raise awareness, often amplifying the impact of the case beyond the courtroom. Media coverage and public campaigns can change public perception of critical issues and create a base of support that puts pressure on policymakers and emphasizes the need for legal reform. For example, high-profile human rights cases often attract significant media attention, which triggers public debate and encourages people to get involved. This public dimension of strategic litigation makes it a powerful tool for shaping social norms and mobilizing communities around issues of justice and equality [44].

7) The Public as Leverage Against Politics and Jurisdiction

Public pressure undeniably serves as a potent lever in strategic litigation, influencing both political and judicial spheres. By mobilizing mass support, strategic litigation can underscore the urgency of specific social issues, compelling policymakers and courts to address them in ways that align with public sentiment. However, the effectiveness and ethical dimensions of public pressure in this context remain subjects of ongoing debate. While public engagement can amplify a case's impact, questions arise about the extent to which external pressure should sway judicial or political outcomes, and whether this influence might sometimes encroach upon the independence of these institutions.

The use of public pressure as leverage often plays out in cases where there is a strong moral imperative behind the litigation, making it difficult for policymakers to ignore. For example, in environmental litigation aimed at holding governments accountable for climate change, widespread public support highlights environmental protection as an issue of collective responsibility, challenging politicians to prioritize long-term ecological health over short-term economic gains. The ethical challenge here lies in balancing the clear moral demand for sustainability against the judicial system's need to remain impartial. While public support for environmental cases lends urgency to the need for legal and policy reform, it also tests the boundaries of judicial independence, as courts must ensure that decisions are grounded in law rather than swayed solely by popular opinion [45].

In politically sensitive cases, public pressure can sometimes serve as a double-edged sword, advancing social causes while risking the perception of judicial bias. For instance, cases involving human rights abuses or systemic discrimination often generate substantial public sympathy, which can help drive meaningful reform. However, there is a risk that excessive public influence could erode confidence in judicial impartiality if it appears that courts are yielding to societal demands rather than interpreting law objectively. This tension underscores the complexity of using public engagement as a lever in strategic litigation: while it enhances visibility and aligns legal action with public values, it also raises concerns about the potential for overreach, where public opinion risks overshadowing the judicial process [46].

In this light, the role of public pressure in strategic litigation calls for a careful balance. When wielded responsibly, it serves as an invaluable asset, promoting justice and accountability by rallying collective support. However, both courts and advocates must remain mindful of the boundaries, ensuring that public influence complements rather than compromises the integrity of the legal process. In this nuanced dynamic, public pressure is both a powerful ally and a potential pitfall, highlighting the intricate relationship between societal values, judicial independence, and strategic litigation.

Through these distinctive features, strategic litigation transcends traditional legal boundaries and functions as both a legal and social tool for reform. By combining advocacy, legal expertise and public engagement, systemic problems are addressed and solutions are sought that are consistent with contemporary values and international norms [47].

In summary, the unique features of strategic litigation – the ability to create legal precedents, the active participation of NGOs, creative financing of high costs, the role of public engagement and the tactical use of public pressure – make this approach a powerful tool for achieving meaningful social and political change. Each element of strategic litigation is interwoven with the goal of achieving justice on a large scale and changing the power dynamic in a way that protects fundamental rights.

III. Fundamental rights, procedural and ethical cornerstones

1) Strategic Litigation and the Separation of Powers

The principle of the separation of powers is a cornerstone of modern democracies. This doctrine mandates a clear division of responsibilities among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches: the legislature enacts laws, the executive implements them, and the judiciary interprets and enforces them. Strategic litigation, which is often employed to prompt legislative and social change, intersects uniquely with this framework, testing the boundaries and interactions between the three branches of government.

By design, strategic litigation often challenges legislative or executive actions, invoking the judiciary's role in upholding rights and liberties. When civil society organizations and NGOs bring cases that question the constitutionality of existing laws or the legality of government actions, they are effectively asking the judiciary to intervene in areas typically under the purview of other branches. For example, cases challenging discriminatory laws or insufficient environmental protections rely on the judiciary to interpret constitutional and human rights protections expansively, pressuring legislators to reconsider or reform the laws in question [48].

This interplay highlights the judiciary's potential as both an independent check on power and a catalyst for change. Courts, through strategic litigation, have the authority to strike down laws or mandate executive actions, thereby indirectly influencing policy and legislative agendas. However, this role also brings challenges: if courts are perceived as encroaching too far into legislative or executive domains, they risk criticism for judicial activism, potentially destabilizing the balance intended by the separation of powers [49].

a) The Separation of Powers System in Europe and the United States

The concept of the separation of powers was originally conceived by Montesquieu as a safeguard against the concentration of authority in a single entity or individual. His vision was to create a system of *checks and balances* in which each branch of government would have the ability to exercise oversight over the others, ensuring stability and fairness within governance structures. This idea, which emerged during the Enlightenment, has become a fundamental principle in modern democratic systems, establishing a framework that prevents abuse of power and protects individual freedoms.

aa) United States

In the United States, the separation of powers is enshrined in the Constitution of 1787, where it serves as a foundational element of American democracy. The federal structure is designed around a clear division among the legislative (Congress), executive (President), and judicial (Supreme Court) branches. Each branch enjoys a degree of autonomy and possesses mechanisms to limit the powers of the others, creating a robust *check and balance* system intended to prevent any one branch from gaining unchecked control. For instance, while Congress has the authority to pass laws, the President can veto them, and the Supreme Court can review their constitutionality. This dynamic interaction ensures that power remains distributed, reinforcing the democratic nature of the American system [50].

bb) Europe

In Europe, the application of the separation of powers varies by country and constitutional structure. In parliamentary systems, such as the United Kingdom, the division between legislative and executive powers is less distinct, as government officials are typically drawn from the members of Parliament. This close relationship enables more efficient governance but also requires additional safeguards to ensure accountability. In civil law countries like Italy and Germany, the judiciary is structurally separate from the legislature, though the interactions are often less rigid than in the United States. Additionally, supranational bodies like the *European Court of Human Rights* (ECHR) and the *Court* *of Justice of the European Union* (CJEU) play essential roles in protecting fundamental rights and maintaining the separation of powers at a transnational level. These courts provide an additional layer of checks, overseeing national governments' compliance with human rights standards and enforcing EU laws, thereby acting as external agents that reinforce the principle of checks and balances across European states [51] [52] [53].

The differences between the U.S. and European approaches to the separation of powers underscore the adaptability of Montesquieu's concept. While the United States implements a strict separation and direct checks between branches, European systems vary, balancing flexibility and oversight to accommodate diverse political traditions and constitutional frameworks. Together, these systems illustrate how the separation of powers continues to serve as a vital mechanism in safeguarding democratic principles and protecting individual rights, even as it evolves to meet the unique needs of different political contexts.

b) The role of supranational courts in Europe

The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) set binding norms that shape the legal framework of the member states. These courts have the authority to interpret European treaties and human rights conventions, and to create case law that fills legal gaps and strengthens fundamental rights across the EU. The *Kadi* case is a significant example, in which the ECJ ruled that EU law even takes precedence over measures implemented in response to resolutions of the United Nations Security Council. This judgment emphasized the supremacy of fundamental rights enshrined in EU law, stating that these rights cannot be overridden by external mandates that conflict with the fundamental principles of the EU [62].

Through judgments such as *Kadi*, supranational courts reinforce a transnational legal order that prioritizes the protection of human rights across Europe. The binding nature of these rulings compels member states to adapt their national laws to EU standards, effectively integrating European norms into national legal systems. This process not only improves the protection of fundamental rights, but also fosters greater legal consistency among European nations, creating a common framework of rights and responsibilities.

In both common law systems and the supranational legal structures of Europe, case law serves as a powerful source of norms that fill gaps in legislation and respond to current societal needs. Through strategic litigation, the courts in these contexts create lasting standards that shape the legal landscape and demonstrate the role of the judiciary in actively shaping the principles that govern society.

c) Constitutional courts in Europe

In Europe, constitutional courts have dealt with legal loopholes in a similar way and often act as the decisive arbiter when weighing up national and supranational laws. For example, the German Federal Constitutional Court has reviewed and even challenged European Union directives, emphasizing the primacy of the German Basic Law in certain areas. In several cases, the court has asserted that EU directives must comply with German constitutional norms, particularly in matters that strongly affect national sovereignty and fundamental rights. This stance empowers the court to override or reinterpret legislative directives issued by the EU, emphasizing national constitutional authority over supranational mandates.

These examples show that constitutional courts in Europe not only interpret laws, but also fill legislative gaps, especially in contexts where EU law may clash with national priorities. By judicially overseeing EU regulations, these courts exercise a form of constitutional control, ensuring that legislative action is consistent with both national and EU obligations.

One of the most important tools the courts have to influence the legislative process is the power to declare laws unconstitutional. When a court rules that a law is unconstitutional, it compels the legislature to revise or repeal that law, thereby effecting legislative reform. This mechanism has been successfully used in numerous cases to challenge discriminatory laws and advance civil rights. For example, court rulings in favor of marriage equality have played a critical role in the legalization of same-sex marriage in several jurisdictions, marking a significant shift in the protection of civil rights. By declaring same-sex marriage bans unconstitutional, courts have pushed lawmakers to enact inclusive marriage laws that reflect modern standards of equality and human dignity.

Through these declarations, courts wield a powerful tool of judicial review that puts pressure on lawmakers to ensure that legislation is in line with constitutional principles. This power to invalidate laws highlights the role of the judiciary in protecting fundamental rights, particularly in cases where existing laws do not ensure equality or justice for marginalized groups. Such rulings not only serve to correct specific laws, but also serve as a symbolic affirmation of constitutional values.

2) Case law as a source of norms

In common law systems, court rulings play a fundamental role in lawmaking. Judges not only interpret existing laws, but also create new legal principles through their judgments, which become binding in future cases. This precedent-setting function allows courts to adapt legal norms to evolving societal values and address emerging issues even in the absence of legislative reform.

Strategic litigation also often results in what can be considered a form of rule-making through jurisprudence, especially when the legislature fails to act. In this context, judges make decisions that actually set new norms and standards for society. These court decisions, especially in cases involving fundamental rights, almost have the same effect as quasi-legislation, as they create guidelines for future cases and even legislative bodies to follow.

This process of "legislation by adjudication" is particularly visible in areas where social or technological progress overtakes the legislative process. For example, issues such as digital privacy, environmental protection and bioethics are often litigated in court before lawmakers have had a chance to address them comprehensively. In such cases, court decisions provide immediate answers and create precedents that guide future cases, so that a body of rules emerges through judicial interpretation. A well-known example is the US Supreme Court's decision in the case of *Roe v. Wade*, in which the court, in the absence of specific federal legislation on abortion, established a constitutional right to privacy that legalized abortion nationwide [87].

In Europe, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) play a similar role. They have issued rulings that set standards on issues ranging from data protection to labor laws. While legally binding, these rulings set expectations and rules that must be followed by member states, thus filling legal gaps at the supranational level. The ECJ's rulings on data protection, for example, have set binding standards for all EU members, ensuring a uniform level of data protection across Europe despite differences in national laws.

The role of the judiciary in setting legal norms raises questions about the balance of powers in democratic systems. While judicial decisions can address pressing social needs, there are concerns about the legitimacy of courts encroaching on the realm of lawmaking. While effective, rules crafted by courts lack the democratic input that legislation typically carries. Nevertheless, in areas where legislation lags behind societal change, case law provides important guidance, ensuring that critical issues are addressed in the absence of explicit laws. Through strategic litigation, the judiciary thus becomes an adaptive force, responding to evolving societal challenges and bridging the gap between the law and current needs.

3) The role of the judiciary

a) Judicial independence

One of the most discussed aspects of strategic litigation is its influence on the legislature. Although courts do not play a direct role in drafting or enacting legislation, they can exert a significant influence on legislative decisions through strategic litigation. When courts decide cases that raise issues of significant public interest, their rulings often prompt lawmakers to reconsider existing laws or introduce new ones that reflect the court's findings and reasoning. This indirect influence can lead to meaningful reforms, but it also raises questions about the boundaries between judicial and legislative authority.

Judicial independence is essential to the effective functioning of the system of checks and balances. Without an autonomous judiciary, there is a risk that judicial decisions will be influenced by political influence, undermining the impartiality necessary for the protection of civil rights.

Judicial independence ensures that the courts can serve as a check on the executive. However, this also means that the judiciary must strike a balance between respecting the other branches of government and the duty to enforce the constitutional restrictions by dealing with complex legal and administrative issues that often overlap with urgent social issues.

b) Judicial activism

The issue of judicial independence arises especially when it comes to judicial activism. Judicial activism refers to the tendency of courts to go beyond the mere interpretation of the law and to actively influence public policy through their rulings. This approach has sparked debates about the democratic legitimacy of judicial decisions, since judges are appointed and not elected and thus have no direct political mandate. Critics argue that when courts take an activist stance, they risk overstepping their boundaries and interfering with the responsibilities of the legislature and executive branch. In such cases, court decisions may appear to represent personal or ideological convictions rather than adhering strictly to legal principles, raising concerns about impartiality and the separation of powers [48].

However, proponents of judicial activism believe that this approach is essential to safeguarding fundamental rights in certain contexts. In political systems where the legislature or executive may be unwilling or unable to protect vulnerable groups, judicial activism becomes a necessary tool to ensure that rights are upheld. For example, when majority opinion or political pressure prevents the passage of progressive legislation—as in cases of racial equity, marriage rights, or environmental protection—courts step in to fill the void by issuing rulings that nudge society toward greater justice and inclusion. Judicial activism in these cases is not seen as overreach but as a form of judicial responsibility to uphold constitutional protections when other branches fail.

This dilemma underscores the delicate balance that judges must maintain between interpreting laws and shaping policy. While judicial activism can effect positive change, it must be tempered by respect for democratic processes and institutional roles. Courts are interpreters by nature, but if they venture into areas traditionally managed by elected representatives, they risk undermining the democratic basis of lawmaking. While judicial activism may be justified in contexts where rights are at stake, it remains a complex and often controversial aspect of strategic litigation, requiring judges to walk a fine line between upholding justice and respecting democratic governance.

c) Judicial independence and public pressure

Strategic litigation often involves a high level of public and media engagement, which can put significant pressure on judges. High-profile cases, particularly those with significant social impact, can attract media attention and public campaigns, creating an environment in which judicial independence may be challenged. Judges may feel compelled to make decisions that conform to public opinion rather than basing their rulings solely on law and fact. While public opinion can play an important role in highlighting issues of justice, media-driven campaigns around strategic cases pose a major challenge to judicial neutrality. Maintaining an unbiased attitude under such scrutiny is essential to preserving judicial integrity, but becomes increasingly difficult when the judiciary is influenced by forces outside the courtroom [85].

Strategic litigation is undeniably a powerful tool for enforcing social justice and protecting fundamental rights, especially in situations where political processes are blocked or respond too slowly. However, its use must be carefully managed to uphold the separation of powers and ensure the legitimacy of democratic governance.

A balanced approach is key. Courts play a key role in defending rights, but they must be aware of their limits and respect the functions of the legislature and the executive, rather than encroaching on their jurisdiction. This approach allows the judiciary to support and strengthen the democratic system without overshadowing elected representatives. On the other hand, lawmakers and policymakers are responsible for actively addressing social challenges and protecting rights through inclusive, democratic processes. When all branches are fully performing their roles, strategic litigation serves as an effective catalyst that complements, rather than replaces, action by the legislature and executive.

Justice, at its core, requires the engagement of all three branches of government in an approach that values collaboration as much as autonomy. Only through this collective responsibility can a fair and responsive democracy flourish, where rights are truly protected and balance is maintained. Strategic litigation is thus more than just a means to win cases; it is a way to foster an environment in which justice, respect, and mutual accountability inform the actions of government and society alike.

4) procedural classification of strategic legal disputes

The procedural categorization of strategic litigation is based on a number of core elements, including how litigation develops in different legal systems, standing and capacity of the parties, jurisdiction, and dealing with potential abuses of the legal system. This chapter will take a closer look at the procedural dynamics of strategic litigation in the United States and Europe, examining each of these aspects in detail to understand how they shape and support the practice of strategic litigation.

a) United States

In the United States, strategic litigation is a deeply entrenched mechanism for social change under the common law, in which court decisions have normative authority. Through the doctrine of precedent, American courts have played a central role in shaping social values and addressing issues that legislative bodies might avoid or delay. Strategic litigation has led to significant advances in civil rights, gender equality, and civil liberties, with important court decisions often laying the groundwork for broader legislative reforms [54].

The reliance on precedent amplifies the impact of strategic cases in the US. When a court decision sets a new standard, it not only impacts the parties involved, but also creates a framework that guides future cases and influences both judicial and legislative responses to similar issues. Landmark rulings such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, which challenged racial segregation, and *Roe v. Wade*, which recognized reproductive rights, discussed in depth above, are examples of how strategic litigation can combat systemic injustices and expand fundamental freedoms. These rulings show that the judiciary can act as a powerful agent of change, especially in areas where policies have stalled [55].

The procedural tools used in strategic litigation in the United States have helped to broaden the impact of judicial decisions and create standards that go beyond the individual case.

aa) Class actions as a catalyst for change

Class actions are an important tool for addressing systemic violations because they allow large groups of individuals to work together to address widespread injustices. In *Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. v. Dukes* (2011), thousands of women filed a class action lawsuit against the retail giant alleging gender discrimination in hiring and promotions. Although the Supreme Court ultimately dismissed the case on procedural grounds, the lawsuit brought great public attention to workplace discrimination and contributed to a broader dialog about transparency in employment practices. The *Wal-Mart* case is an example of how class action lawsuits, even if unsuccessful in court, can highlight social issues and drive public and corporate policy change, reinforcing the role of strategic litigation as a means of social advocacy [56].

bb) Micus curiae to extend the effect

The use of amicus curiae briefs, or "friends of the court," is another effective tool in strategic litigation in the United States. These briefs are filed by entities that are not directly involved in a case - such as non-governmental organizations, civil rights groups and academic institutions - to provide the court with a broader perspective on the issues at hand. In *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which involved marriage equality, dozens of amicus briefs were filed by various parties, including economists, psychologists, and major corporations, all making arguments in support of marriage equality. These submissions enriched the Court's understanding of the social, economic, and psychological benefits of legalizing same-sex marriage and demonstrated how *amicus curiae* can influence judicial reasoning by contextualizing legal issues within a broader social framework [57].

By using tools such as class actions and amicus curiae briefs, lawyers in the U.S. are expanding the reach and importance of strategic litigation and positioning the judiciary as a powerful platform for addressing and publicizing systemic issues. These litigation strategies aim not only to bring justice to the courts, but also to influence public opinion and policy and amplify the impact of court decisions on society at large.

cc) Manufacturing (strategic case construction)

Strategic case building, or case *making,* involves careful planning and thoughtful selection of cases and plaintiffs to optimize the impact of litigation. This approach utilizes not only legal arguments, but also social narratives and evidence to build compelling cases that are both legally and culturally persuasive.

A prime example of strategic case construction is *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), in which the legal team selected plaintiffs who could make a strong case for the human aspect of the issue. Mildred and Richard Loving, a mixed-race couple in love and determined to fight for their right to marry, were chosen as ideal plaintiffs to challenge the laws against miscegenation. Their deeply personal and sympathetic story generated public support and caught the attention of the Supreme Court, which ultimately ruled in the couple's favor and struck down the laws against interracial marriage. The strategic selection of plaintiffs whose stories resonated with the public was critical to this positive outcome and demonstrates how case construction can align legal goals with public empathy and support [58].

In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the NAACP legal team drew on psychological studies such as Kenneth and Mamie Clark's doll experiments to show how segregation affected African American children's self-esteem. This use of social science evidence was groundbreaking because it brought academic research into the courtroom to bolster legal arguments and lend additional empirical credibility to the case. The Supreme Court cited these studies in its decision and recognized the harmful psychological effects of segregation, strengthening the legal basis for desegregating public schools. Since then, the integration of social and scientific evidence has become a hallmark of strategic litigation, underscoring the power of data to influence judicial outcomes in cases with far-reaching social implications [59].

Through the purposeful construction of cases, strategic litigation utilizes storytelling, plaintiff selection, and empirical evidence to not only strengthen legal arguments, but also build public support. This approach, referred to as "*manufacturing,*" is integral to building cases that resonate beyond the courtroom and promote broader social and cultural goals.

b) Europe

In Europe, strategic litigation is conducted within a civil justice system that relies primarily on codified laws rather than judicial precedent, as is common in the United States. This codificationoriented approach shapes the structure of lawsuits and limits reliance on prior court decisions as a guide for judicial decisions. Codified laws, combined with the role of national and supranational courts, are central to ensuring that individual and collective rights are upheld.

European civil procedural law sets out the framework within which strategic cases can be brought, often focusing on detailed procedural steps and specific requirements for standing. Unlike common law systems, where precedents can influence future decisions, civil law systems require a careful review of codes and national statutes to identify legal avenues for enforcing rights.

As mentioned above, supranational courts such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) play an important role in strategic litigation in Europe. These courts allow individuals and groups to go beyond national borders and challenge state measures that may violate human rights or EU regulations. For example, actions can be brought before the ECtHR against violations of the European Convention on Human Rights, allowing citizens to seek redress if national remedies prove inadequate. Similarly, the ECJ interprets and enforces EU law by ensuring that Member States comply with the fundamental principles of the EU, including the protection of rights and freedoms [60].

Strategic litigation in the European context often requires lawyers to navigate a complex web of national and supranational laws and procedures. Despite these challenges, the codified nature of European law provides a stable basis on which to assert rights, while the existence of supranational courts provides a powerful tool to hold states to account and promote uniform human rights protection across Europe.

aa) Individual legal protection and supranational courts

The ECtHR is an important guardian of human rights throughout Europe and its decisions are binding on the Member States. The Court's decisions aim to ensure that national legislation complies with the human rights standards set out in the European Convention on Human Rights. *A* landmark case, *Airey v. Ireland* (1979), is an example of the ECtHR's influence on widening access to justice. In this case, the ECtHR ruled that access to justice is a fundamental right and obliged Ireland to provide free legal aid to those who could not afford it. This decision not only had an impact on Irish law, but also set a precedent for other European states, prompting them to improve legal aid and access to justice across the region. *Airey* thus illustrates the role of the ECtHR in using strategic litigation to improve human rights protection and enforce accountability on a broad scale [61].

The ECJ plays a central role in ensuring the uniform interpretation and application of EU law in the Member States. Strategic legal disputes often reach the CJEU when issues of EU law are at stake, such as consumer protection or environmental regulations, where the court has the power to issue binding legal norms. In *Kadi v. Council of the European Union*, the ECJ underlined the primacy of fundamental rights over international security measures and ruled that EU law must take precedence even over United Nations Security Council resolutions. This landmark decision emphasized that EU institutions and Member States are obliged to comply with EU fundamental rights standards, setting an important precedent that strengthens the EU's commitment to human rights [62].

These supranational courts expand the scope for strategic litigation by providing individuals and organizations with mechanisms to challenge national practices that do not meet European standards. Through cases such as *Airey* and *Kadi*, the ECtHR and CJEU demonstrate how strategic litigation can reshape national policies and strengthen human rights protection across Europe by creating a unified legal framework that prioritizes fundamental rights.

bb) Instances and jurisdictions in European systems

Strategic litigation in Europe must navigate a complex, multi-layered legal system in which different courts and jurisdictions have different responsibilities. This structure allows for strategic escalation, where cases can be passed from local courts through national and supranational levels to have a broad, authoritative impact on legal norms.

The ordinary courts serve as the first level at which legal issues are raised and form the basis of the legal process in strategic litigation. However, appeals to higher courts or appellate courts are a common component of strategic cases, especially when the goal is to set a legal precedent that could influence future cases. This multi-stage process allows litigants to take a case all the way to the highest national courts or supranational tribunals in order to obtain a binding and influential decision. Escalating cases through these levels maximizes the case's potential to shape the broader legal landscape and ensures that strategic litigation can set standards that are applicable in all jurisdictions [63].

European constitutional courts, such as the German Federal Constitutional Court, play a central role in ensuring that national laws comply with constitutional principles. These courts often serve as decisive venues for strategic litigation, particularly in cases involving fundamental rights. In Germany, for example, the Federal Constitutional Court has often been called upon to challenge laws that violate individual rights, such as cases involving mass surveillance laws. In a landmark decision, the court limited the scope of government surveillance powers in order to protect citizens' privacy, underlining its role as protector of personal freedoms from overreaching government measures. This decision not only confirmed data protection rights in Germany, but also influenced data protection standards across Europe and showed that constitutional courts can be powerful instruments for the promotion of human rights [64].

Through this multi-level system, strategic litigation can be designed to reach the courts that are best placed to deliver effective and binding decisions. By engaging ordinary courts, courts of appeal and constitutional courts, lawyers can utilize the diversity of European jurisprudence to advance human rights protection and ensure that national and supranational norms remain consistent with principles of justice and constitutional integrity.

cc) Specific instruments and options for strategic litigation

In European strategic litigation, certain procedural tools enhance the ability to protect rights and influence policy, and provide crucial opportunities to intervene in cases with far-reaching social and environmental impacts.

Precautionary procedural tools such as injunctions are often used to prevent harmful actions from being taken while proceedings are pending. This is particularly important in environmental litigation, where non-governmental organizations can apply for injunctions to stop projects that pose environmental risks until a full impact assessment has been carried out. By applying for an injunction, plaintiffs can prevent potentially irreversible damage and give the courts time to assess the case in its entirety. For example, in several environmental cases in Europe, construction or industrial activities that threatened ecosystems have been halted by injunctions, demonstrating the value of this tool for protecting environmental and public interests during the duration of court proceedings [65].

In Europe too, civil society organizations, including non-governmental organizations, can participate as *amicus curiae*, providing expertise and legal arguments that can strengthen a party's case. Such contributions have proved crucial in cases such as *López Ostra v. Spain*, where Amnesty International provided important information on the environmental and health impacts of local measures. In the *López Ostra* case, the European Court of Human Rights recognized the Spanish government's responsibility to protect citizens from environmental harm, a decision that was influenced by amicus submissions highlighting the broader implications of environmental health [66].

These tools - injunctions for emergency measures and *amicus curiae* for informed advocacy - illustrate the procedural possibilities available in European strategic litigation. By utilizing these mechanisms, plaintiffs can not only protect their rights, but also increase their impact by engaging civil society and preventing potential harm, making strategic litigation a powerful approach for promoting justice and accountability.

5) Legal standing and extension of the parties in strategic legal disputes

Standing, i.e. the right to bring a case to court, is a fundamental element in strategic litigation as it determines who has the power to bring a claim. In the context of strategic litigation, standing can be a powerful tool, but also a limitation, as it places limits on who can advocate for certain rights and issues.

a) Legal standing in the European legal system

In Europe, standing is often more restrictive than in other jurisdictions, such as the United States. For a party to have standing, it must usually demonstrate a direct interest in the matter, which can limit the ability of non-governmental organizations or third parties to sue on behalf of affected communities or the environment. In recent decades, however, standing has been gradually expanded to allow broader participation in cases that are of significant public interest, particularly in areas such as environmental protection and human rights [67].

aa) Extension of legal standing in environmental and human rights cases

The expansion of legal standing in European strategic legal disputes is particularly evident in environmental and human rights cases. European courts such as the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) have granted standing to non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations under certain conditions. This extension reflects the recognition that organizations representing public interests such as the environment and health or fundamental rights often play a crucial role in holding states to account. In cases such as *López Ostra v. Spain*, which concerned environmental and health concerns of local communities, the Court accepted standing for parties representing broader societal interests, paving the way for a broader interpretation of who can act in defense of public goods [68].

bb) Challenges and opportunities in extending the right to sue

While the extension of standing offers strategic litigants more opportunities to bring cases of great importance, it also brings challenges. Courts must balance the need for accessible justice with the risk of opening up the legal system to a flood of cases, which could slow down court proceedings. As strategic litigation evolves, European courts are refining their approach to standing to allow greater involvement in cases where public interests are at stake, while maintaining procedural efficiency. This careful consideration demonstrates the importance of standing not only in determining who can bring a claim, but also in shaping the practical reach and impact of strategic litigation.

b) Legal standing in the American legal system

In the United States, standing is dependent on a party being able to prove a specific and tangible injury. This requirement ensures that only those directly affected by an issue can bring a case to court, creating a threshold that influences strategic litigation efforts. An illustrative case is *Sierra Club v. Morton* (1972), in which the U.S. Supreme Court denied standing to the Sierra Club on the grounds that the organization had not demonstrated a concrete personal injury. The Sierra Club had sought to stop a development project in a national forest, arguing that it would harm the environment. However, the court ruled that standing only exists if the plaintiff can show a direct and personal connection to the harm, underscoring the need to select plaintiffs who can demonstrate direct effects.

This decision underscored a central tenet of American tort law: an abstract interest alone is not sufficient for access to the courts. *Sierra Club v. Morton* reaffirmed the need to select plaintiffs who meet the jurisdictional standard of injury, which has since prompted strategic litigants to focus on cases in which affected individuals can demonstrate a personal interest. This requirement has shaped the approach to environmental and social justice cases in the United States, prompting plaintiffs to frame the injury in a way that satisfies the criteria for standing while advancing broader public interests [69].

In cases such as *Sierra Club v. Morton*, U.S. standing demonstrates both the possibilities and limitations of strategic litigation. It encourages attorneys to find plaintiffs with demonstrable harm while requiring courts to consider public interest issues within the limits of individual standing.

6) NGOs as parties in strategic legal disputes

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play an important role in promoting strategic litigation, particularly in cases that protect collective rights and environmental interests. By initiating legal action or participating as *amicus curiae*, NGOs bring their expertise and persuasive power to drive systemic change.

In Europe, NGOs actively participate in proceedings before supranational courts such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). These courts often allow NGOs to intervene either as active parties or as *amicus curiae*, where they can provide critical insight, research and arguments in support of public interest cases. For example, Greenpeace has been instrumental in challenging harmful energy policies, including government subsidies for coal-fired power plants in Europe. By bringing these cases, Greenpeace has helped to create a legal framework that is consistent with environmental goals and pushes for a transition to sustainable energy sources.

In cases like these, NGOs use strategic litigation to promote not only environmental protection, but also broader societal goals. By engaging in supranational litigation, they extend the reach of legal norms and support a pan-European approach to rights protection. This form of participation enables NGOs to act on behalf of communities and ecosystems affected by policies, hold governments accountable and promote compliance with EU environmental targets [70].

7) class actions and collective participation

Class actions are an effective tool for strategic litigation, particularly in the United States, where the legal system facilitates collective action to address widespread harms. Because large groups of affected individuals can sue as a collective, class actions can address systemic problems that would be difficult to resolve on an individual basis.

A well-known example of class action litigation is the case against ExxonMobil following the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska. This environmental disaster resulted in one of the largest class action lawsuits in U.S. history, as thousands of individuals and businesses joined together to seek compensation for the extensive environmental and economic damage caused by the spill. The case resulted in significant compensation for the affected communities and forced ExxonMobil to improve its safety protocols, ultimately setting a precedent for corporate accountability in the oil industry. The magnitude of the litigation and its results not only provided direct redress to those affected, but also underscored the power of class actions in driving regulatory changes that prioritize environmental protection and corporate responsibility [71].

8) Jurisdiction of courts and international legal disputes

Jurisdiction is a critical aspect of strategic litigation, especially in an era of increasing globalization and interconnected issues. As strategic litigation often involves cross-border challenges such as environmental damage, human rights violations and corporate accountability, determining the appropriate jurisdiction for these cases is essential.

a) Cross-border responsibilities and challenges

In international strategic litigation, complex legal issues arise when the problems span multiple countries. In environmental cases involving pollution affecting multiple countries, or in corporate cases where multinational companies operate transnationally, careful consideration must be given to where the case can be prosecuted most effectively. Courts must consider whether they have jurisdiction to hear cases with a foreign element, which often requires balancing the principles of territorial sovereignty with the need for accountability.

A notable example is the case of *Kiobel v. Royal Dutch Petroleum Co.* in which Nigerian plaintiffs brought suit in the United States against a multinational corporation for alleged human rights violations based on the Alien Tort Statute (ATS). The United States Supreme Court ultimately limited the extraterritorial application of the ATS, concluding that the claims must "touch and concern" the United States with sufficient force to confer jurisdiction. This decision underscores the complexity of asserting jurisdiction in cross-border human rights cases and highlights the limits of jurisdiction when pursuing strategic litigation across borders [72].

b) Possibilities of international jurisdiction in Europe

In Europe, courts have increasingly dealt with cases with cross-border implications, particularly in the area of human rights and environmental law. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) offer plaintiffs the opportunity to challenge national policies and corporate practices with international implications. In addition, EU regulations such as the Brussels I Regulation provide a framework for determining jurisdiction in civil and commercial matters, allowing European courts to hear cases involving parties from multiple EU member states. This harmonized approach facilitates international litigation within the EU and enables strategic litigation on issues that transcend national borders [73].

By extending jurisdiction over strategic disputes, courts can tackle complex global challenges by holding states and companies accountable across borders. However, the operation of jurisdictional rules remains a critical factor in ensuring that cases are brought before courts that are authorized and willing to adjudicate cross-border disputes.

9) Private international law and supranational jurisdictions

a) Private international law

Private international law governs disputes with cross-border elements and determines which national law is applicable and which court has jurisdiction. This is crucial in strategic legal disputes, especially when it comes to human rights violations committed by multinational companies operating in several countries. In cases where companies are accused of labor rights violations or environmental destruction abroad, for example, private international law provides the framework for determining where the case should be heard and which legal system should be applied. This area of law allows plaintiffs to take strategic action against powerful companies that might otherwise avoid accountability by operating in different jurisdictions [74].

b) Regulations Rome I and Rome II

The Rome I and Rome II Regulations play an important role in determining the applicable law in cross-border cases within the European Union. Rome I regulates contractual obligations, while Rome II deals with non-contractual obligations, such as tort claims. In strategic litigation involving environmental damage caused by a multinational company in several EU countries, these regulations help to determine the most appropriate jurisdiction and applicable law. For example, Rome II allows courts to apply the law of the country where the damage occurred, which can be beneficial in cases where local laws provide strong environmental protection. By providing a clear legal framework, these regulations assist claimants in bringing coherent cross-border actions that comply with EU standards and ensure uniform legal treatment in all Member States [75].

Through the structure provided by private international law and the Rome Regulations, strategic litigation can address complex cross-border disputes and enable courts to hold multinational corporations accountable for cross-border harms. This framework is crucial in strategic cases, particularly when seeking justice for widespread rights violations that transcend national borders.

c) Forum Shopping and Forum Non Conveniens

aa) Forum shopping as a strategy

Forum shopping is a Strategic Litigation tool that allows plaintiffs to select the jurisdiction most favorable to their case, often based on precedent or the court's general stance on certain issues. In strategic litigation, forum shopping is particularly useful in cases against multinational corporations, where certain jurisdictions may be more sympathetic to consumer or environmental protection. For example, lawsuits against tobacco companies have been filed in jurisdictions that are considered more consumer-friendly, increasing the chances of a successful outcome. By choosing a jurisdiction with legal norms or precedents that support their claims, plaintiffs can maximize the impact of their cases and set precedents that will influence future litigation in other jurisdictions [76].

bb) Forum Non Conveniens Objection

The doctrine of *forum non conveniens* allows a court to dismiss a case if it determines that another forum would be better suited to resolve the dispute. While this doctrine can ensure that cases are heard in the most appropriate jurisdiction, it can also present a significant hurdle in strategic litigation, particularly when plaintiffs seek to bring a case in a country known for its strong human rights protections. For example, in cases involving alleged human rights abuses by corporations, plaintiffs may seek to litigate in jurisdictions with strong human rights laws. However, defendants may invoke *forum non conveniens* to argue that the case should be litigated in the country where the harm occurred or where the defendant is based, where there may be no comparable protections. This doctrine may thus limit the strategic advantages of forum shopping as plaintiffs must deal with jurisdictional challenges in cross-border litigation [77].

Forum shopping and *forum non conveniens* illustrate the strategic considerations to be made when selecting an appropriate forum for strategic litigation. While forum shopping allows plaintiffs to optimize their chances of success, forum *non conveniens* can redirect cases to less favorable jurisdictions, striking a balance between freedom of choice and the requirement of judicial appropriateness.

IV. Misuse of legal remedies and ethical considerations

While strategic litigation is a powerful tool for social change, it can also be misused, leading to potential abuse of legal action and raising important issues of ethical and professional integrity. When strategic litigation is used primarily to harass or unduly burden opponents rather than to seek justice, it risks undermining the credibility of legal proceedings and eroding public confidence in the justice system.

1) Ethical issues in strategic litigation

The ethical challenges associated with strategic litigation arise when cases are brought without any real legal basis or are filed solely to put pressure on an opponent. Thus, litigation can be weaponized by filing excessive lawsuits to intimidate the opposing party or deplete its resources, particularly in cases involving corporations or governments subject to public scrutiny. This practice, sometimes referred to as "SLAPP" (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) litigation, serves to silence critics, discourage activism, and stifle advocacy for critical issues such as environmental protection or consumer rights [78]. This type of case is contrary to the purpose of strategic litigation, which ideally aims to promote justice rather than impede legitimate social engagement.

2) Professional integrity and responsible litigation

For lawyers involved in strategic litigation, maintaining ethical standards and professional integrity is essential. Lawyers must balance the interests of their clients with their duty to the court and ensure that the cases brought are based on legitimate legal claims. Professional codes of conduct, particularly in jurisdictions where strategic litigation is prevalent, encourage lawyers to act responsibly and discourage the pursuit of cases that are merely vexatious or harassing. Strategic litigation, when conducted responsibly, is a means to address systemic problems and protect rights. However, when abused, it jeopardizes not only the reputation of the parties involved, but also the justice system in general and can deter legitimate cases that serve social justice [79].

3) code of ethics and professional practices

Lawyers involved in strategic litigation are bound by a strict code of ethics that requires them to act in the best interests of their clients while avoiding frivolous or dilatory actions. This ethical framework is essential to maintaining the integrity of strategic litigation, particularly where cases may have far-reaching political implications or attract significant media attention. Lawyers are expected to pursue cases that are genuinely about protecting rights or redressing injustices, not merely using the court system as a platform for political influence or publicity.

In cases where strategic litigation aligns with public interest goals, ethical standards help ensure that the legal profession focuses on achieving meaningful justice rather than exploiting legal processes for superficial gain. The Code of Conduct for Lawyers generally discourages the filing of cases solely for media attention or as a form of political pressure, and requires that cases be based on legitimate claims and substantive legal needs [80]. Thus, bar associations in many countries provide specific guidelines to prevent abuse of the judicial process and emphasize that lawyers must prioritize their role as officers of the court.

4) Weighing up the interests of the client and the public

In strategic litigation, lawyers often face the challenge of balancing the specific needs and goals of their clients with the broader public interest goals that these cases may serve. This balancing act is particularly important in cases involving environmental law or human rights, where achieving sweeping legal changes can sometimes conflict with the immediate needs of affected communities. For example, in environmental cases, lawyers might seek long-term policy changes aimed at reducing industrial pollution, which could ultimately benefit society as a whole, but these goals may not immediately alleviate the harms faced by local communities struggling with short-term health risks or economic losses.

Strategic litigation often involves the pursuit of systemic reforms that may require lawyers to consider the broader implications of the case. However, ethical guidelines require lawyers to prioritize their duty to the client and ensure that the client's immediate needs and rights are adequately represented, even as they advocate for broader public benefit. This dynamic requires careful management of client expectations, focusing advocacy on individual and collective outcomes, and ensuring that client rights are not compromised in favor of a larger agenda [81].

5) the "all for the case" approach: ethical dilemmas and practices

The "all for the case" approach to strategic litigation can pose significant ethical risks, as attorneys may feel pressured to use aggressive or manipulative tactics to achieve favorable outcomes, sometimes at the expense of their clients' procedural integrity or well-being. In pursuing a high-impact decision, lawyers may focus intensely on the broader goals of the case, such as setting legal precedent or creating public awareness, which can lead to ethical compromises. If left unchecked, this approach risks undermining trust in the justice system and the legitimacy of strategic litigation as a tool for social change. Such actions may involve, for example, overstretching litigation tactics, overstepping the boundaries of ethical advocacy or manipulating procedural loopholes, ultimately undermining the credibility of the practice [83].

Some attorneys involved in strategic high-stakes cases have been criticized for urging plaintiffs to proceed with litigation, even when it was clear that the psychological and personal consequences for the plaintiffs could be severe. One well-known example was a class action lawsuit against a large pharmaceutical company in the United States, where several plaintiffs reported feeling that they were being "used" as a means to gain publicity or promote social change and that their emotional and personal well-being was not being adequately addressed. While this form of litigation was intended to challenge corporate misconduct, it highlighted the ethical need for lawyers to ensure that their clients are viewed not just as means to achieve broader goals, but as individuals whose interests and well-being are equally paramount.()

Such cases underscore the importance of client-centered advocacy in strategic litigation, with ethical guidelines advising attorneys to balance the pursuit of public interest goals with genuine care for the clients they represent. Strategic litigation should strive for systemic impact without disregarding the personal interests and integrity of the individuals involved in order to preserve both the ethical foundations of the profession and the public's trust in the administration of justice [84].

6) Judicial impartiality: Public pressure and influence on judges

In strategic litigation, judicial impartiality is fundamental to ensuring that justice is fair and free from external pressures. However, cases of strategic importance often attract a great deal of public and media attention, creating an environment in which judges may be subject to increased scrutiny and influence from public opinion. This attention can call into question the independence of the judiciary, as judges may feel pressured to make decisions that meet the expectations of the public or social movements rather than strictly following the law.

a) Effects of public pressure on judicial decisions

In high-profile cases, particularly those involving human rights, environmental protection or corporate accountability, judges may be aware of the public interest in the outcome. While this awareness is sometimes unavoidable, it poses a risk to impartiality. In cases where public opinion strongly favors a particular outcome, there may be implicit pressure on judges to consider societal impact in addition to legal principles, even if such considerations are outside their mandate. Strategic litigation advocates recognize this dynamic and sometimes use public campaigns to raise awareness and increase pressure on judicial actors; however, this strategy can unintentionally compromise judicial objectivity [85].

One of the best-known examples of judicial decisions under intense public scrutiny is the already mentioned case *Brown v. Board of Education case*. The U.S. Supreme Court justices in this case were aware of the significant social and political implications of their decision, as it would challenge the deeply entrenched system of racial segregation in the United States. Although the justices had a primary duty to apply the law impartially, they could not overlook the historical and social context of the case. The court's ruling that "separate but equal" schools were unconstitutional reflected a commitment to justice, but the justices had to balance their legal obligations with the risk of provoking social unrest. This example illustrates the challenges judges face in highly publicized, strategic cases where the weight of public opinion can subtly influence judicial decisions and increase pressure to align outcomes with societal expectations [86].

b) Decisions on moral and social issues

Cases involving moral issues, such as abortion rights, euthanasia or LGBTQ+ rights, pose particular challenges for judges as they have to apply the law in the context of conflicting societal values. In *Roe v. Wade*, for example, the U.S. Supreme Court had to make a decision that went beyond a purely legal judgment and incorporated profound moral and social considerations. The ruling, which recognized a woman's right to abortion, became a landmark case with far-reaching consequences for the entire country. Decades later, the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision demonstrated how social pressures and shifting political landscapes can influence jurisprudence when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe*, signaling a dramatic shift that reflected evolving (or regressive) social and political trends in the United States. These cases illustrate the delicate balance that judges must maintain between legal reasoning and the moral weight of their rulings, as well as the responsiveness of the judiciary to broader societal changes [87].

c) Balancing independence and public expectations

The challenge for the judiciary is to strike a balance between independence and consideration of broader social justice concerns, particularly in cases where systemic issues are at the center. The ethical standards for judges emphasize the importance of insulating judicial reasoning from external pressures, even in high profile cases. Maintaining this balance is critical to preserving trust in the judiciary and ensuring that decisions reflect legal principles rather than public opinion. Some judicial systems have recognized this and have protocols in place to protect judges from undue influence, such as restricting pretrial media access or instituting transparency measures that clarify the judiciary's commitment to impartiality [88].

By strengthening measures to promote judicial independence, the judiciary can manage the complexity of strategic litigation without compromising impartiality. This will ensure that strategic litigation continues to advance justice without jeopardizing the fundamental principles of fairness and impartiality in court proceedings.

d) Cases of undue influence

In strategic litigation involving powerful companies or state institutions, the risk of undue influence on judges becomes a tangible problem. In *Chevron v. Ecuador*, for example, a strategic dispute over environmental damage showed how difficult it is to maintain judicial impartiality when dealing with powerful actors. In this case, there were allegations of corruption and undue influence on both sides, which shows how judges can get caught between the interests of influential economic and political actors. To ensure the impartiality of judges in such cases, they must resist outside pressure and focus strictly on legal principles, even when faced with significant political or financial influence. This highlights the ethical challenges of strategic litigation when powerful corporations are involved, as well as the need for systems to protect judicial independence [89].

Strategic litigation often highlights the complex interplay between judicial independence and external pressures, particularly in cases of social or political importance. Maintaining impartiality in such cases is critical to maintaining public confidence in the judiciary and ensuring that strategic litigation continues to serve as a fair and effective avenue for social change.

V. Equal rights at work: legal framework and its implementation in Italy and Germany

1) Overview of the European legal framework

The European legal framework for the promotion of women's rights at work is based on fundamental standards that form the basis for greater equality between men and women in terms of opportunities, access to employment and fair pay. Key elements of this framework include Article 20 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Directive 2006/54/EC and Article 157 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Together, these legal instruments form the basis of European anti-discrimination legislation, each of them contributing uniquely to the promotion of a fairer and more inclusive working environment [90].

a) Article 20 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

aa) Basis for equality in the workplace

Article 20 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union enshrines the principle of equality before the law, a fundamental concept that underpins the entire European human rights and anti-discrimination framework. This principle states that everyone should receive equal treatment and protection before the law and serves as a crucial basis for challenging discriminatory practices in various areas, particularly in the field of employment.

In the context of the workplace, Article 20 provides a solid legal basis for promoting gender equality and tackling structural barriers that disproportionately affect women. By affirming equality as a fundamental right, Article 20 empowers individuals and advocacy organizations to challenge policies and practices that perpetuate inequalities or marginalize women. Strategic litigation invoking Article 20, often goes beyond individual cases of discrimination; it seeks to set important precedents and strengthen the equality obligations that Member States must incorporate into their national legislation and workplace practices [93].

The role of Article 20 in the EU legal system goes far beyond a symbolic obligation. It serves as a practical tool for strategic litigators seeking to eliminate systemic discrimination and create a framework for accountability. Through this legal route, the principle of equality provides a solid foundation for progressive change and promotes a fairer and more inclusive workplace culture that respects the rights and dignity of all people.

bb) Legal interpretation

The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has interpreted Article 20 to mean that states are obliged to eliminate both direct and indirect discrimination. This obligation goes beyond equal treatment and recognizes that proportionate measures may be necessary to meet specific needs. In cases relating to positive action, for example, the Court has confirmed that the principle of equality can justify positive action measures, particularly those aimed at improving the representation of women in traditionally male-dominated fields. In *Kalanke v. Free Hanseatic City of Bremen*, the ECJ ruled on the admissibility of positive action measures and emphasized that measures aimed at improving women's access to certain roles must be proportionate and justified in the context of equality [94].

cc) Positive measures and their necessity

While Article 20 emphasizes equal treatment, it has also been interpreted as a legal basis for positive measures to promote women's access to traditionally male-dominated fields. Various Member States have introduced gender quotas and similar measures to promote gender balance in leadership positions. Although such initiatives have met with both support and criticism, they remain important tools to combat structural discrimination. For example, measures such as gender quotas are sometimes perceived as controversial; however, the ECJ has recognized that, when applied fairly, they serve to address systemic imbalances that cannot be remedied by purely formal equality [95].

In the case *Marschall v. Land Nordrhein-Westfalen* (1997), the ECJ clarified its position and recognized that affirmative action measures are compatible with Article 20 if they aim to eliminate existing structural inequalities. In this case, the Court confirmed a policy in which preference could be given to female applicants with equal qualifications, provided that the decision was not automatic and exceptions could be made. This decision showed that the Court's understanding of Article 20 has evolved, recognizing that positive action may be necessary to achieve real equality and not just formal equality. The Marschall judgment illustrated how Article 20 can serve as a legal basis for tackling systemic bias in employment and set a precedent for further strategic litigation to promote fair hiring practices [96].

Through strategic litigation invoking Article 20, these cases highlight how the Article supports not only the elimination of overt discrimination, but also the application of carefully crafted affirmative action. Such litigation helps to create a legal environment in which policies must not only meet formal equality standards, but also take into account the broader context of systemic discrimination.

b) Directive 2006/54/EC: Equal treatment in employment and working conditions

Directive 2006/54/EC provides for explicit protection against direct and indirect discrimination and requires Member States to implement measures to promote gender equality at all stages of employment. Under this Directive, employers are prohibited from discriminatory practices in recruitment, pay negotiations, promotion and dismissal to ensure that men and women have equal access to opportunities and resources. The Directive also requires equal pay for equal work or work of equal value, a principle enshrined in Article 157 of the TFEU, which reinforces employers' obligation to prevent pay inequalities based on gender alone [97].

In addition, Directive 2006/54/EC has served as a crucial basis for strategic litigation aimed at challenging discriminatory practices in the workplace. By setting clear legal standards, the Directive empowers individuals and stakeholders to hold employers accountable for gender bias. Proceedings brought under the Directive have resulted in significant judgments that have influenced policy across the EU and prompted companies to reassess their practices and bring them into line with equality principles. The Directive therefore not only protects the rights of individuals, but also contributes to a greater shift towards an inclusive workplace culture where fairness and respect are paramount.

aa) Indirect discrimination and practical barriers

Indirect discrimination often arises from seemingly neutral company policies that disproportionately disadvantage one gender. A classic example is policies relating to overtime and night shifts, which tend to disadvantage women who have a greater proportion of caring responsibilities. Directive

2006/54/EC explicitly recognizes these obstacles and seeks to eliminate them. It stipulates that measures or practices that appear neutral but have a disproportionate negative impact on one sex must be justified by objective reasons and must be proportionate to the objectives pursued. The ECJ has dealt with such cases and emphasized that seemingly neutral requirements must be subject to strict scrutiny to ensure that they do not unjustifiably burden one sex, especially in cases where it is more difficult for women to meet certain requirements in the workplace due to caring responsibilities [98].

bb) Equal pay and criteria for work of equal value

The Directive enshrines the right to equal pay for work of equal value, a principle that goes beyond simple job titles or sectors. This provision requires that the value of a job is assessed on the basis of a comprehensive evaluation of skills, responsibilities and working conditions. For example, strategic litigation has made it clear that occupations traditionally performed by women, such as nursing, must be recognized as equivalent to more male-dominated jobs in technical fields that require a comparable level of skill and responsibility. Such cases have driven the recognition and appropriate remuneration of undervalued roles and demonstrate how Directive 2006/54/EC serves as a tool to combat the systemic undervaluation of work performed by women [99].

cc) Use of the Directive in Strategic Litigation

Directive 2006/54/EC has served as the basis for numerous court cases across Europe to ensure that women have access to fair working conditions.

A landmark example of the Directive's principle of equality in practice is the case of *P v S and Cornwall County Council* (1996), in which the ECJ ruled that the dismissal of a transsexual employee was contrary to the principle of equal treatment. This case broadened the interpretation of the concept of gender equality under the Directive by recognizing that discrimination based on gender identity falls within the scope of the Directive. The judgment demonstrated the transformative impact of strategic litigation and showed how Directive 2006/54/EC can be used not only to combat traditional sex discrimination, but also to protect individuals facing prejudice based on their gender identity. This case set a precedent that has influenced further protections for gender diverse individuals across Europe and highlights the adaptability of the Directive to the evolving notion of equality [100].

dd) National implementation and challenges

The Directive requires Member States to enact national legislation to ensure the effective application of the Directive. However, implementation has often met with resistance, particularly in more conservative areas. In some countries, trade unions and non-governmental organizations have had to engage in numerous strategic legal battles to force employers to comply with the equality requirements prescribed by the Directive. This has highlighted how difficult it is to ensure full compliance with European standards at local level. Strategic litigation in these cases is not only aimed at enforcing the law, but also serves as a lobbying tool to pressure national governments and employers to comply with EU equality standards. These efforts highlight the ongoing struggle to translate European standards into uniform practices in different national contexts [101].

Directive 2006/54/EC, through its use in strategic litigation, has proved essential in advancing equal treatment in employment, enabling wider application of equality principles and adapting to emerging issues in the area of rights at work.

c) Article 157 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)

Article 157 of the TFEU is a fundamental principle of EU law that requires equal pay for men and women for work of equal value. This article clearly obliges Member States to eliminate all forms of gender pay discrimination and thus sets a legal standard aimed at eliminating the gender pay gap throughout the European Union.

Article 157 provides a solid framework for challenging pay inequalities as it requires pay to be based on objective criteria such as skills, responsibilities and working conditions rather than gender. This provision has enabled strategic litigation to address systemic issues around pay gaps and highlight instances where women's work is often undervalued compared to equivalent roles traditionally performed by men. By enforcing equal pay principles, Article 157 supports a comprehensive approach to equality in the workplace and forces employers to review their pay structures and ensure that all employees receive fair pay.

The article has also played a role in cases before the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), which has used it in various judgments to strengthen the principle of equal pay. These cases have set important precedents, establishing that any difference in pay between men and women performing work of equal value constitutes discrimination unless it is objectively justified. The ECJ's interpretation of Article 157 has been instrumental in advancing the EU's commitment to gender equality, particularly in industries where historical gender gaps have led to persistent pay inequalities [102].

aa) Criteria for equal pay

Article 157 stipulates that the assessment of equal pay must not be limited to basic salary, but must also include all other employment-related benefits, including bonuses, promotions and incentives. This comprehensive approach aims to eliminate hidden inequalities within remuneration packages. For example, productivity bonuses in some companies are structured in a way that disproportionately favors men, as they are more likely to work longer hours due to their reduced family care responsibilities. By requiring a comprehensive assessment of all aspects of pay, Article 157 aims to eliminate these subtle forms of gender pay inequality and ensure that all employees receive equal pay for work of equal value [103].

bb) Strategic legal disputes on equal pay

Article 157 has served as the legal basis for numerous cases of strategic litigation. A notable example is the case of *Allonby v Accrington & Rossendale College*, in which the ECJ ruled that the difference in treatment between male and female lecturers was a breach of Article 157 as there was no objective justification for the unequal pay of the two groups. This case has had a significant impact on the interpretation of the concept of "work of equal value" by the European courts and has led to greater transparency in remuneration practices. The ruling emphasized that any unequal pay must be justified by legitimate and objective reasons, setting a precedent for challenging hidden biases that affect pay structures. Through cases such as *Allonby*, Article 157 has strengthened the EU's commitment to equal pay by holding employers to account for discriminatory pay practices and promoting fairer pay systems in Member States [104].

cc) Proactive measures and policies for EU Member States

Member States are obliged to take proactive measures to reduce the gender pay gap and promote equal pay. However, the actual implementation of Article 157 varies greatly across the EU.

(1) Examples of national best practice

France has enacted a law that requires companies with more than 50 employees to publish annual gender pay gap data and take corrective action if the gap exceeds a certain threshold. This requirement has increased transparency and provided a basis for strategic litigation aimed at eliminating gender pay gaps. Such proactive measures encourage companies to actively tackle pay gaps before legal challenges arise. Even in Iceland - which is not an EU member state but is often cited as a role model for progressive equal pay legislation - employers must obtain certification confirming equal pay practices. This approach has created a tangible framework to hold employers accountable and is an example that other EU member states could follow [105].

(2) Sanctions for violations

Member States are also encouraged to impose sanctions on companies that do not comply with the principles of equal pay. Spain, for example, has introduced significant fines for companies that fail to implement equal pay measures, creating a strong deterrent against pay discrimination. In this context, strategic litigation becomes a tool to not only enforce compliance, but also to set binding precedents that drive systemic change. By holding companies accountable and ensuring compliance with equal pay standards, these legal actions contribute to a culture in which equal pay is both a legal obligation and a corporate responsibility.

2) Obstacles and challenges in implementing the European legal framework

Despite the progress made by the European legal framework, there are still many obstacles to the full realization of women's rights in the workplace. These obstacles include cultural resistance, lack of awareness and difficulties in accessing justice.

a) Cultural resistance

Cultural norms and deep-rooted prejudices remain significant barriers, particularly in regions where traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched. In some EU countries, societal expectations regarding care and household responsibilities disproportionately affect women, limiting their career progression and access to leadership positions. This cultural resistance makes it difficult to implement policies to achieve equality in the workplace, as legislative measures alone may not be enough to change entrenched attitudes. For example, even with progressive laws, women are often indirectly discriminated against because stereotypes influence hiring and promotion decisions. This shows that in addition to legislative reforms, a comprehensive cultural change is also needed [106].

Hiring and promotion practices are often influenced by implicit biases that lead to discriminatory decisions. For example, men are often seen as more reliable or better suited to positions that require a strong presence in the company or the flexibility to travel extensively. This perception means that women have fewer opportunities to reach management positions despite having the same or better qualifications. Strategic litigation aims to address these biases by targeting cases where discriminatory hiring and promotion decisions are evident. For example, cases have been reported in EU countries where female applicants for management positions have been passed over because it was believed that family commitments would limit their involvement [107].

These biases are deeply rooted in societal expectations around gender roles, which shape workplace dynamics and influence how employers view candidates for leadership positions. Initiatives such as mandatory gender quotas or transparency in recruitment processes are often proposed as countermeasures, but are met with resistance in cultures where traditional views on gender persist. Overcoming these deep-rooted cultural and structural barriers requires not only the enforcement of laws, but also a gradual change in corporate culture supported by education and awareness-raising measures.

b) Lack of sensitization

The lack of awareness among employees and employers of their rights and obligations under EU law is also a significant obstacle. Many employees are unaware of the special protection afforded to them by provisions such as Article 157 and Directive 2006/54/EC, making it difficult for them to identify and challenge discriminatory practices. In addition, some employers, particularly small businesses, may be unaware of these requirements, leading to unintentional non-compliance. Raising awareness through targeted education programs, both in the workplace and through public campaigns, could help close this gap and empower individuals to stand up for their rights.

c) Challenges in access to justice

Access to justice remains a critical issue, especially for women in precarious employment. High legal costs, lengthy proceedings and fear of retaliation deter many from taking legal action against employers who violate equality laws. Many women are reluctant to report discrimination because they fear retaliation from employers, such as loss of employment or a delay in career advancement. This culture of silence, combined with concerns about possible personal consequences, is a significant obstacle to justice. Even in EU member states with favorable laws, the lack of strong protections against employer retaliation remains a challenge, limiting the effectiveness of these laws in practice [108].

Especially Strategic Litigation can also be very costly and time-consuming, which discourages many women from filing discrimination claims. High legal fees and the emotional toll that protracted litigation can take make legal action a daunting prospect [109].

3) Conclusions on the role of the European legal framework in strategic litigation

The European legal framework is a good basis for strategic litigation to promote women's rights in the workplace. Article 20 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Directive 2006/54/EC and Article 157 TFEU not only set out key principles of equality and fair treatment, but also provide a concrete basis for removing structural and cultural barriers that restrict women's rights.

Strategic litigation uses these tools to challenge discriminatory practices, promote equal pay and improve women's access to leadership roles and positions of responsibility. However, the success of strategic litigation depends on overcoming existing cultural and structural barriers and ensuring effective enforcement of the law. The commitment of European institutions, non-governmental organizations and social movements is essential to drive the changes necessary to make the rights enshrined in European legislation a tangible reality for all women. Only through persistent lobbying and enforcement can the framework evolve from a set of ideals to a practical protection that empowers women in different workplaces.

The European legal framework as it stands provides solid mechanisms to support strategic litigation efforts, but further efforts are needed to bridge the gap between legislation and lived reality. By raising awareness, improving access to justice and promoting a culture of equality, the EU and its Member States can continue to build on these fundamental principles and support meaningful progress towards gender equality in the workplace.

4) legal framework in Italy and Germany

The legal framework for promoting gender equality in Italy and Germany is based on constitutional articles, specific laws and measures designed to ensure women's access to the labor market and to leadership positions. The complexity of these regulations reflects the concerted efforts to eliminate deep-rooted gender inequalities within the socio-economic structures of both countries. In this context, strategic litigation has proven to be a crucial tool to ensure that these principles are not only anchored in theory, but also enforced in practice so that women can fully enjoy the rights enshrined in law.

In Italy, the constitution explicitly promotes gender equality in the workplace. Article 37 guarantees equal pay for equal work and prescribes conditions that enable women to fulfill both professional and family obligations. Italian labor law, including the Codice delle Pari Opportunità (Equal Opportunities Code), provides special protection against discrimination in the workplace. Nevertheless, the application of these principles often depends on strategic litigation to draw attention to and challenge discriminatory practices. Cases challenging pay disparities and bias in hiring have underscored the need for consistent enforcement to translate constitutional principles into daily reality in the workplace [111].

Gender equality is also enshrined in the German Basic Law. Article 3 expressly prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender and stipulates equal rights for men and women. The German Anti-Discrimination Act (AGG) further strengthens protection in the workplace by providing legal remedies against direct and indirect discrimination. In addition, measures such as the Act on the Promotion of Equality between Women and Men (FüPoG), which sets a quota for the representation of women on company boards, are an example of the proactive measures in Germany. However, the enforcement of these measures often depends on strategic litigation, as entrenched prejudices and structural barriers continue to restrict women's access to leadership positions. Strategic cases brought by advocacy groups have challenged systemic issues, pushed for accountability, and set precedents that promote compliance across industries [112].

a) Italy

aa) Article 37 of the Italian Constitution

Article 37 of the Italian Constitution enshrines the right of working women to fair pay that is commensurate with both the quality and quantity of the work performed. It also recognizes the importance of women's role in the family and stipulates that women's employment must be compatible with family responsibilities. This dual focus on equality in the workplace and compatibility with family underlines Italy's commitment to supporting women both as employees and as caregivers and to addressing the particular challenges they face in balancing work and home responsibilities.

Article 37 goes beyond simply affirming equal pay; it includes a broader vision of fairness in the workplace and ensures that women not only receive equal pay, but also the structural support they need to meet their family responsibilities. This provision has laid the foundation for numerous measures to create family-friendly workplaces, such as maternity leave, flexible working hours and childcare support. However, the practical application of these principles often requires active legal enforcement, as women continue to face pay gaps and working conditions that are not fully compatible with family responsibilities [113].

(1) Historical context and development of Article 37

Article 37 was introduced in post-war Italy as the country was redefining its social and political landscape. The 1948 Constitution was intended to create a more just and inclusive society and recognize women's rights at a historical moment when their role was rapidly changing.

The inclusion of Article 37 reflected the desire to overcome the traditional model that confined women to the role of housewife and mother. This article laid the foundations for the recognition of women as integral members of the workforce and granted them the same rights as men. With Article 37, the Italian Constitution recognized the social and economic contribution of women by establishing their right to an adequate salary and the reconciliation of work and family life. This was a progressive step, especially at a time when cultural norms and employment structures did not yet fully support women's participation in the labor market.

Originally, Article 37 represented an ambitious vision of gender equality, but its practical application developed gradually. The economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s led to an increasing demand for labor, which contributed to a steady rise in female labor force participation. Nevertheless, women continued to face systemic barriers, such as pay gaps and limited opportunities for advancement. Over the decades, Article 37 has been used through litigation and lobbying to challenge these inequalities and drive not only individual rights but also broader societal change. For example, discriminatory practices around maternity leave and pay gaps have been challenged in the courts to hold employers to account and enforce the constitutional obligation of gender equality [114].

(2) Application of Article 37 in strategic litigation

Article 37 has played a central role in numerous cases concerning equal pay and the recognition of the rights of working mothers.

In the Italian public administration, Article 37 has been invoked in several cases where female employees have reported pay differences compared to male colleagues performing equivalent work. The Constitutional Court has affirmed that any pay discrimination based on gender is contrary to the Constitution, setting an important precedent that has contributed to reducing the gender pay gap. This judicial recognition of equal pay has strengthened the mandate of Article 37 and set a legal standard that promotes transparency and fairness in pay practices across all sectors [115].

Another important use of Article 37 has been in cases concerning maternity protection. Article 37 has often been used to underpin the need for paid maternity leave and protective measures for working mothers and to emphasize the importance of reconciling work and family responsibilities. These protections are crucial in enabling women to participate fully in the labor market without sacrificing family responsibilities. For example, cases have highlighted the need for flexible working arrangements and job security during and after maternity leave, using Article 37 to reaffirm that mothers should not be penalized in their careers for family responsibilities. Strategic litigation in this area has not only protected individual rights, but has also stimulated wider policy reforms to promote family-friendly workplaces [116].

bb) Article 51 Cost.

(1) Standard purpose and gender quotas

Article 51 of the Italian Constitution states that all citizens, regardless of their gender, have the right to equal access to public office and elected positions. This article formed the legal basis for the introduction of gender quotas in Italy, which aim to promote the participation of women in leadership positions in politics and corporate management.

The principle of equal access to public office enshrined in Article 51 has been realized in Italy through measures to eliminate gender inequality in high-level positions. The introduction of gender quotas is a proactive approach to address structural inequalities that have limited the representation of women in leadership positions in the past. By stipulating a minimum proportion of women in politics and companies, quotas aim to achieve a more balanced distribution of power and promote diversity of perspectives in decision-making processes.

Legislative measures to implement gender quotas relate in particular to public and company boards. For example, Law 120/2011, the so-called "Golfo Mosca Law", stipulates that one third of the seats on the boards of listed companies must be held by women. This law was later extended to non-listed, state-controlled companies, which significantly increased the proportion of women in management positions [117].

(2) **The Golfo Mosca Law (2011)**

The Golfo Mosca Act of 2011 marks a turning point in promoting the participation of women on the boards of listed companies. This law stipulates that at least 30% of board members must be women and targets corporate governance as a key area for promoting gender balance. The introduction of this law came after years of highlighting the under-representation of women in leadership positions and the need for systemic solutions to counteract the male-dominated landscape in the Italian economy.

In addition to the legal requirements, the Golfo Mosca Act was complemented by initiatives aimed at preparing women for leadership roles through training, mentoring and networking opportunities. This support structure was intended to build a pipeline of qualified women who could enter leadership positions, addressing concerns about a potential shortage of experienced female candidates. Since its implementation, the Act has significantly increased the representation of women in corporate leadership and raised awareness of the benefits of diverse leadership [118] [119].

The gender quotas introduced by the Golfo Mosca Act have led to a significant increase in the representation of women on company boards, but have also sparked debate and criticism.

As a result of the Golfo Mosca law, the proportion of women on the boards of listed companies in Italy has risen from under 10% to over 35%. This increase has not only strengthened the presence of women in corporate governance, but has also promoted a change in corporate culture that has led to initiatives that prioritize diversity. The presence of women on boards is associated with a broader range of perspectives, which proponents believe improves board decision-making and fosters an inclusive environment. However, the extent of their influence has sometimes been constrained by the limited decision-making power within these roles, leading some to criticize the law as promoting tokenism rather than genuine inclusion [120].

Gender quotas have come under fire for potentially promoting symbolic representation over substantive influence. Critics argue that quotas can lead to the selection of women who do not have the qualifications usually required for these roles and are only appointed to fulfill numerical requirements rather than to make a meaningful contribution to governance. However, proponents of quotas claim that these measures remove structural barriers that have historically excluded women from leadership positions and that quotas are therefore essential to break the 'glass ceiling'. They argue that the notion of 'unqualified' female candidates is due to deep-rooted prejudices rather than a lack of talent in female candidates and that quotas can serve as a catalyst for wider systemic change [121].

Despite criticism, gender quotas have opened doors for women in sectors previously dominated by men, highlighting the policy's potential to promote cultural change. As Italy reflects on the future of gender quotas, continued reflection and adjustment can help ensure that these policies continue to promote not only numerical representation, but also the actual influence of women in corporate leadership and beyond.

b) Germany

aa) Article 3 of the German Basic Law (GG)

Article 3 of the German Basic Law enshrines the principle that all people are equal before the law and prohibits all forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on gender. This article is a cornerstone of human rights protection in Germany and forms the necessary legal framework for gender equality.

Article 3, particularly in sections (2) and (3), explicitly promotes gender equality. Section 2 states that "men and women shall have equal rights" and the state undertakes to actively promote the effective realization of gender equality, which provides a basis for proactive measures. Section 3 expands on this principle by prohibiting discrimination on various grounds, including gender. Together, these provisions emphasize the importance of equal treatment before the law and encourage initiatives to overcome existing gender gaps in the social, political and economic spheres [123].

Beyond its role in gender equality, Article 3 plays an important role in the protection of human rights more broadly and has stimulated legislative efforts aimed at achieving equality in many areas. The article has spurred legislative reforms that combat indirect discrimination and ensure equal opportunities not only for women but for all marginalized groups. This commitment to substantive equality is reflected in Germany's support for initiatives aimed at eliminating prejudice in the educational and professional environment and thus contributing to a more inclusive society as a whole.

By establishing a legal norm against discrimination, Article 3 of the German Basic Law plays an important role in Germany's ongoing efforts to ensure gender equality and protect human rights. Its application in strategic litigation underscores the importance of legal protections for marginalized communities and ensures that Germany's commitment to equality is continuously upheld [124].

(1) Development of Article 3 and the commitment to gender equality

Over the years, Article 3 of the Basic Law has evolved considerably, particularly due to progressive interpretations by the German Federal Constitutional Court. This court has recognized the need to actively promote equality, paving the way for a stronger commitment to gender equality in German legislation and policy.

The Federal Constitutional Court has established that Article 3 not only contains a ban on discrimination, but also a positive obligation on the state to actively promote gender equality. This interpretation has expanded the scope of Article 3 and positioned it as a basis for positive measures and programs to eliminate structural inequalities. For example, in its rulings, the court has supported measures aimed at eliminating gender imbalances, particularly in leadership positions, thus recognizing the need for proactive approaches to reduce entrenched prejudices in various areas [125].

One of the results of this interpretation was the introduction of initiatives such as FüPoG II (Second Act on the Equal Participation of Women and Men in Leadership Positions in the Private and Public Sector). FüPoG II was enacted to improve the gender balance in management positions and stipulates that large listed companies in Germany must appoint a minimum number of women to their management boards. [126].

Beyond the corporate sector, the state's commitment is evident in public sector hiring practices, education policies and broader societal initiatives that strive for equal representation. In accordance with Article 3, the German state continues to implement measures to eliminate gender disparities and ensure that the principle of equality is not merely symbolic, but is reflected in concrete, enforceable standards.

Article 3 has often been invoked in strategic litigation against gender discrimination in the workplace, education and public life. For example, it has served as the legal basis for lawsuits against gender pay gaps and discriminatory hiring practices. In particular, Article 3 supports the application of gender quotas in certain areas, including political representation and company boards. This interpretation is consistent with the German Federal Constitutional Court's view that gender equality may require positive action measures to counteract structural discrimination, thereby justifying targeted interventions under Article 3 [127].

(2) Cases of discrimination in recruitment

Several cases were brought forward by women who were excluded from recruitment procedures for traditionally male-dominated professions such as engineering and technology. The Federal Constitutional Court has ruled that a lack of representation of women in these fields may indicate indirect discrimination. In a notable case, the court recognized that persistent gender imbalances in hiring may be due to biased hiring practices and ordered companies to implement fairer hiring standards. This precedent has reinforced the importance of inclusive hiring practices and emphasized the need for companies to actively assess and eliminate discriminatory barriers [128].

These strategic cases, based on Article 3, have forced companies to rethink their recruitment practices and adopt more inclusive approaches. Many companies, particularly in male-dominated fields, have since adopted diversity-focused hiring policies to attract qualified female applicants. In addition, Article 3 has given claimants the opportunity to challenge not only overt discrimination, but also more subtle, structural biases that contribute to gender inequality. As a result, companies have increasingly introduced measures such as gender-specific job advertisements, unbiased selection procedures and inclusive workplace policies. Through the use of Article 3, strategic litigation has played a critical role in driving systemic change and forcing companies to embrace diversity as a core part of their organizational values [129].

The application of Article 3 in strategic litigation has triggered a domino effect that is impacting gender equality in Germany. As companies comply with court mandates to improve equality, these changes are gradually shaping workplace norms and setting industry-wide standards. This litigation strategy, based on constitutional principles of equality, has significantly advanced Germany's progress towards gender equality in sectors where women were previously excluded. The legal precedents set by Article 3 underscore the potential of strategic litigation to serve as a catalyst for structural reforms that promote a truly inclusive workforce.

bb) Remuneration Transparency Act (Entgelttransparenzgesetz)

The Pay Transparency Act, which came into force in 2017, aims to eliminate the gender pay gap by promoting greater transparency in pay practices. This legislation is an important step in Germany's commitment to reducing pay gaps and ensuring fair pay for all employees, regardless of gender.

The main aim of the Pay Transparency Act is to give employees, especially women, access to information about how their pay compares to that of their colleagues in similar positions. The law gives employees in companies with more than 200 employees the right to request information about the average salary of colleagues of the opposite sex who perform work of equal value. This measure is intended to enable individuals to identify and eliminate potential pay gaps within their company.

In addition, the law requires companies with more than 500 employees to conduct regular pay audits to assess equal pay between the sexes. While these audits are not mandatory for smaller companies, they encourage large employers to actively monitor and improve their pay structures. By making pay structures more accountable, the law aims to promote a culture of fairness and transparency in German workplaces [130].

The Pay Transparency Act has become the basis for several strategic lawsuits aimed at improving transparency and reducing gender pay gaps. The law's provision that employees have access to salary information has given women the ability to identify discrepancies and challenge unfair pay practices.

In numerous cases, women have used the law to request information about the salaries of their male colleagues and, after discovering inequalities, have sued their employers. These lawsuits have been instrumental in promoting a culture of transparency and have prompted companies to rethink and adapt their pay practices. For example, women in sectors with historically opaque pay structures have used these cases not only to demand individual compensation, but also to push for systemic change within their companies [131].

While these strategic lawsuits have created significant momentum in the demand for fair pay, the lack of harsh penalties for non-compliance has in some cases diminished the effectiveness of the law as a tool for widespread change. Without meaningful consequences, some companies remain unwilling to adopt transparent pay practices. This limitation has led to calls for additional legislative action to strengthen the law and support ongoing strategic litigation efforts for gender pay equity [132].

cc) FüPoG II (Second Act on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in Management Positions)

The *Leadership Positions Act II* (FüPoG II), which was introduced in 2021, represents the second phase of Germany's legislative efforts to promote gender equality in leadership positions.

The central provision of FüPoG II stipulates that listed companies with supervisory boards consisting of more than three members must have at least one female member. This legal requirement is a strategic step to ensure that female managers are not only present, but are also empowered to play a full part in important corporate decision-making processes. By introducing this quota, FüPoG II aims to break down structural barriers that have limited women's access to management positions in the past, thereby promoting a more balanced and inclusive business environment [133].

FüPoG II is part of Germany's broad-based strategy for gender equality, which aims to bring about a cultural change in corporate norms. The law reflects the realization that it is not enough to have women on management boards, but that they must also be able to meaningfully influence the direction and strategy of the company. In this way, FüPoG II supports long-term efforts to reshape the landscape of German corporate governance and create pathways for future generations of female leaders.

FüPoG II has served as a solid legal basis for several lawsuits aimed at enforcing compliance with the proportion of women in companies. This legislation has enabled gender equality organizations and advocacy groups to hold companies accountable, reinforce the need for true representation in corporate governance and advance gender parity in the German corporate landscape [135].

While FüPoG II represents a legal milestone, critics argue that a single mandatory seat on supervisory boards does not necessarily lead to significant influence or decision-making power for women. Some critics argue that without broader systemic changes, companies may view this quota as a formality rather than a true commitment to equality. Furthermore, the law's current focus on larger companies means that many mid-sized companies are not affected, leading to significant gaps in gender representation at executive levels across the economy [136].

5) Access to justice and the limits of Strategic Litigation

Although strategic litigation is an effective tool for promoting gender equality, access to justice remains a major challenge for many women in both Italy and Germany [139].

Pursuing legal action can be prohibitively expensive and many women are reluctant to take legal action because they fear retaliation such as job loss, career setbacks or social stigmatization. In Germany, the *Pay Transparency Act* has created a framework for bringing equal pay claims, but many women are still reluctant to take this route for fear of the potential impact on their careers [140]. Without robust protection against retaliation in the workplace, women seeking transparency in pay structures often face subtle or overt pressure from employers, which can prevent them from fully asserting their rights.

In Italy too, the fear of retaliation by employers and the often high legal costs associated with a lengthy process discourage many women from starting or pursuing strategic litigation. While the legal framework provides the opportunity to seek redress, the lack of financial support for individuals who wish to bring these cases underscores the need for accessible legal assistance and stronger protections against retaliation. These barriers limit the effectiveness of strategic litigation as a tool for systemic change and point to the need for reforms that reduce the financial burden and provide greater security for plaintiffs.

6) Conclusions on the Italian and German legal framework for gender equality

The Italian and German legal frameworks for promoting gender equality in the workplace combine constitutional principles with specific legislative measures to ensure equal opportunities for women. While both countries have implemented progressive policies, the realization of true equality requires continuous cultural and structural change

Even though both countries have created a legal framework to ensure equal treatment of women and men in the world of work, there are fundamental differences between the legislative approaches.

VI. Differences between Italian and German approaches to gender equality

1) Italy

Italy's approach focuses on the social protection of women and recognizes their dual role at work and in the family. Italian measures such as Articles 37 and 51 of the Constitution combine formal equality with targeted protection for working women to enable a balance between professional responsibilities and family commitments. The "quota rosa" (gender quotas) is an important tool to improve the representation of women in leadership positions. However, this focus on quotas and social protection illustrates Italy's broader goal: to mitigate the impact of traditional gender roles on women's careers while working towards equality in decision-making areas.

2) Germany: Emphasis on transparency and active leadership development

The German strategy focuses on pay transparency and the active promotion of female managers through legislation such as *FüPoG II*. This systematic approach combines pay transparency with concrete measures to ensure the representation of women in management positions and addresses gender equality from both a structural and cultural perspective. By mandating greater transparency and requiring a minimum percentage of women in leadership positions, Germany is attempting to create a more equitable workplace where gender is not a barrier to career advancement. This proactive promotion of gender equality reflects Germany's commitment to embedding equality in corporate structures and organizational practices and promoting the visibility and influence of women in decision-making positions.

Together, these approaches illustrate the nuanced strategies that both countries employ to address the complexities of gender equality, reflecting the unique cultural and social context of each country.

3) Common challenges and possible solutions

Both Italy and Germany face the same challenge when it comes to ensuring that the legal principles of gender equality become tangible for women in the workplace. These challenges include structural and cultural barriers as well as the need for stricter enforcement of existing regulations.

a) Structural obstacles to change

A major obstacle in both countries is the lack of adequate infrastructure to support work-life balance, which disproportionately affects women. In Italy, for example, limited access to affordable childcare facilities is a major obstacle for women who want to enter or remain in the workforce. This discrepancy often forces women to choose between career advancement and family responsibilities, perpetuating the gender imbalance in the labor market. In Germany, while social support systems are generally more stable, cultural expectations still often see women as the primary caregivers. This expectation can subtly limit women's career opportunities, especially in leadership positions where time pressures and cultural biases create additional hurdles.

b) Legal support and access to strategic litigation

Strategic litigation can be an effective tool for enforcing women's rights, but its success depends on access to legal services and financial resources. In both Italy and Germany, NGOs and trade unions play a crucial role in supporting women who want to take legal action against discrimination. These organizations provide women with important legal advice and, in many cases, financial support to help them challenge gender inequalities. However, improving access to strategic litigation requires greater international cooperation and increased funding to ensure that all women, regardless of their economic background, can demand justice and fair treatment in the workplace.

Addressing these challenges requires a combination of policy reform, infrastructural support and improved access to legal resources to pave the way for a workplace that truly embraces the principles of gender equality.

c) Legal framework and culture - solutions

The future of the framework conditions for gender equality in Italy and Germany will depend on the extent to which the two countries are able to overcome the existing challenges and adapt their policies to the changing needs of the workforce.

aa) Work-life balance policy

Significant improvements are still needed to promote work-life balance. In Italy, extended access to childcare services and the implementation of measures such as mandatory paternity leave would encourage men to share family responsibilities more actively, reducing the burden on women and increasing their participation in the workforce. In Germany, further strengthening measures to encourage the sharing of family responsibilities could reduce pressure on women and promote a more balanced working environment.

bb) Overcoming gender stereotypes:

Persistent gender stereotypes continue to hinder true equality. Both Italy and Germany would benefit from an increased commitment to educating employers and employees about the benefits of gender diversity. Awareness campaigns combined with tailored training programs for companies could promote a workplace culture that values inclusion and respects gender differences, paving the way to a more egalitarian workplace.

cc) Stricter sanctions for non-compliance

Stricter sanctions for companies that do not comply with their equality obligations are crucial. In Germany, the lack of strict consequences for non-compliance with the Pay Transparency Act has limited its effectiveness. By introducing stricter penalties, governments could create incentives for companies to comply and actively promote gender equality in order to translate the intention of the legislator into practice in the workplace.

These measures, combined with continuous monitoring and adaptation of the legal framework, could accelerate progress and ensure that gender equality is transformed from a legal mandate into a daily reality in both countries.

d) Conclusions

The legal frameworks in Italy and Germany to promote gender equality are complex and multi-layered and are shaped by the unique cultural, political and legal traditions of the two countries. While considerable progress has been made, much remains to be done to ensure that women have equal opportunities to participate in the workforce and assume leadership positions. The Italian approach combines social protection measures with positive measures, such as gender quotas, which have had a positive impact but need to be further refined to ensure meaningful and not just symbolic representation. Germany's focus on transparency and women's quota measures has laid the foundation for greater equality in positions of power and pay structures. However, fully realizing these goals will require stricter enforcement and a cultural shift to break down the remaining barriers that limit women's participation.

VI. Equal treatment in the workplace - the current situation

1) current situation

The current landscape of gender equality in the workplace is still characterized by persistent inequalities that hinder the full and equal participation of women compared to men [141]. These inequalities manifest themselves in various forms, including pay gaps, limited career advancement opportunities and particular challenges for working mothers.

Despite legislative measures to reduce this gap, such as the EU Equal Pay and Anti-Discrimination Directives, recent reports highlight that women continue to earn less than men on average in many sectors and that gender bias continues to influence recruitment and promotion practices [142]. For example, data shows that women are often relegated to lower-paid sectors or roles with fewer opportunities for advancement, perpetuating economic inequalities and limiting representation in leadership positions.

2) Gender pay gap (gender pay gap)

The gender pay gap remains one of the biggest challenges to achieving gender equality. It goes beyond social justice concerns and represents a significant economic loss, both for individual families and for the economy as a whole. Despite progress in legislation and public awareness, a significant pay gap persists in various sectors, reflecting structural inequalities that are deeply embedded in workplace and societal norms.

The gender pay gap (GPG) describes the difference in the average gross hourly earnings of women and men. There are two key measures of the GPG: the unadjusted and the adjusted gender pay gap.

The unadjusted GPG takes into account all pay differences between men and women, regardless of factors such as career choice, working hours, education or professional experience. This value therefore provides a comprehensive perspective on the unequal earning opportunities between the genders.

The adjusted GPG, on the other hand, takes into account differences that can be explained by individual characteristics such as professional experience, working hours and qualifications. This value is intended to measure the "pure" pay gap that is not caused by structural factors. The adjusted GPG thus shows the pay gap that exists even when all factors that normally influence earnings are controlled for [145].

a) Germany

In Germany, the unadjusted GPG amounted to around 19% in 2020. This means that, on average, women earn 19% less than men. Compared to 2010, when this was around 23%, an improvement can be seen. However, the adjusted GPG was around 6% in 2020, indicating that many of the pay gaps are due to structural factors, such as the unequal distribution of women and men in different sectors and occupational fields [143].

Political measures to reduce the GPG in Germany include the 2017 Pay Transparency Act, which obliges companies to make wages within companies more transparent. In addition, initiatives to promote women in management positions have been introduced in recent years, such as the women's quota in listed companies and companies with parity co-determination. This quota regulation is intended to ensure that at least 30% of supervisory board seats are filled by women [144].

b) Italy

In Italy, the unadjusted GPG in 2020 was around 5.5%, which appears relatively low in a European comparison. However, the adjusted GPG is around 10%, which indicates deeper structural inequality, particularly with regard to the professional status of women and their career opportunities [145].

Italy has introduced several policy measures to combat the GPG in recent years. Of particular note is the law to promote equal opportunities in the workplace (Legge 183/2014), which encourages companies to draw up and implement equality plans. Measures have also been taken to improve work-life balance, for example by introducing paternity leave and improving childcare facilities, which particularly benefits women, who often bear the main responsibility for the family [146].

c)Europe

The gender pay gap in Europe shows a wide range between the member states. On average, the unadjusted GPG in the EU amounted to 14.1% in 2020, with the adjusted GPGs being significantly lower in most countries [147].

In recent years, the EU has taken several political measures to reduce the gender pay gap. The EU's Gender Equality Strategy for the years 2020-2025 contains concrete targets to promote equal pay, including pay transparency and the promotion of flexible working time models. In addition, some countries such as Sweden and Iceland have promoted gender equality in the labor market through statutory quotas for company boards and the expansion of parental leave schemes. Countries such as Spain and Greece have launched special programs to promote women in management positions [148].

d) Worldwide

Globally, the gender pay gap varies considerably depending on the region and level of development of the respective countries. The unadjusted GPG was around 16% globally in 2020, although the adjusted GPG is significantly lower in many countries [149]. However, in some countries, especially in the Nordic countries, there is a remarkable convergence of wages between the genders, while in many developing countries the GPG is well above 20%.

Various political measures have been introduced worldwide to reduce the gender pay gap. In the Nordic countries, gender equality policies such as parental leave schemes, quota systems for companies and transparent wage reporting have largely been successfully implemented. In developing countries, laws to promote women's rights and protect labor rights are often in place, but the implementation and impact of these measures are still insufficient. In countries such as India and China, governments have introduced legislation to promote women's economic empowerment, but the gender pay gap largely persists due to traditional gender roles and unequal distribution of labor [150].

3) Goal of gender equality from the 2030 Agenda

The **2030 Agenda** for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by the United Nations in 2015, comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of these goals is **Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls**. This goal is crucial for promoting equal opportunities and combating discrimination on the basis of gender worldwide.

Goal 5 includes several specific targets and measures aimed at strengthening women's rights and promoting gender equality in various areas, including education, health, political participation and economic empowerment. A key sub-goal (5.1) is:

"To end all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere and in all areas of life."

Another important sub-goal (5.5) relates to promoting the **participation of women in management positions**:

"Striving for equal participation of women and men in decision-making in political, economic and public areas."

a) Measures in Germany to archive gender equality

In Germany, the government is pursuing several measures to promote **gender equality** in the labor market and reduce the gender pay gap. The most important political initiatives include

aa) Pay Transparency Act (2017)

This law is intended to encourage companies to make pay inequality transparent. Companies with more than 200 employees must publish an annual report on equal pay between men and women. The law aims to make pay differences between the sexes visible and serve as a basis for corrective measures.

bb) Women's quota for supervisory boards

Since 2016, there has been a statutory quota that obliges companies to fill at least 30% of supervisory board seats with women. This measure is intended to promote the participation of women in decision-making bodies and also lead to fairer remuneration in the long term.

cc) Promotion of part-time models and flexible working hours

Flexible working models are promoted to enable women to better reconcile work and family life. These measures help mothers in particular to avoid falling behind in their careers and contribute to reducing the gender pay gap.
Through these and similar measures, Germany aims to achieve a significant reduction in the gender pay gap by 2030 and further advance the goal of gender equality in accordance with the 2030 Agenda [151].

b) Italy

Italy has also taken several measures to promote gender equality in the workplace and reduce the gender pay gap.

aa) **Gender equality plans for companies**

Law 183/2014 requires companies to draw up equality plans that include concrete measures to reduce the gender pay gap and promote women in management positions. These plans should help to tackle the structural causes of the gender pay gap.

bb) Parental leave and paternity leave

In recent years, Italy has extended **paternity leave** and also made **parental leave** more flexible. These measures are intended to reduce the gender-specific division of labor in the family and enable women to better pursue their professional ambitions.

cc) Promoting women in management positions

The Italian government has introduced initiatives to increase the proportion of women in management positions. These include mentoring programs and networks designed to make it easier for women to gain access to management positions.

Italy has set itself the goal of further reducing the gender pay gap by 2030 by tackling structural imbalances in the labor market and strengthening the political and economic participation of women [152].

c)Europe

At European level, there is the **European Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025**, which aims to eliminate gender inequalities in all areas, particularly in the labor market. Some of the key initiatives to reduce the gender pay gap in Europe are:

aa) Pay transparency

The EU has adopted regulations on pay transparency that oblige companies to regularly analyze their wages by gender and to explain and eliminate any pay differences.

bb) Parental leave schemes and flexible working hours

Various EU member states have introduced flexible working time models and the promotion of **parental leave schemes** in order to reduce the gender pay gap. These measures are intended to help ensure that women are not disadvantaged when caring for their families.

cc) Quota regulations

Some European countries have introduced quota regulations to give women access to higher positions in companies and politics. This should also lead to fairer pay in the long term.

The EU has committed to reducing the gender pay gap in the member states by at least 5% by 2030 and to further promoting gender equality in all areas [153].

d) Worldwide

At a global level, the United Nations **2030 Agenda** aims to **end discrimination and promote equal opportunities**. Many countries, particularly in Northern and Western Europe, have progressive laws to promote gender equality in the labor market. In developing countries, however, implementation is often more difficult. Measures to reduce the gender pay gap worldwide include:

- **aa) Promoting the professional participation of women** through education and training programs.
- **bb) Legal regulations to protect women's rights** in the labor market.
- **cc) Creating better access to flexible working time models** to make it easier for women to combine family and career.

The **United Nations** and international organizations such as the **World Bank** support countries in the development and implementation of policies aimed at reducing the gender pay gap by 2030.

e) Conclusion

Reducing the gender pay gap by 2030 is a key goal of the **2030 Agenda** and is being driven forward by various political measures in Germany, Italy and Europe. These include legal regulations on pay transparency, quota regulations, flexible working models and the promotion of women in management positions. Through these measures, the countries are aiming to significantly reduce the gender pay gap and achieve gender equality in the labor market by 2030.

VII. Jurisdiction and standing in actions for equal pay and recruitment

Equal pay claims and fair hiring practices involve multiple levels of jurisdiction and multiple actors, as these issues lie at the intersection of national law, EU law and international human rights standards. This chapter examines how national courts, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and supranational regulations interact to ensure the enforcement of the principle of equal pay.

Cooperation between these judicial bodies is crucial when it comes to eliminating systemic inequalities and establishing solid precedents to guide future cases. National courts are usually the first instance to hear individual cases and interpret local and EU law. However, when complex issues of EU law are at stake, such as the interpretation of Article 157 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) on equal pay, national courts can ask the ECJ for preliminary rulings. These rulings are crucial to ensure uniform application across all member states and have been used to eliminate pay discrepancies and hiring biases that impact gender equality in the workplace [154] [155]

1) Which court has jurisdiction for actions for equal pay?

The national courts are the first port of call for people who wish to bring an equal pay claim. Which national court is responsible for dealing with such claims depends on the legal framework of the country in question and illustrates the unique judicial structures in Europe. These courts play an important role in effectively protecting the rights of employees, particularly women, who are affected by pay discrimination. In many countries, these cases are handled by specialized labor courts that have expertise in employment-related matters and simplify the judicial process for employees [154].

a) Jurisdiction of the national courts

In European countries, the judicial structures for dealing with equal pay claims are very different, partly due to the different legal traditions that shape employment law in each country.

aa) Italy

In Italy, equal pay cases are dealt with by the labor courts, which are part of the civil court system and have specific jurisdiction over labor law disputes. These courts are considered the most appropriate place to deal with issues of gender discrimination in the workplace, including equal pay claims. Cases usually start in the labor court and can proceed to the court of appeal and, if necessary, to the Court of Cassation. Italian labor courts are mandated to uphold the constitutional principles of equality and fair treatment, which serve as the cornerstone for equal pay claims [154].

bb) Germany

In Germany, equal pay claims are filed with the labor courts. Jurisdiction for labour law disputes is organized in a multi-level system, starting with the local labour courts, through the state labour courts, to the Federal Labour Court, which is the highest instance for labour law matters. German labor courts have developed extensive case law on equal pay, often relying on European directives and ECJ rulings to align national case law with European standards on gender equality in the workplace [155].

b) Jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU)

The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) plays a crucial role in ensuring that EU equal pay standards are respected and applied consistently across all Member States. Its role is fundamental in interpreting European law and ensuring that the principles enshrined in EU directives and treaties are fully implemented at national level. The ECJ's interpretations create binding precedents that influence national legislation and strengthen the framework for equal pay across the EU [155].

One of the most important mechanisms used by the ECJ in equal pay cases is the preliminary ruling procedure. This procedure allows national courts to request an interpretation of EU law that is relevant to an ongoing case in order to ensure uniform application in all Member States. In Allonby v Accrington & Rossendale College, for example, the Court interpreted Article 157 TFEU decisively and clarified how the principles of equal pay between men and women are to be applied [154].

The ECJ's rulings are also binding for all member states, which means that every decision of the Court of Justice must be respected and enforced at national level. These decisions can have a significant impact on national legislation and company policy. For example, in Defrenne v Sabena, the ECJ ruled that equal pay for men and women is a directly applicable right, setting an important precedent that strengthened the legal protection of female employees against pay discrimination [155].

aa) Defrenne v. Sabena:

This case was decisive for the further development of European case law on equal pay between men and women. In this case, the ECJ ruled that the right to equal pay for men and women is directly enforceable, i.e. it applies throughout the EU without the need for further national legislation. The Court's decision underlines that Article 157 TFEU - equal pay for equal work - is not just a directive, but a binding obligation for Member States and employers alike. This ruling prompted several EU countries to reassess and amend their labor laws to ensure stronger protection against gender discrimination and to enshrine gender equality as a core component of European labor policy [154].

bb) Danfoss

Another landmark ruling, the Danfoss case, strengthened the principle of transparency and fairness in pay structures. The ECJ ruled that in cases where pay structures are not transparent, employers must provide clear, objective justifications for the pay differentials found. If they fail to do so, discrimination is presumed. This effectively shifts the burden of proof to the employer, which is a significant step forward in assisting employees who suspect pay discrimination. By reducing the legal burden on employees, this case has empowered more employees to demand fair pay and forced companies to adopt transparent, non-discriminatory pay practices [155].

These cases are an example of how strategic litigation before the CJEU has gradually broken down barriers to equal pay and brought about legal reforms that both protect individual workers and bring about wider systemic change across the EU.

2) Access to justice

Access to justice for employees asserting equal pay claims often faces various economic, cultural and procedural barriers.

a) Legal costs and financial support

Legal costs can be prohibitively high and represent a significant obstacle for many employees. In Italy, free legal aid (Assistenza Legale Gratuita) is available for people who can prove that they do not have sufficient means to pursue a legal dispute. However, access to this benefit is not always easy and financial hardship often forces employees to give up their claims (Schmidt & Russo, 2023). In Germany, legal aid is an important tool that enables employees to take legal action without bearing the full burden of the costs of proceedings. However, access to this aid is restricted by strict eligibility criteria, meaning that only some employees who meet the requirements are able to claim it.

b) Fear of retaliation and job security

As mentioned above, fear of retaliation from employers is another major barrier to accessing justice. In workplaces with insecure job security, many women are reluctant to bring claims for fear of losing their jobs or other forms of reprisal. This concern highlights the important role of trade unions and NGOs in providing legal support and representation, encouraging more workers to stand up for their rights. These organizations help create a safer avenue for workers to assert their equal pay claims without facing the direct risks of employer retaliation [155].

VIII. Society and its institutional barriers - from the perspective of game theory

1) Game theory and the role of women in the world of work

Achieving gender equality is a multifaceted process that requires rethinking cultural beliefs and interpersonal dynamics as well as changing deeply entrenched formal and informal social institutions. Game theory provides a powerful framework for examining the interactions between individual and collective decisions that often lead to stable social "equilibria" that resist change and act as barriers to social progress. These barriers, perpetuated by mutually reinforcing choices and expectations, can impede the realization of equality despite legal and policy advances [189].

In game theory, the concept of equilibrium - where individuals make decisions based on the behavior expected of others - can help explain the persistence of gender norms. For example, when women are expected to take on primary caregiving roles, their careers often shift towards part-time or more flexible work, reinforcing societal expectations and stereotypes around gender and work. These roles are in turn lower paid and undervalued, perpetuating the cycle. To break this equilibrium, collective change is needed, where policy changes go hand in hand with cultural changes that redefine societal expectations of gender [190].

Traditional gender roles can also be viewed through the lens of coordination games, where members of society benefit from following established patterns of behavior. For example, companies may avoid hiring women for leadership positions on the assumption that they may prioritize family responsibilities, reinforcing a limited view of women's potential contribution in high-level positions. Even women faced with such expectations may opt for positions that conform to these norms, perpetuating a self-reinforcing pattern. Interventions such as equal parental leave or institutional support for work-life balance could break this pattern and enable more balanced choices that do not reinforce traditional roles [191].

Game theory suggests that incentives are essential to achieve changes in collective behavior. Policies that provide clear benefits to organizations that promote gender diversity - such as tax incentives or improved access to public contracts - can motivate companies to rethink their hiring and promotion practices. In addition, 'penalties' for non-compliance with gender equality standards, such as fines or public reporting requirements, could increase the pressure to break the balance that perpetuates gender inequality in the workplace [192].

Game theory also emphasizes the importance of long-term benefits, which often require initial sacrifices or changes in strategy. For society to achieve gender equality, individuals and organizations must recognize the benefits of inclusive practices, which include improved innovation, higher employee satisfaction and a more robust economy. Promoting collective action, whether through public awareness campaigns or collaborative industry initiatives, can help shift the perspective to these longer-term benefits and gradually foster an environment where equality becomes a stable and self-sustaining equilibrium [193].

By applying game theory, it becomes clear that gender equality is not just about changing policy, but also about reshaping the motivations and perceived benefits that uphold current social conventions. When society begins to prioritize equality as a shared goal with tangible benefits for all, it creates a foundation upon which more equitable norms can be built and maintained [194].

2) What are institutions?

Institutions are the framework and rules that determine social life, shape individual behavior and influence social norms. They can be divided into formal and informal institutions, each of which plays a crucial role in defining and reinforcing gender dynamics. Understanding how institutions work is critical to addressing gender inequalities, as both types of institutions create structured expectations that can either facilitate or hinder progress towards equality [195].

a) Formal institutions

These are officially sanctioned systems such as laws, policies and regulations that explicitly govern behavior and establish rights and obligations. Formal institutions include employment laws, anti-discrimination policies and organizational structures that set standards for employment, compensation and career advancement. For example, laws mandating equal pay and non-discriminatory hiring practices are formal institutions designed to promote equality in the workplace. However, if these institutions fail to effectively enforce or incentivize compliance, they can lose their transformative potential and become symbolic rather than practical tools for change [196].

aa) Equality laws

Equal pay laws and anti-discrimination measures are the best examples of formal institutions to promote gender equality. These laws create the legal basis for fair treatment in the workplace, including equal pay for work of equal value and the prohibition of gender discrimination in hiring. However, the impact of these laws depends on political will, effective enforcement and the extent to which organizations and society as a whole adopt and integrate these principles. Often inequalities exist not because of a lack of laws, but because of inadequate enforcement mechanisms and a lack of commitment to monitoring compliance [197].

bb) Corporate policies

Internal company policies are another category of formal institutions. These can cover areas such as promotion criteria, parental leave and pay transparency, all of which aim to promote a more inclusive working environment. While such measures may appear progressive on paper, they are often not implemented in practice. There remains a significant gap between policy and practice in many companies, with gender inequalities still prevalent due to inconsistent application. For example, parental leave policies could in theory support gender equality, but without cultural support and management buy-in, they may not lead to equal take-up by all genders [198].

b) Informal institutions

Informal institutions are the unwritten rules, cultural norms and social expectations that influence behavior. These include gender stereotypes, traditional family roles and social expectations regarding work and care. For example, the expectation that women should take primary responsibility for family care is an informal institution that has a direct impact on women's career choices and advancement. Informal institutions are deeply embedded in culture, so they cannot be changed even when formal laws mandate equality. Their influence is particularly strong because they shape individual aspirations and self-perception and often unconsciously limit women's perceived options in terms of career and leadership roles [199].

Gender stereotypes are one of the biggest obstacles to gender equality [156]. For example, societal expectations that see men as the main breadwinners and women as providers and housewives significantly shape career and family decisions. Such stereotypes often restrict women to lower-paid or part-time jobs in order to meet societal expectations, limiting their career options and reinforcing economic inequalities [200].

Informal institutions shape everyday decisions. For example, the social stigma associated with fathers taking parental leave discourages many men from actively participating in family responsibilities. This not only perpetuates the 'double burden' of women continuing to take on both work and domestic responsibilities, but also perpetuates gender inequality by limiting opportunities for shared care [201].

3) Interaction between formal and informal institutions

The interplay between formal and informal institutions is complex and can create either reinforcing or contradictory dynamics. For example, even with formal policies to promote equal parental leave, informal expectations may push women to take on more care responsibilities, perpetuating gender inequalities in career advancement. To make real progress, both formal and informal institutions must be reconciled - legal frameworks must be supported by cultural changes that normalize equal behavior between the sexes [202].

By recognizing and addressing the role that both formal and informal institutions play, policy makers and advocates can develop more holistic approaches to address structural barriers to gender equality. This alignment requires not only legal changes, but also sustained efforts to change cultural narratives and social expectations and create a societal framework in which men and women can thrive equally [203].

While formal institutions are critical to laying the foundations for equality, they must be actively supported by ongoing organizational and governmental commitment to ensure their effectiveness. In addition, creating a culture that emphasizes compliance, transparency and accountability is crucial for these laws and policies to make a real difference [204].

Informal institutions, consisting of unwritten norms, social conventions, cultural habits and shared values, play an important role in shaping behavior and are particularly resistant to change. These deeply ingrained beliefs, passed down through generations, often influence individual and collective actions in ways that reinforce traditional roles and hinder gender equality [157] [205].

4) Can institutions be changed?

Institutional change is indeed possible, although it often requires concerted, sustained effort over a long period of time. Institutions, especially entrenched ones, tend to resist change because they are built on established norms and values that shape social behavior and reinforce the status quo. However, institutions adapt when internal and external pressures become strong enough to overcome these inherent resistances [206].

a) Internal pressure

Change can often come from within an institution itself, with key stakeholders advocating for progressive adjustments. For example, employee-led corporate diversity initiatives or advocacy by women's groups in the workplace can gradually reshape corporate policies towards greater gender inclusion . This internal advocacy is particularly effective when it is aligned with institutional goals such as improving corporate social responsibility or meeting diversity targets [207].

b) External pressure

Social movements, legal frameworks and global norms are external forces that can drive institutional change. Laws promoting equal pay or regulating maternity and paternity leave serve as external pressures to which institutions must adapt. Social movements advocating for gender equality, for example, can also exert sustained public pressure that drives public and private institutions to adopt more equitable practices [208].

c) Long-term adjustment

Change in deeply rooted institutions is often slow. The norms and values on which they are based are usually internalized by the organization's employees. This is where sustained education, political reinforcement and even generational change come into play. For example, in Sweden and other Nordic countries, attitudes towards parental leave for fathers have changed as newer generations place a different emphasis on work-life balance, suggesting that even entrenched informal norms can change over time [158] [209].

Institutional change therefore requires not only changes in legislation or policy, but also a shift in cultural norms and expectations, an endeavor that can be driven by ongoing community engagement, inclusive education and strategic, well-supported advocacy from both internal and external stakeholders [210].

5) Legal changes and resistance

Public policies and legislative changes can act as powerful catalysts for change in formal institutions, but are often met with resistance, especially from established interest groups or traditional organizations.

Formal institutions often encounter resistance from interest groups that benefit from maintaining the status quo. For example, traditional organizations, which are often dominated by men, may resist measures to promote gender equality because they could disrupt established power structures. This resistance underscores the challenges that legislative change faces when attempting to alter long-standing institutional norms [159] [211].

Legal reforms that require pay transparency, enforce gender quotas or distribute parental leave more fairly are important measures that can contribute to institutional change. These reforms aim to make structural adjustments and make institutions more inclusive and equitable. However, the effectiveness of these reforms often depends on whether there are incentives for compliance and a robust monitoring system. Otherwise, reforms remain superficial and organizations formally adopt measures that in practice have limited impact on achieving true gender parity [212].

Legislative action can thus lay the foundation for institutional change, but the full impact of these changes often depends on a supportive infrastructure that promotes compliance, tracks progress and effectively sanctions violators [213].

6) Game theory for changing institutions

Game theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the strategic interactions between individuals and institutions and the ways in which these interactions can either maintain or change gender inequalities.

a) The Nash equilibrium

The so-called Nash equilibrium exists when neither person has an incentive to change their behavior in light of the behavior of others [160]. In the context of gender inequality, this equilibrium can mean that both men and women continue to adhere to traditional gender norms because they see no personal advantage in changing. For example, men may avoid taking parental leave because they fear career consequences, as few other men do. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which the cultural expectation that men prioritize work over family remains strong and social acceptance of shared care responsibilities remains limited.

This understanding helps to explain the resilience of gender norms: Individuals may choose not to challenge the status quo because of potential social or economic costs, even if change would be beneficial to the wider community. Breaking this balance often requires coordinated efforts, political incentives or changes in organizational culture to make alternatives - such as equal care responsibilities - socially and professionally viable.

b) Incentives to shift the Nash equilibrium

Game theory suggests that changing an unfavorable equilibrium that reinforces inequalities requires a reorganization of incentives.

aa) Incentives for parental leave

Shifting women's caring role to a more balanced model requires an adjustment of incentives for parental leave. The introduction of mandatory or subsidized leave for men can change society's perception of the father's role. This creates a new equilibrium in which fathers' involvement in childcare becomes the norm and encourages others to follow suit. Countries that have taken this approach, such as Sweden with its use-it-or-lose-it leave for fathers, have seen greater participation by fathers and a reduced burden on women in childcare [161].

bb) Rewards for companies

Companies can be motivated to promote gender equality through financial incentives [162]. For example, bonuses or tax breaks for companies that meet specific diversity benchmarks can incentivize more inclusive policies and promote cultural change within organizations. As more companies adopt these practices, a labor market equilibrium will emerge where promoting diversity becomes standard practice. This new norm is having an impact as companies that value gender balance attract a larger talent pool, improve their reputation and achieve long-term organizational benefits.

By targeting incentives to disrupt existing balances, policymakers and organizations can create an environment in which equal participation becomes a natural and expected choice, creating a self-perpetuating cycle towards greater equality.

c) Cultural change and evolutionary game theory

Evolutionary game theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how social norms can change over time.

If enough individuals adopt equitable behaviors - such as the active promotion of women to leadership positions or the use of parental leave by fathers - these behaviors can spread throughout society and eventually become the new norm. This dynamic is based on the principle that behaviors that benefit a growing number of people will naturally spread throughout the population and change collective expectations [163]. For example, as more and more fathers take parental leave and experience a stronger family bond, their actions set a standard that influences others and triggers a domino effect [164].

Seeing others benefit from new behaviors, such as fathers' greater involvement in family tasks leading to more satisfying family relationships, can trigger a positive reinforcement effect [165]. This effect encourages others to follow suit, further reinforcing the behavior as a social norm. As these positive examples accumulate over time, they can help to break down entrenched cultural balances and promote far-reaching change.

Evolutionary game theory suggests that even small changes in behavior, if positively reinforced, can lead to far-reaching cultural changes. These changes can redefine social norms and lead to a more balanced distribution of roles between the sexes and promote a culture of equality [166].

7) Strategic processes for implementing institutional change

Strategic processes can contribute to changing informal institutions by challenging existing norms and creating new social expectations. Several mechanisms play a role here:

a) Raising awareness and shifting discourse

Media campaigns, educational initiatives and social movements can be used to challenge gender-specific stereotypes and promote alternative role models [167].

b) Political and economic incentives

Legal measures such as quota regulations or tax incentives for equality policy measures in companies can bring about long-term changes in attitudes towards women in management positions [168].

c) Networks and role models

Women's advancement programs, mentoring initiatives and women's networks are helping to change informal structures by creating new social relationships and career opportunities [169].

d) Corporate culture and operational strategies

Companies that implement targeted diversity and equality measures can bring about a change in corporate culture that also changes informal norms in the long term [170].

e) Legal framework and institutional enforcement

The introduction of binding regulations, for example on wage transparency or family-friendly working models, can accelerate social change [167]

8) Conclusion

Society is characterized by formal and informal institutions that cannot be easily changed. Informal institutions in particular, which have become entrenched in society over decades, have a decisive influence on gender equality in the world of work. In order to change these, it is necessary to adjust the Nash equilibrium and implement new ways of thinking and behaving in society. The strategic process can be of enormous benefit here, as it aims to change thought patterns in society by involving the public. In addition to the creation of formal institutions such as laws etc., the strategic process can serve to ensure that the norms created are accepted and implemented in society.

IX. Can a company afford to guarantee equal rights for women?

Implementing gender equality measures is a complex challenge for companies, involving direct and indirect costs as well as organizational and cultural constraints. However, ensuring equality for women in the workplace is not only feasible, but can also bring significant economic and competitive benefits. This chapter explores this dynamic, focusing on employers' obligations during maternity and parental leave and how these practices affect overall organizational performance.

1) Maternity and parental leave: legislation and obligations

In many European countries, maternity leave is protected by national laws that allow women to take time off to care for their newborn without risking job loss. In Italy, for example, maternity leave offers women a five-month break from work during which they receive an allowance equal to 80% of their salary, paid by the Italian Social Security (INPS). This legislation not only protects the employee, but also imposes certain obligations on employers, such as keeping the employee in employment and ensuring equivalent working conditions on her return. Such protective measures help women to reconcile family and work, but require companies to adapt strategically in order to fulfill these obligations effectively.

Parental leave allows mothers and fathers to take time off to care for their children in their early years. The structure of parental leave varies greatly from country to country, but generally goes beyond maternity leave and provides additional time to meet the needs of the family. However, parental leave is often less well remunerated, which can cause financial hardship for many families and sometimes discourages them from taking it. Employers, meanwhile, need to consider how to deal with extended employee absences, which can involve additional costs for training replacements or temporarily redistributing workloads. Despite the potential logistical challenges, evidence suggests that supporting family leave policies has long-term benefits for company loyalty and employee satisfaction, which ultimately builds business resilience and reputation.

Providing fair and accessible maternity and parental leave is not only a legal obligation, but also a strategic opportunity [171]. Companies that effectively support these policies foster an inclusive work environment and are well positioned to attract and retain top talent. Compliance with these regulations helps to balance the scales in favor of gender equality, benefiting both the workforce and the company as a whole.

2) Economic impact of vacation policies on the company structure

a) Direct costs

There are clear direct costs associated with granting maternity and parental leave rights, which have a particular impact on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which may have a smaller budget and less staff flexibility. In countries such as Italy, although the INPS covers a significant part of maternity pay, companies still bear certain operational costs related to the temporary replacement of employees. This may include hiring temporary staff, compensating other employees for overtime for vacated positions or reallocating tasks to other team members, which may require additional training costs. These immediate costs are sometimes manageable for larger companies, but can be a significant burden for SMEs whose financial and human resources are more limited [172].

b)Indirect costs:

The indirect costs associated with employee leave are often less visible, but can also affect a company's overall productivity. When an experienced employee goes on leave, the company may experience a temporary drop in productivity while it adjusts to the absence. The time and resources invested in integrating temporary replacements or reassigning tasks increases the indirect burden, especially for smaller organizations where each team member plays a pivotal role in the day-to-day operations. The need to restructure to maintain productivity can challenge continuity and sometimes lead to delays or lower customer satisfaction, factors that can indirectly impact sales and the company's reputation.

By proactively supporting family leave policies, companies can mitigate these impacts through strategic workforce planning and fostering a culture of resilience and inclusivity. In the long run, companies that emphasize fair leave practices build stronger teams and often benefit from improved employee retention and brand image, ultimately offsetting the initial costs [172].

3) Organizational challenges and the risk of discrimination

The financial and operational burden associated with maternity leave can sometimes lead employers to view women of childbearing age as a 'risk' to the company. This perception can unfortunately lead to discriminatory practices where women are passed over in recruitment or promotion processes to avoid potential future absences [173]. Such prejudice is not only illegal, but also damages the company's reputation and limits its talent pool. Discrimination based on potential maternity leave undermines the benefits of diversity and stunts a company's growth by potentially excluding capable and innovative talent.

Government support is essential so that companies can implement gender equality without major financial burdens. Government intervention can help companies absorb the cost of gender equality measures, reducing the risk that employers see women as a 'cost' rather than a valuable investment.

Parental and maternity leave allowances are crucial when it comes to offsetting the costs associated with keeping workers on leave. In several EU countries, governments fully cover the cost of maternity leave, which reduces the financial burden on companies and encourages the recruitment of women without economic concerns [174]. This support allows companies to offer equal opportunities without jeopardizing their budgets.

Furthermore, Tax incentives are among the most effective tools to encourage companies to adopt inclusive policies. For example, when companies that hire women of childbearing age or offer shared parental leave options receive a reduction in social security contributions, this helps offset the associated costs and encourages inclusive hiring and retention practices. Such incentives not only help companies manage the financial aspects of gender equality policies, but also reinforce a culture of inclusion.

Governments can also support companies directly to ensure business continuity during parental leave. Training temporary workers is one of the more costly aspects of maternity leave for businesses. Some governments offer funded training programs for replacement workers to reduce the financial burden on businesses while ensuring consistent productivity. By subsidizing the training of temporary staff, these programs help companies maintain high service and operational standards without incurring excessive costs.

Industry associations can serve as invaluable resources for companies facing the challenges of maternity leave. They provide tools, guidelines and support for effectively managing employee absences. By utilizing these networks, companies gain access to shared knowledge and best practices that ease the transition during maternity leave and help them maintain stability and a cohesive work environment [175].

4) Company childcare: a solution for the future?

Childcare is one of the biggest challenges for working mothers, and the availability of childcare facilities can often determine whether they keep or leave their jobs. Companies that commit to providing childcare solutions are investing directly in women's participation in the workforce and employee retention.

The provision of on-site childcare facilities offers numerous benefits for both employees and the company. An in-house childcare facility significantly reduces stress for working parents and increases their mental well-being and productivity [176]. Employees can concentrate better on their daily childcare and are more motivated, which benefits the company's overall performance. Companies that offer family-friendly benefits such as childcare generally experience lower staff turnover [176]. Women who are supported during and after maternity leave are more likely to stay with the company, retain their skills and expertise and reduce the recruitment and training costs associated with new hires.

Introducing childcare solutions for businesses can be a challenge, particularly due to the high set-up and running costs. However, innovative solutions and government support can help overcome these obstacles.

Setting up an on-site childcare facility involves significant investment, including adapting the premises, ensuring a child-safe environment and hiring qualified childcare staff. For smaller businesses, these expenses can be prohibitive. To reduce costs, some companies have explored cross-company partnerships and set up shared childcare facilities for neighboring companies [177].

In addition to the initial costs of setting up childcare facilities, there are also ongoing operating costs, such as staff salaries, maintenance and day-to-day operational needs. To manage these, some companies have adopted hybrid solutions, using existing facilities with government subsidies or partnering with private childcare providers that offer both high quality care and manageable costs.

5) Economic benefits of gender equality

Ensuring equal rights for women in companies can significantly improve the organization's performance in various areas.

Gender diversity is widely recognized as a driver of creativity and innovation. Companies that embrace diversity in their teams are better able to understand the needs of a diverse customer base, develop products and services that meet different market demands, and address challenges from a broader perspective. This diversity fosters the creation of more adaptable and resilient teams that are better prepared to respond effectively to market fluctuations and industry challenges [180].

Implementing equality measures improves a company's reputation and its ability to attract talent. Younger generations in particular are attracted to employers that uphold values such as fairness and inclusivity. This improved reputation often extends to consumer perception, as many customers prefer companies that demonstrate a tangible commitment to social responsibility [181].

Gender equality measures such as shared parental leave, childcare support and career development for women help to reduce staff turnover. Retaining employees reduces recruitment and training costs and enables companies to retain expertise and knowledge in their teams. Research shows that companies with well-implemented gender equality policies have significantly higher employee retention rates, especially among women, which contributes to organizational stability and reduces operating costs [182].

Numerous international studies show that companies in which more women are represented in management positions often achieve better financial results than companies that include fewer women. Women in key positions diversify leadership, improve decision-making processes and strengthen the company's ability to tackle complex challenges [183]. These positive impacts result from the unique perspectives and innovative approaches that women leaders bring to corporate leadership.

6) The role of public policy and private partnerships

An effective gender equality policy requires an active commitment not only from companies, but also from government agencies and public institutions.

Tax incentives and public subsidies can significantly offset the costs associated with implementing gender equality measures [184]. For example, reductions in social security contributions for companies that set up in-house childcare facilities or mentoring programs for women can facilitate these practices, promote broad acceptance and improve equality in the workplace. Collaboration between the public and private sectors is critical to overcoming economic and structural barriers to gender equality. Joint initiatives between government, non-profit organizations and businesses can promote professional development for women, develop programs to support childcare and offer resources for managing family responsibilities. Such partnerships spread the responsibility for gender equality measures across different actors, increasing their sustainability and reach [185].

7) Conclusions: Gender equality as a competitive advantage

Ensuring gender equality in the workplace is not only an ethical imperative, but also an effective strategy for growth and long-term sustainability. Gender equality measures should be seen as an investment, not a cost, that pays off in terms of productivity, innovation, reputation and well-being of the company.

Companies that actively promote gender equality are better equipped to meet the demands of the global marketplace. Gender diversity promotes resilience by creating a more adaptable, inclusive and sustainable work environment. The ability to attract and retain skilled talent, increase productivity and drive effective innovation makes inclusive companies more competitive in the marketplace [186].

A workplace culture that promotes gender equality creates an environment where all employees, regardless of gender, have an equal opportunity to succeed. This inclusive culture not only increases employee satisfaction, but also fosters collaboration and a sense of belonging, which is reflected in the quality of work and internal relationships [187].

The role of government and public institutions is crucial when it comes to laying the foundation for effective gender equality. Incentives, financial support and awareness-raising measures can help companies to implement structural changes and promote a fairer and more inclusive labor market [188]. Only through collaboration between the public and private sectors can true gender equality be achieved, ensuring that companies can afford to implement inclusive policies without negative financial repercussions.

X. Strategic Litigation for women's rights at the workplace?

Strategic litigation has proven to be an effective tool for creating or changing law in recent decades. The strategic involvement of the public in a process that is "private" according to most codes of civil procedure is able to exert enormous pressure on legislators and politicians. However, the goal of bringing about legislative reform can only be achieved if the focus of the process is no longer on the plaintiff, but on society and the creation of a new legal basis. This is probably one of the most significant differences to "normal" civil proceedings, in which the sole aim is to enforce the plaintiff's claim. However, the plaintiffs who opt for a strategic lawsuit usually have an intense ordeal behind them or are fighting for change out of conviction and are prepared to accept a possible defeat. This is why these processes are used in areas such as environmental law, asylum and human rights. Those involved are concerned with social change and not just with enforcing their own rights. There are also differences between the parties involved and "normal" civil proceedings. The plaintiffs are usually backed by third parties such as NGOs, which are involved in public relations work and the finalization of the case. The extent to which they are allowed to participate in the civil proceedings depends on the respective national code of civil procedure. In any case, the participants in a strategic process have one thing in common: they are fighting for change. But what if there is already a good and effective legal framework but injustice still prevails? In the area of equal treatment of women in working life, the gender pay gap is significant and shows that we are still a long way from effective equal treatment. However, this is not because women are not legally protected at European or national level. The European and national legal framework provides for unrestricted equal treatment of women and men. Nevertheless, women still earn less, receive fewer promotions and have far fewer chances of professional success after re-entering the workforce than their male colleagues. The background to this discrimination is the informal institutions that have taken root in society over decades. Women are seen by society as the main providers for the family, men as the main breadwinners who are responsible for providing financially for the family. This way of thinking is also reflected in companies and leads to the fact that entrepreneurs tend to favor men when hiring for higher positions and awarding salary increases. However, it would be wrong to blame entrepreneurs. The fact that society takes it for granted that women, as soon as they have a child, are responsible for the household as well as for raising and caring for the children alongside their job, makes it far more difficult for women to combine work and family life. If a child falls ill, the mother is usually contacted by the school, nursery and puts work on hold. In order to achieve equal treatment of women and men, there would have to be more state incentives and safeguards. However, it is doubtful whether state support alone can lead to equal treatment. Effective equal treatment requires a change in institutional structures. The mindset of society must change fundamentally in order to eliminate unequal treatment in the long term. Strategic processes can be used for this purpose, as they aim to confront the public with problematic issues and exert pressure on politicians. As the aim is to change society's way of thinking, equal pay processes can be helpful in creating and consolidating new patterns of thought in society. The right of fathers to take parental leave can only lead to equal treatment of women and men if fathers make use of it. A right is only effective if it is applied. The application of strategic processes can help to create a new equilibrium and thus more equal treatment of women and men in working life.

XI. Conclusions

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