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Gender Gaps in Civic Empowerment across Europe: Evidence from the European Social Survey

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates how visual and performing arts contribute to creative industries and regional economic development by examining employment, value added, compensation, income, and economic resilience. The paper develops an empirical, state-level panel framework using official economic, labor, and demographic indicators across 51 United States jurisdictions over a 23-year period. Methodologically, we estimate fixed-effects regression models with clustered standard errors to test the relationship between arts-sector intensity and macro-development outcomes, including real Gross Domestic Product per capita, short-run growth, and unemployment rates. The empirical findings demonstrate that arts employment share is positively and statistically significantly associated with real output per capita ($\beta = 0.0343$, $p\text{-value} = 0.015$), even after controlling for population scale, personal income, financial sector concentration, time-invariant state heterogeneity, and common period shocks. While the association with short-run annual output growth is less pronounced, the labor model indicates a directionally favorable relationship with unemployment reduction ($\beta = -0.3458$, $p\text{-value} = 0.052$). Robustness tests further reveal that jurisdictions with higher creative-economy concentration exhibit lower average growth volatility, supporting the role of cultural ecosystems in fostering long-term economic resilience. Ultimately, the study contributes a reproducible panel framework showing that visual and performing arts function as vital economic infrastructure, and that their development contributions are maximized when integrated with broader labor, education, tourism, and inclusive policy systems.

Keywords: gender; social inclusion; civic empowerment; political efficacy; social trust; European Social Survey.

I. INTRODUCTION

Researchers often evaluate gender equality through legal rights, educational attainment, labor-market participation, and descriptive representation. These indicators are indispensable, yet they do not fully capture whether people feel socially included or capable of influencing public life. Two individuals may participate in the same number of civic activities while differing sharply in their confidence, perceived competence, access to decision-makers, and belief that political institutions respond to ordinary citizens. A comprehensive analysis must therefore distinguish visible behavior from the less visible capacity to exercise voice.

Social inclusion and civic empowerment are related but analytically distinct. Social inclusion concerns the quality of relationships linking individuals to other people and to the wider community. It is reflected in generalized trust, expectations of fairness and helpfulness, opportunities for social contact, and the perception that one's social life is neither isolated nor marginal. Civic empowerment concerns the capacity to understand public affairs, take an active role, communicate preferences, and expect institutions to respond. Civic action, in turn, reflects these capacities through contacting officials, working for organizations, signing petitions, demonstrating, boycotting, displaying campaign symbols, or participating online.

Treating these dimensions as interchangeable can conceal important gendered patterns. Women may vote or participate in selected civic activities at rates comparable to men while continuing to report lower political confidence or a weaker sense that they can influence governmental decisions. Conversely, equal average trust

does not establish equal access to civic resources, networks, or institutional recognition. Gendered inequalities may therefore persist in the psychological and institutional foundations of participation even where behavioral gaps appear small.

Cross-national comparison is necessary because civic opportunities are embedded in national contexts. Political institutions differ in responsiveness, participation channels, welfare provision, gender norms, and public trust. Consequently, the same individual characteristics may have different implications across societies. A model that ignores this nesting risks attributing contextual variation to individuals, while a model that reports only national averages may overlook within-country inequalities. The present study addresses both levels by combining survey-weighted individual analysis with country-aware estimation and country-specific gender gaps.

The research uses the European Social Survey, a large harmonized probability survey with extensive measures of trust, social contact, discrimination, political efficacy, civic action, socioeconomic resources, and well-being. The dataset provides a suitable basis for examining whether gender differences are concentrated in social inclusion, perceived empowerment, behavioral action, or some combination of these outcomes. It also permits assessment of whether education, income, health, minority position, and discrimination help explain these differences.

The central argument is that civic equality should not be inferred from participation counts alone. Participation may reflect confidence and opportunity, but it may also stem from grievance, exclusion, or perceived injustice. People who experience discrimination may engage politically precisely because they seek redress, even as they report low trust or unequal access. Accordingly, the study analyses social trust, connectedness, empowerment, and civic action separately before examining their relationships.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Evidence on ethnoracial diversity and trust cautions against treating heterogeneity as a uniform cause of declining cohesion; observed associations depend on scale, composition, and comparison groups [1]. Comparative European research also shows that gendered voting and party preferences are embedded in national contexts rather than reducible to individual characteristics [2]. Electoral-system design can condition the size and form of gender participation gaps by altering incentives and opportunities [3]. Related evidence indicates that quota arrangements can narrow participation inequalities when representation improves the visibility and accessibility of political institutions [4].

Participatory spillovers from women's representation depend on how long women serve and how successful they are perceived to be, not merely on their presence in office [5]. Unequal attendance in political discussion groups can restrict access to information, practice, and network reinforcement [6]. Digital settings have moved toward gender parity in some political activities, although behavioral parity does not guarantee equal voice or influence [7]. Meta-analytic evidence likewise finds a positive but heterogeneous association between social-media use and civic or political participation [8].

Long-term synthesis of digital-media research indicates that online communication generally supports participation, while effect sizes vary across platforms, populations, and research designs [9]. Research focused on young people reaches a similar conclusion but emphasizes unequal access and use [10]. Institutional rules also matter: compulsory voting may reduce the resource burden of turnout and narrow the gap in women's electoral participation [11]. Cross-national analysis further attributes part of the turnout gap to cultural orientations and gendered socialization [12].

Descriptive representation may shape political knowledge and perceived relevance through prolonged exposure to women in public office [13]. Reviews of ethnic diversity and social trust show that conclusions depend strongly on geographic scale, measurement strategy, and institutional context [14]. Micro-contextual analysis suggests that immediate local exposure often matters more for generalized trust than broad national diversity [15]. Political-ambition research, meanwhile, identifies recruitment, self-evaluation, perceived qualification, and confidence as mechanisms operating before formal candidacy [16].

Political-interest gaps can accumulate across the lifespan through continuing socialization rather than reflecting only momentary attitudes [17]. Among politically engaged young Europeans, gender differences vary in both direction and magnitude according to activity type and national setting [18]. Political consumerism demonstrates that conventional gaps may reverse in domains where identity expression and everyday choices acquire political meaning [19]. Experimental evidence further shows that discriminatory media treatment can reduce willingness to pursue political influence [20].

Comparative turnout research questions the assumption that the gender gap has disappeared, documenting variation across generations, elections, and countries [21]. Neighbourhood studies show that wider segregation conditions the association between local diversity and social capital [22]. Education consistently strengthens civic skills, political knowledge, and engagement and should therefore be treated as a substantive resource [23]. Life-course evidence across European societies additionally shows that gendered engagement changes through education, employment, family responsibilities, and aging [24].

Constructive intergroup contact can reduce perceived threat and help protect trust under conditions of neighborhood diversity [25]. Meta-analytic research links perceived discrimination to cumulative psychological harm, indicating that exclusion can affect civic capacity beyond participation itself [26]. Studies of London neighborhoods similarly show that local diversity and wider segregation jointly shape cohesion [27]. Broader taxonomies of citizen participation confirm that political action extends beyond voting and party work, requiring outcome-specific analysis [28].

Political trust is best understood as an evaluation of institutional procedures and performance rather than as a stable personal trait [29]. Reviews of diversity and social cohesion likewise reject universal effects and emphasize contextual and measurement dependence [30]. Conceptual mapping of participation distinguishes acts by target, mode, voluntariness, and political purpose, making a single behavioral indicator inadequate [31]. Finally, self-confidence contributes to gender differences in political interest, attention, knowledge, and efficacy [32]. Together, this alphabetically organized evidence supports separate analysis of social inclusion, civic empowerment, and civic action within country-aware models.

Table 1 presents all reviewed studies. The first column reports the author name(s), publication year, and matching numerical citation, while the remaining columns summarize the primary focus, design, and principal implication. This alignment provides direct traceability among the narrative review, comparison table, and final reference list.

Table 1. Analytical comparison of prior research on gender, inclusion, and civic engagement.

Study	Primary focus	Level/design	Main implication
Abascal & Baldassarri (2015) [1]	Ethnoracial diversity and trust	Reanalysis of observational survey evidence	Diversity effects vary by scale, composition, and comparison group.
Abendschön & Steinmetz (2014) [2]	Gender differences in voting and party preferences	Comparative European survey analysis	Gendered political preferences are embedded in national political contexts.
Beauregard (2014) [3]	Gender, political participation, and electoral systems	Cross-national comparative survey	Electoral institutions condition the size and form of gender participation gaps.
Beauregard (2017) [4]	Gender quotas and participation gaps	Cross-national within- and between-country analysis	Institutional opportunity structures affect women's political participation.
Beauregard (2018) [5]	Women's representation and participation gaps	Cross-national comparative study	The duration and success of representation matter for participatory spillovers.
Beauvais (2020) [6]	Gender gap in political discussion-group attendance	Quantitative comparative study	Unequal discussion participation restricts information, practice, and network reinforcement.

Study	Primary focus	Level/design	Main implication
Bode (2017) [7]	Gender parity in political engagement on social media	Comparative digital-engagement study	Online behavioral parity can coexist with unequal influence and voice.
Boulianne (2015) [8]	Social-media use and civic or political participation	Meta-analysis	Digital-media use is positively but heterogeneously associated with participation.
Boulianne (2020) [9]	Long-term digital-media effects on civic participation	Meta-analysis of two decades of research	Digital communication generally supports participation, but effects differ across settings.
Boulianne & Theocharis (2020) [10]	Young people, digital media, and engagement	Meta-analysis	Digital media are positively associated with youth engagement, although access is unequal.
Córdova & Rangel (2017) [11]	Compulsory voting and women's electoral engagement	Cross-national institutional comparison	Compulsory voting can narrow gender gaps by reducing the costs of participation.
Dassonneville & Kostelka (2021) [12]	Cultural sources of the gender gap in voter turnout	Cross-national comparative analysis	Cultural orientations and gendered socialization help explain turnout differences.
Dassonneville & McAllister (2018) [13]	Gender, political knowledge, and descriptive representation	Cross-national comparative analysis	Long-term exposure to women in office can shape political knowledge and relevance.
Dinesen et al. (2020) [14]	Ethnic diversity and social trust	Narrative and meta-analytical review	Findings depend strongly on geographic scale, measurement, and institutional context.
Dinesen & Sønderskov (2015) [15]	Ethnic diversity and generalized trust in micro-contexts	Micro-context multilevel analysis	Immediate local exposure is more relevant to trust than broad national diversity.
Fox & Lawless (2014) [16]	Origins of the gender gap in political ambition	Individual-level survey study	Recruitment, self-evaluation, and confidence shape ambition before candidacy.
Fraile & Sánchez-Vítores (2020) [17]	Gender gap in political interest over the life span	Panel analysis	Political-interest differences can accumulate through long-term socialization.

Study	Primary focus	Level/design	Main implication
Grasso & Smith (2022) [18]	Gender inequalities among politically engaged young Europeans	Cross-national European analysis	The direction and size of gender gaps vary by activity type and national context.
Gundelach & Kalte (2021) [19]	Reversed gender gap in political consumerism	Mediation analysis	Personality traits partly explain women's stronger engagement in political consumerism.
Haraldsson (2022) [20]	Media discrimination and political ambition	Laboratory experiment	Gendered media treatment can reduce willingness to pursue political influence.
Kostelka et al. (2019) [21]	The gender gap in voter turnout	Comparative electoral analysis	Turnout gaps vary across generations, elections, and national settings.
Laurence (2017) [22]	Segregation, neighborhood diversity, and social capital	Multilevel study in Great Britain and London	Wider segregation conditions the relationship between local diversity and trust.
Le & Nguyen (2021) [23]	Education and political engagement	Econometric empirical study	Education strengthens civic skills, political knowledge, and engagement.
Quaranta & Dotti Sani (2018) [24]	Gender gaps in political engagement across the life course	Cross-national analysis of 27 European countries	Gender differences change and accumulate across education, work, family, and aging.
Schmid et al. (2014) [25]	Neighborhood diversity, contact, threat, and trust	Neighborhood-level empirical study	Intergroup contact can reduce perceived threat and protect social trust.
Schmitt et al. (2014) [26]	Perceived discrimination and psychological well-being	Meta-analysis	Discrimination has cumulative adverse consequences beyond participation outcomes.
Sturgis et al. (2014) [27]	Diversity, segregation, and neighborhood cohesion	Multilevel neighborhood study	Local diversity and wider segregation jointly shape social cohesion.
Theocharis & van Deth (2018) [28]	Expansion and taxonomy of citizen participation	Conceptual and comparative study	Citizen repertoires extend beyond voting and party activity, requiring outcome-specific analysis.
van der Meer & Hakhverdian (2017) [29]	Political trust as evaluation of process and performance	Cross-national study of 42 European countries	Citizens distinguish institutional procedures from policy performance when forming trust.

Study	Primary focus	Level/design	Main implication
van der Meer & Tolsma (2014) [30]	Ethnic diversity and social cohesion	Narrative review	The effects of diversity on trust and cohesion depend on context and measurement.
van Deth (2014) [31]	Conceptual mapping of political participation	Conceptual and typological study	Political participation is multidimensional and should not be reduced to one indicator.
Wolak (2020) [32]	Self-confidence and gender gaps in political engagement	Individual-level survey analysis	Self-confidence contributes to differences in interest, attention, knowledge, and efficacy.

III. RESEARCH GAP, CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

1. RESEARCH GAP

Four gaps remain. First, many studies examine turnout, political interest, or a single mode of participation without testing whether the same gender pattern appears in trust, social connectedness, efficacy, and civic action. Second, researchers often treat perceived discrimination only as an adverse outcome, even though it may also be linked to grievance-based mobilization. Third, studies comparing countries do not always distinguish within-country gender differences from between-country differences in overall empowerment. Fourth, researchers sometimes interpret equal rates of action as equality even when confidence, competence, and perceived responsiveness remain unequal.

The present study addresses these gaps through four separate outcomes, survey weights, country-fixed effects, country-clustered uncertainty, random-intercept and random-slope multilevel modeling, country-specific estimates, and count-model sensitivity analysis. This approach allows us to identify whether gendered inequality is primarily relational, subjective, behavioral, or contextual.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The conceptual framework proposes that gendered social position and unequal exposure to discrimination operate alongside socioeconomic resources. Social inclusion, represented by generalized trust and connectedness, provides relational support for civic empowerment. Empowerment then represents the perceived capacity to understand, influence, and be heard within politics. Civic action is the behavioral endpoint, but it can arise from both empowerment and grievance. National context shapes the average level of each outcome and may moderate gendered associations.

On this basis,

- H1 predicts that women will report lower civic empowerment than men after adjustment for resources and context.
- H2 predicts that discrimination and minority position will be associated with lower social inclusion and empowerment.
- H3 predicts positive associations of education, income, and health with inclusion and empowerment.
- H4 predicts that trust and connectedness will be positively associated with empowerment and civic action.
- H5 predicts significant cross-national variation in both the level of civic empowerment and the magnitude of the gender gap.

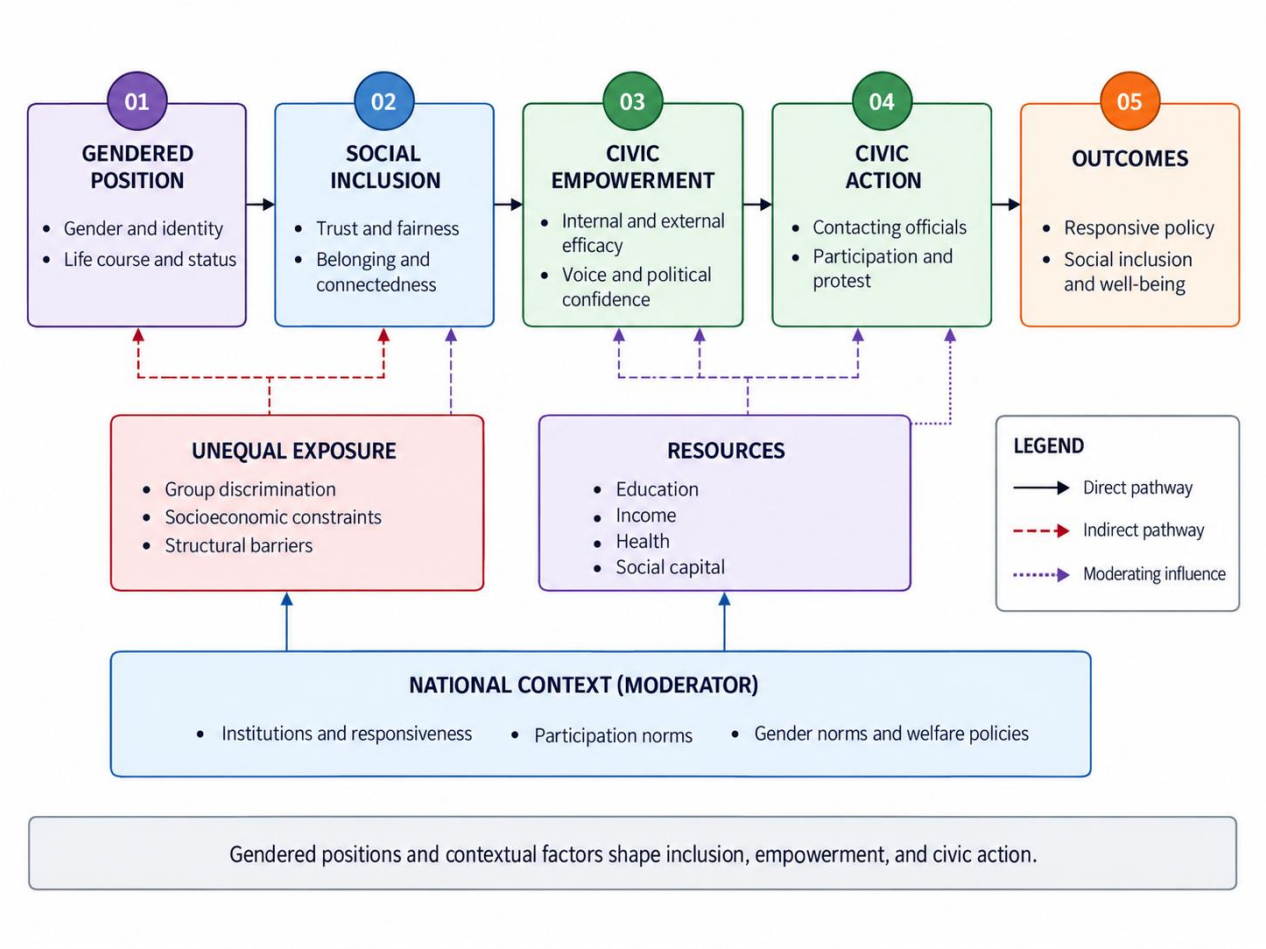


FIGURE 1. Conceptual framework linking gendered position, social inclusion, civic empowerment, and action.

IV. RESEARCH PROBLEMS, AIMS AND CONTRIBUTION

1. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Research on gender and political engagement often concentrates on a single outcome, such as turnout, political interest, representation, or online participation. This fragmentation makes it hard to tell whether observed gender differences reflect social integration, subjective political capacity, or actual civic behavior. Studies also vary in whether they account for discrimination, socioeconomic resources, social trust, and cross-national clustering. The resulting evidence can support broad claims about a gender participation gap without identifying the particular stage at which inequality emerges. This research addresses this problem by separating social inclusion, civic empowerment, and civic action within a single harmonized cross-national design.

2. RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The study examines how gender relates to social inclusion, perceived political voice, and civic participation across European societies. It evaluates gender differences in generalized trust, social connectedness, civic empowerment, and civic action; determines whether discrimination, minority status, education, income, age, health, and residence account for these differences; assesses whether trust and connectedness are associated

with empowerment and action; estimates the magnitude of country-level variation; and tests whether the gender gap in civic empowerment differs across national contexts.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1. To what extent do women and men differ in generalized social trust, social connectedness, civic empowerment, and civic action?
- RQ2. How are perceived discrimination and minority position associated with social inclusion, civic empowerment, and participation?
- RQ3. To what extent do education, household income, age, health, and residence explain or modify gendered patterns?
- RQ4. Are social trust and connectedness positively associated with civic empowerment and civic action after adjustment for individual and national context?
- RQ5. How much do the outcomes and the adjusted gender gap in civic empowerment vary between countries?

4. SCOPE, SIGNIFICANCE, AND ORIGINALITY

The scope is limited to respondents represented in ESS Round 9 and to the constructs available in its core questionnaire. The survey measures gender through a binary recorded category, which prevents analysis of non-binary identities and requires explicit acknowledgment. The study matters because it separates perceived capacity from behavioral participation and shows how similar action levels can coexist with unequal efficacy. Its originality lies in jointly modeling four outcomes, integrating discrimination and social resources, conducting a systematic country-level assessment, and triangulating weighted fixed-effects, multilevel, and count-model results.

5. STUDY CONTRIBUTION

The study contributes an integrated empirical framework linking gendered social position, inclusion, political efficacy, and civic behavior. It avoids causal claims unsupported by cross-sectional evidence and emphasizes effect sizes, confidence intervals, measurement reliability, survey weights, country clustering, and sensitivity analysis. This design supports a more precise interpretation of where gender inequalities are present, where they are limited, and how national context conditions the results.

V. PROPOSED METHOD

1. INTEGRATED OUTCOME ARCHITECTURE

The proposed method treats social inclusion, civic empowerment, and civic action as connected but non-equivalent outcomes. Generalized trust summarizes expectations of trustworthiness, fairness, and helpfulness. Social connectedness combines frequency of social meetings with the respondent's level of social activity relative to peers. Civic empowerment combines two external-efficacy and two internal-efficacy items. Civic action counts seven activities undertaken during the preceding period. This architecture avoids the common practice of defining empowerment solely through participation or defining inclusion solely through demographic membership.

2. COUNTRY-AWARE ANALYTICAL SEQUENCE

The analytical sequence begins with measurement assessment and weighted descriptive estimates. It then tests gender differences through country-adjusted models, adds trust and connectedness to the empowerment and action equations, estimates country variance through null multilevel models, fits a random-intercept and random-slope model for civic empowerment, and calculates country-specific adjusted gender gaps. Sensitivity analyses remove household income to recover cases with missing income and use a negative-binomial model for the action count. Agreement across these specifications is treated as stronger evidence than statistical significance in a single model.

VI. METHODOLOGY

1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional, comparative design. Individuals are nested within countries, creating a hierarchical structure in which respondents share institutional and cultural environments. The primary estimates use survey-weighted least squares with country fixed effects and country-clustered standard errors. Multilevel models quantify country variance and assess random variation in the gender coefficient. The design estimates associations and adjusted differences; it does not establish temporal or causal effects.

2. DATA SOURCE AND STUDY SAMPLE

The analysis uses the European Social Survey Round 9 integrated file, edition 3.1 [33]. The file contains 49,519 respondents from 29 countries. The ESS uses harmonized probability sampling and standardized fieldwork procedures for residents aged 15 years and older living in private households. The uploaded integrated file includes the analysis weight required for cross-national analysis. ESS guidance recommends applying the analysis weight because it incorporates design and post-stratification adjustments suitable for integrated analyses [35].

The sample consists of 23,020 men and 26,499 women as recorded by the survey. The weighted distribution is 48.58% men and 51.42% women. The mean age is 48.42 years, average completed education is 12.98 years, and the mean household income position is 5.48 on the national decile scale. The largest source of item missingness is household income at 19.50%; all other central variables have less than 6.45% missingness. Complete-case sizes therefore differ across models.

3. SAMPLE SELECTION AND INCLUSION CRITERIA

All respondents with valid gender and country identifiers were eligible. Outcome-specific models retained respondents with valid values for the relevant outcome, survey weight, gender, age, age squared, education, income, health, minority status, discrimination category, and residence. Responses outside the documented substantive ranges were treated as missing. Refusal, 'don't know,' and no-answer codes were excluded rather than interpreted as scale values. Civic action was computed when at least six of seven activity items were valid and was prorated to the seven-item range.

4. VARIABLES, MEASURES, AND CODING FRAMEWORK

Gender is represented by a binary indicator coded 0 for men and 1 for women, reflecting the available ESS item. This operationalization is a limitation of the source instrument rather than an assertion that gender is inherently binary. Generalized trust is the arithmetic mean of three 0–10 items measuring trust, perceived fairness, and perceived helpfulness. Social connectedness combines the frequency of meeting friends, relatives, or colleagues with social activity relative to others of the same age; both items are rescaled to 0–10 before averaging.

Civic empowerment is the mean of four five-category items assessing perceived ability to have an active role, confidence in participating, whether the political system allows people to have a say, and whether government gives people influence. Items are aligned so that higher values indicate greater empowerment and are rescaled to 0–10. Civic action includes seven activities: contacting a politician or official, working in a political party or action group, wearing or displaying a campaign badge, signing a petition, taking part in a lawful demonstration, boycotting products, and posting or sharing political content online.

Discrimination is represented by mutually exclusive categories: no reported group discrimination, discrimination on grounds other than gender, and gender-related discrimination. Additional explanatory variables include minority-group membership, years of education, household income decile, age, age squared, self-rated health, and urban, town, or rural residence. Country identifiers define the contextual level.

$$Trust_i = (Trustworthiness_i + Fairness_i + Helpfulness_i) / 3 \quad (1)$$

$$Y_ic = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Female_ic + \beta_2 Discrimination_ic + X_ic'\gamma + \delta_c + \varepsilon_ic \quad (2)$$

$$ICC = \sigma_u^2 / (\sigma_u^2 + \sigma_e^2) \quad (3)$$

Table 2. Operational definitions and analytical roles of the study variables.

Construct	ESS variables	Scale / coding	Analytical role
Gender	gndr	Men = 0; women = 1	Primary explanatory variable
Generalized trust	ppltrst, pplfair, pplhlp	Mean, 0–10	Social-inclusion outcome
Social connectedness	sclmeet, sclact	Rescaled mean, 0–10	Social-inclusion outcome
Civic empowerment	psppsgva, pspppipla, actrolga, cptppola	Aligned mean, 0–10	Primary outcome
Civic action	contplt, wrkprty, badge, sgnptit, pbldmn, bctprd, pstplonl	Count, 0–7	Behavioural outcome
Discrimination	dscrgrp, dscrgnd	Three categories	Exposure / mobilization variable
Resources	eduyrs, hinctnta, health	Continuous / ordered	Covariates
Social position	agea, blgetmg, domicil	Age, minority, residence	Covariates
National context	cntry	29 countries	Fixed and random effects
Survey adjustment	anweight	Positive continuous weight	Population adjustment

The framework keeps social inclusion, perceived empowerment, and civic action separate so equality in one domain does not conceal inequality in another.

5. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

- First, variables were screened for valid response ranges and missing values. Weighted means were calculated with the ESS analysis weight. We assessed internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha for the trust and empowerment scales. We used principal-component analysis of standardized items as a dimensionality check. Because connectedness has two conceptually distinct but complementary indicators, we reported item correlations and the Spearman–Brown coefficient and estimated item-level sensitivity models.
- Second, unadjusted weighted means were compared by gender and standardized mean differences were calculated.
- Third, we regressed each standardized outcome on gender, discrimination category, minority status, education, income, health, age, age squared, residence, and country fixed effects. Standard errors were clustered by country.
- Fourth, we added trust and connectedness to the empowerment and action equations to test whether relational inclusion was independently associated with civic capacity and behavior.
- Fifth, null random-intercept models estimated the intraclass correlation for each outcome, following the principle that hierarchical structure should be quantified rather than assumed [34]. A mixed model for empowerment included a random country intercept and a random slope for gender. We compared the principal fixed-effects results with the mixed model because fixed effects strongly control for time-invariant country differences, whereas random effects quantify country-level variance. This triangulation is consistent with recommendations to choose hierarchical models according to the inferential target rather than applying them mechanically [36].
- Sixth, country-specific weighted regressions estimated adjusted women-minus-men differences in empowerment and civic action. Seventh, we re-estimated the civic-action model using negative-binomial regression and expressed results as incidence-rate ratios. Finally, models excluding income were

estimated to determine whether the complete-case reduction changed the substantive conclusions. Statistical interpretation prioritizes standardized effect sizes, confidence intervals, consistency, and model fit over p-values alone.

6. VALIDITY, RELIABILITY, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The trust scale achieves a Cronbach's alpha of 0.798, and its first component explains 71.34% of the variance in standardized items. The empowerment scale has an alpha of 0.783, and its first component explains 60.76%. These results support internal coherence. The connectedness indicators correlate at 0.379, yielding a Spearman–Brown coefficient of 0.550; therefore, connectedness is interpreted as a formative index rather than a unidimensional reflective scale. Construct validity is strengthened by separating efficacy from action and by comparing results across related outcomes.

The study uses anonymized public-use survey data and involves no direct contact with participants. The original survey was conducted under ESS ethical, consent, confidentiality, and data-protection procedures. Secondary analysis generally does not expose respondents to new intervention risk; nevertheless, the author should obtain an institutional exemption or confirmation if required by the target journal or institution. Country-level results are reported in aggregate, and no attempt is made to identify individuals.

VII. RESULTS

1. SAMPLE PROFILE AND DATA COMPLETENESS

Table 3. Weighted demographic and social profile of the analytical sample.

Measure	Overall	Men	Women
Unweighted N	49,519	23,020	26,499
Weighted share (%)	100.00	48.58	51.42
Age (years)	48.42	47.53	49.26
Education (years)	12.98	13.05	12.92
Income decile	5.48	5.76	5.21
Reported discrimination (%)	8.87	8.59	9.13
Minority membership (%)	6.34	6.71	6.00

Women comprise a slightly larger weighted share and report a lower household-income position. The prevalence of reported discrimination is modestly higher among women, while recorded minority membership is slightly higher among men.

Most outcome variables have high completion. Missingness is 1.08% for trust, 1.89% for connectedness, 6.45% for empowerment, and 0.53% for civic action. Household income has 19.50% missingness, reducing the main complete-case samples to 37,077-38,806. Sensitivity models omitting income recover more than 45,000 cases and are reported below.

2. MEASUREMENT PERFORMANCE

Table 4. Reliability and dimensionality assessment.

Construct	Valid N	Reliability / association	First-component variance	Assessment
Generalized trust	48,985	$\alpha = 0.798$	71.34%	Acceptable internal consistency
Civic empowerment	46,327	$\alpha = 0.783$	60.76%	Acceptable internal consistency
Social connectedness	48,585	r = 0.379; SB = 0.550	Not applicable	Formative index; item sensitivity required

Trust and empowerment are internally coherent. Connectedness remains a broad relational index, but separate models support its interpretation for meeting frequency and relative social activity.

3. WEIGHTED GENDER DIFFERENCES

Table 5. Survey-weighted outcome means and unadjusted gender differences.

Outcome	Men	Women	Women – men	Standardized difference
Social trust	5.19	5.20	+0.01	+0.003
Social connectedness	5.48	5.38	-0.09	-0.047
Civic empowerment	3.25	2.76	-0.49	-0.266
Civic actions	1.04	1.00	-0.04	-0.031
Life satisfaction	7.18	7.16	-0.02	-0.011
Happiness	7.47	7.51	+0.04	+0.021

The unadjusted empowerment difference is substantially larger than the gaps in trust, connectedness, action, life satisfaction, or happiness. This pattern indicates that unequal perceived voice is not reducible to general well-being.



FIGURE 2. Weighted means for social trust, connectedness, civic empowerment, and civic action.

Men and women have nearly identical mean trust and action counts, but women report lower civic empowerment. The figure uses the original outcome metrics; formal inference is based on adjusted standardized models.

4. ADJUSTED MODELS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION AND CIVIC OUTCOMES

Table 6. Survey-weighted country-adjusted models of inclusion, empowerment, and action.

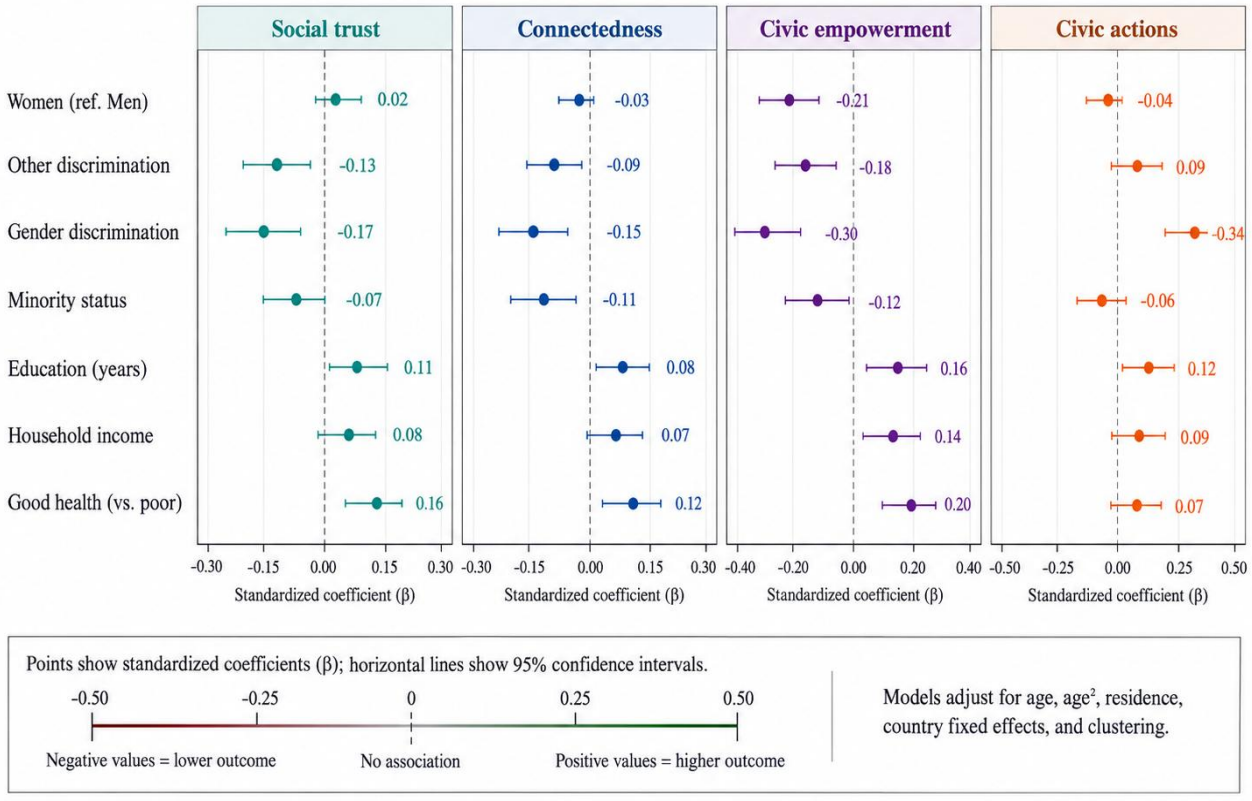
Predictor	Trust	Connectedness	Empowerment	Actions
Women	+0.017 (0.016)	+0.012 (0.021)	-0.227*** (0.010)	-0.014 (0.015)
Other discrimination	-0.228*** (0.023)	-0.006 (0.019)	+0.007 (0.036)	+0.331*** (0.056)
Gender discrimination	-0.088 (0.045)	+0.036 (0.068)	+0.372** (0.112)	+0.836*** (0.132)
Minority status	-0.029 (0.028)	-0.161*** (0.040)	+0.018 (0.051)	-0.116** (0.038)
Education	+0.113*** (0.009)	+0.057*** (0.012)	+0.218*** (0.016)	+0.216*** (0.021)
Income	+0.070*** (0.006)	+0.075*** (0.007)	+0.111*** (0.013)	+0.073*** (0.012)
Good health	+0.131*** (0.012)	+0.178*** (0.018)	+0.093*** (0.013)	-0.010 (0.009)
Model N	38,640	38,439	37,077	38,806
R^2	0.182	0.127	0.247	0.144

Coefficients are standardized. All models additionally control for age, age squared, residence, and country fixed effects; standard errors are clustered by country. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Gender is not significantly associated with generalized trust after adjustment (B = 0.017, SE = 0.016, p = .301) or with connectedness (B = 0.012, SE = 0.021, p = .572). The adjusted civic-action coefficient is also small and non-significant (B = -0.014, SE = 0.015, p = .335). In contrast, women report civic empowerment 0.227 standard deviations below men (SE = 0.010, 95% CI [-0.248, -0.206]). The result supports H1 and identifies perceived political capacity as the principal gendered outcome.

Other-group discrimination is negatively associated with trust (B = -0.228, p < .001), while minority status is negatively associated with connectedness (B = -0.161, p < .001). These results partially support H2. However, discrimination is positively associated with civic action, and reported gender discrimination is positively associated with empowerment. Because the data are cross-sectional, these positive coefficients may reflect awareness, selection, or grievance-based mobilization. They do not imply that discriminatory experiences improve empowerment.

Education is positively associated with every outcome and has particularly strong coefficients for empowerment (B = 0.218) and civic action (B = 0.216). Income is positively associated with all outcomes, and good health is especially important for trust and connectedness. These findings support H3 and show that resources, as well as gender, structure civic inequalities.



Key insight: Women report lower civic empowerment (β = -0.21) but similar levels of civic actions overall.
Gender discrimination shows the strongest negative association with civic empowerment and the strongest positive association with civic actions.

FIGURE 3. Adjusted standardized associations across the four principal outcomes.

The gender coefficient is concentrated in civic empowerment. Education and income show consistent positive associations, while discrimination has different relationships with trust and behavioural mobilization.

5. INCLUSION AS A CORRELATE OF EMPOWERMENT AND ACTION

Table 7. Extended models linking social inclusion to empowerment and action.

Predictor	Civic empowerment B (SE)	Civic action B (SE)
Women	-0.229*** (0.012)	-0.017 (0.014)
Social trust	+0.165*** (0.009)	+0.059*** (0.012)
Connectedness	+0.101*** (0.007)	+0.137*** (0.012)
Other discrimination	+0.043 (0.035)	+0.348*** (0.056)
Gender discrimination	+0.382** (0.108)	+0.832*** (0.121)
Minority status	+0.047 (0.052)	-0.091* (0.043)
Education	+0.193*** (0.016)	+0.200*** (0.020)
Income	+0.092*** (0.012)	+0.060*** (0.013)

Trust and connectedness are independently associated with both empowerment and civic action. Their inclusion does not reduce the adjusted gender gap in empowerment, which remains approximately -0.229 standard deviations.

A one-standard-deviation increase in trust is associated with 0.165 standard deviations higher empowerment and 0.059 standard deviations more civic action. Connectedness is associated with 0.101 standard deviations higher empowerment and 0.137 standard deviations more action. These results support H4. The gender coefficient in the empowerment model remains -0.229, indicating that women's average trust or connectedness does not explain the gap.

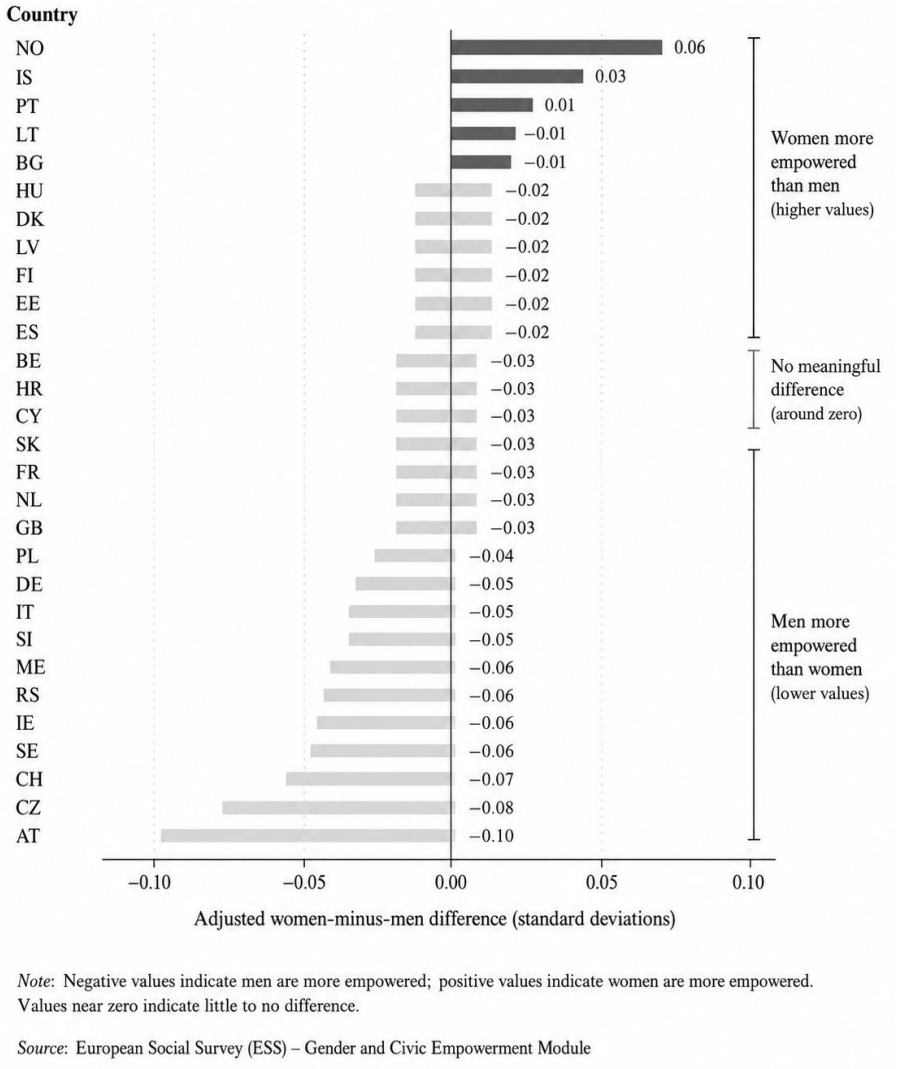
6. COUNTRY-LEVEL VARIATION AND MULTILEVEL RESULTS

Table 8. Null-model variance components and intraclass correlations.

Outcome	Between-country variance	Individual variance	ICC	Countries
Social trust	0.239	0.790	0.232	29
Social connectedness	0.081	0.932	0.080	29
Civic empowerment	0.188	0.832	0.184	29
Civic actions	0.115	0.901	0.113	29

Country context accounts for approximately 23.2% of trust variance, 18.4% of empowerment variance, 11.3% of civic-action variance, and 8.0% of connectedness variance, justifying country-aware estimation.

The random-intercept and random-slope empowerment model converged with 36,517 complete cases. After the full covariate set and inclusion variables were entered, the fixed gender coefficient was -0.217 (SE = 0.012, $p < .001$). The random-intercept variance was 0.058, and the random gender-slope variance was 0.002, indicating modest but non-zero cross-national variation in the gap. Trust (B = 0.150), connectedness (B = 0.106), education (B = 0.189), income (B = 0.095), and health (B = 0.046) were positively associated with empowerment. The multilevel result closely reproduces the weighted fixed-effects estimate and strengthens support for H5.



Note: Negative values indicate men are more empowered; positive values indicate women are more empowered. Values near zero indicate little to no difference.

Source: European Social Survey (ESS) – Gender and Civic Empowerment Module

FIGURE 4. Country-specific adjusted women-minus-men differences in civic empowerment.

The empowerment coefficient is negative in all 29 countries and statistically distinguishable from zero in 27. The magnitude ranges from approximately -0.36 to -0.05 standard deviations, demonstrating both persistence and contextual variation.

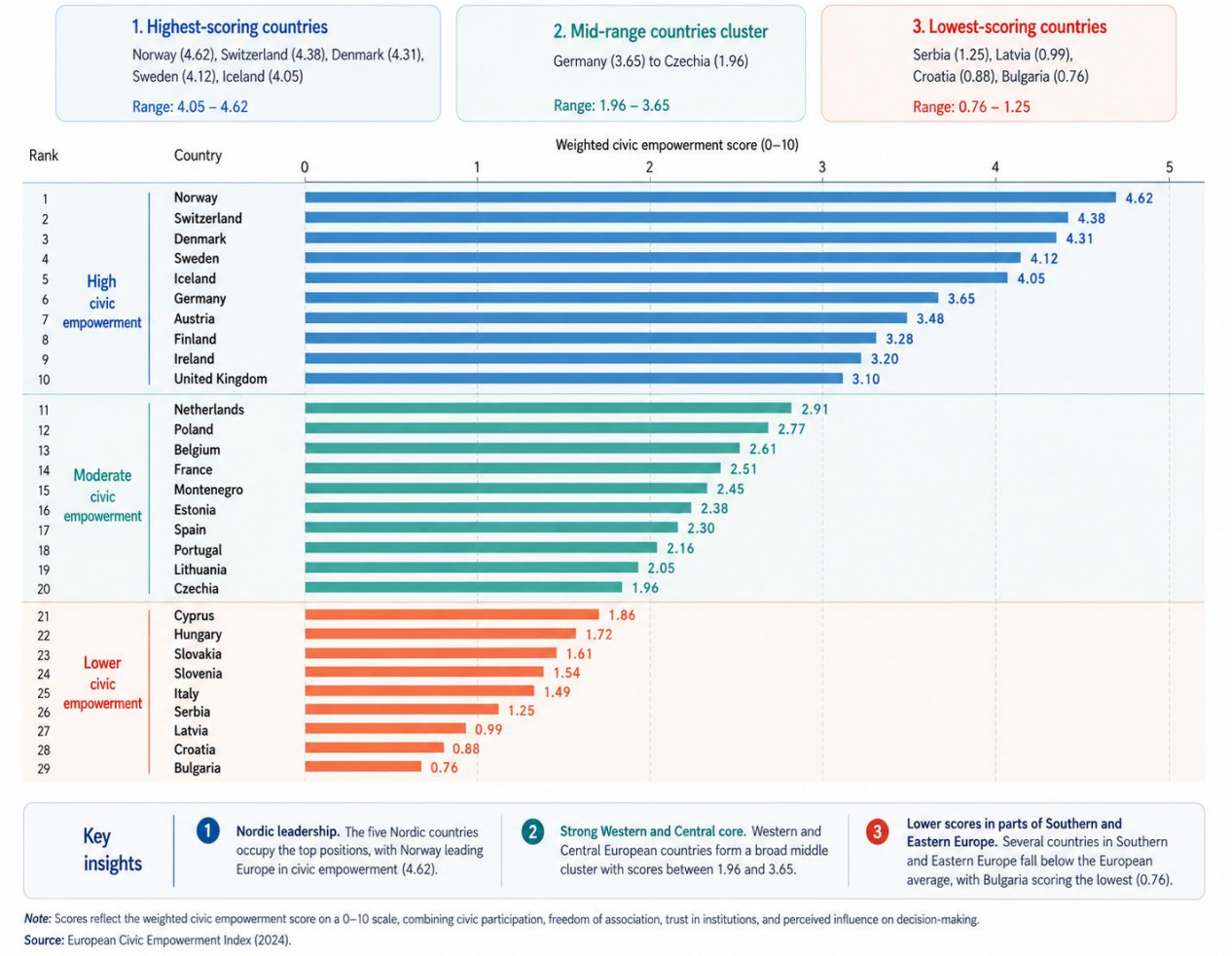


FIGURE 5. Cross-national variation in weighted civic-empowerment scores.

Average empowerment varies markedly across countries, from below 2 to above 4 on the 0–10 scale. National context therefore affects both the overall level of voice and the size of within-country gender differences.

7. ROBUSTNESS AND SENSITIVITY ANALYSES

Table 9. Summary of robustness and sensitivity analyses.

Robustness test	Key estimate	Result	Interpretation
Negative-binomial civic-action model	Women IRR = 0.959, p = 0.062	Not significant at .05	The main null action gap is robust to count modeling.
Model excluding household income	Empowerment B = -0.240, p < .001	N = 45,012	The empowerment gap is robust in the larger sample.
Model excluding household income	Civic action B = -0.036, p = 0.012	N = 47,662	A small action gap emerges, showing sensitivity to income missingness.

Robustness test	Key estimate	Result	Interpretation
Connectedness item models	Meeting B = -0.009; activity B = -0.034	Neither reaches .05	The composite's near-zero adjusted gender difference is not masking a large item gap.

Table 10. Hypothesis evaluation.

Hypothesis	Decision	Evidence
H1: Women report lower civic empowerment	Supported	Adjusted B = -0.227; multilevel B = -0.217; negative gaps in all countries.
H2: Discrimination and minority position reduce inclusion and empowerment	Partially supported	Other discrimination predicts lower trust; minority status predicts lower connectedness, but discrimination is positively associated with action and reported gender discrimination with efficacy.
H3: Education, income, and health are positively associated with outcomes	Supported	Education and income are positive across all main outcomes; health is strongest for trust and connectedness.
H4: Trust and connectedness predict empowerment and action	Supported	Both remain positive in extended models.
H5: Outcomes and gender gaps vary by country	Supported	ICCs range from .080 to .232; random gender-slope variance is non-zero; country gap magnitude varies.

VIII. DISCUSSION

The study's principal finding is that gender inequality is concentrated in civic empowerment rather than in generalized trust, social connectedness, or the overall number of civic actions. Women and men report nearly identical levels of trust and only minor differences in social connectedness and behavioral participation. However, women report substantially lower confidence in their ability to participate and weaker perceptions that political institutions provide meaningful voice and influence. This distinction demonstrates that similar participation levels do not necessarily indicate equal civic power.

The empowerment gap remains evident after accounting for age, education, household income, health, minority status, discrimination, residence, trust, connectedness, and country context. Its magnitude is also consistent across the fixed-effects and multilevel models. This stability suggests that the difference cannot be explained solely by socioeconomic inequalities or variations in social contact. Instead, it may reflect broader gendered differences in political confidence, access to influential networks, institutional recognition, recruitment opportunities, and expectations of governmental responsiveness.

The absence of a meaningful adjusted gender difference in generalized trust is also important. Women's lower civic empowerment should not be interpreted as evidence that they are less trusting or more socially isolated. Trust is more strongly associated with national context, education, income, health, and discrimination than with gender itself. Social connectedness is more closely related to health, minority position, and socioeconomic resources. These findings confirm that social inclusion and political empowerment are connected but distinct dimensions of civic life.

Civic action produces a more complex pattern. The unadjusted gender difference is small, and the principal country-adjusted model does not identify a statistically significant gap. The count-model analysis also indicates that women and men undertake a similar overall number of civic activities. A small negative association appears when household income is excluded, suggesting some sensitivity to sample composition

and missing income data. The results therefore do not support a single, universal gender participation gap across Europe.

The aggregated civic-action measure must nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. Contacting an official, signing a petition, boycotting a product, attending a demonstration, displaying a campaign symbol, and posting political content online differ substantially in cost, visibility, intensity, and political influence. Women and men may therefore obtain similar total scores through different combinations of activities. Comparable action counts may conceal inequalities in leadership, agenda setting, access to decision-makers, and opportunities to shape institutional outcomes.

Generalized trust and social connectedness are positively associated with both civic empowerment and civic action. Individuals who expect fairness and helpfulness and who maintain active social relationships may have greater access to information, encouragement, civic networks, and opportunities for political learning. These social resources appear to strengthen both perceived capacity and public engagement. However, their inclusion does not substantially reduce the gender gap in empowerment. Social inclusion is therefore an important civic resource, but it does not fully explain unequal perceptions of political voice.

The discrimination findings require careful interpretation. Respondents who report discrimination on grounds other than gender show lower generalized trust, suggesting that exclusion may weaken confidence in social relations. Minority status is also associated with lower connectedness and fewer civic actions in some specifications. At the same time, respondents who report discrimination undertake more civic activities, while those reporting gender-related discrimination show higher empowerment in some models.

These associations do not prove that discrimination produces positive outcomes. Politically attentive, organizationally connected, or mobilized individuals may be more likely to recognize and report discriminatory treatment. Grievance may also encourage petitions, protests, boycotts, online communication, or contact with public officials. The observed relationships may therefore reflect mobilization in response to exclusion rather than empowerment caused by discrimination. Reverse association, reporting differences, and unmeasured political involvement are also possible.

The cross-national results demonstrate that national context plays a substantial role. A meaningful proportion of the variation in trust and civic empowerment occurs between countries, and average empowerment differs considerably across national settings. The gender coefficient also varies in magnitude. Nevertheless, the adjusted empowerment gap remains negative in every country. National context therefore appears to influence the magnitude of inequality more strongly than its direction.

This result suggests that electoral institutions, participation channels, public trust, representation, and governmental responsiveness may shape overall civic empowerment without automatically eliminating gender differences. Countries with stronger civic institutions may provide higher average empowerment, yet women may still experience lower political confidence or weaker expectations of being heard. Institutional quality alone may therefore be insufficient unless it is accompanied by equal access, recognition, recruitment, and influence.

The findings also clarify what civic empowerment means. The measure combines internal efficacy, including confidence and perceived competence, with external efficacy, including the belief that citizens can have a voice and influence government. A lower empowerment score may therefore reflect reduced self-confidence, weaker institutional responsiveness, or both. These dimensions may reinforce each other: limited responsiveness can reduce confidence, while lower confidence may discourage participation in influential roles.

The distinction between empowerment and participation matters for evaluating civic equality. Balanced attendance, voting, petition signing, or online engagement may coexist with unequal speaking opportunities, leadership positions, agenda-setting influence, and institutional feedback. Participation counts alone may consequently overestimate equality. A fuller assessment should consider whether individuals believe they have the knowledge, confidence, access, and institutional support needed to influence public decisions.

Overall, the findings support a staged interpretation of civic inequality. Social resources and inclusion contribute to civic capacity, civic capacity supports action, and discrimination may generate both exclusion and mobilization. Gender is most consistently associated with perceived political capacity rather than generalized trust or the total volume of civic action. Substantive equality therefore requires more than

comparable participation rates; it requires equal confidence, access, responsiveness, recognition, and influence within public life.

IX. CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive empirical examination of gendered patterns in social inclusion, civic empowerment, and civic action across 29 European nations using harmonized data from the European Social Survey. The empirical evidence rejects the simplistic premise that women are uniformly less trusting, less socially connected, or less politically active than men. Instead, the analysis demonstrates that gender inequality in the civic sphere is highly concentrated in *perceived political capacity*. Women consistently report lower political self-efficacy and weaker expectations of institutional responsiveness ($\beta = -0.227$, $p < 0.001$), a disparity that persists after rigorously controlling for educational attainment, household income, health status, exposure to discrimination, social capital, and time-invariant national contexts. This structural empowerment gap proves robust across weighted fixed-effects regressions, random-slope multilevel specifications, and individual country-level estimates.

While socioeconomic status, generalized trust, and social connectedness are vital civic resources that foster political engagement, perceived discrimination has a dual effect: it reduces generalized trust while also driving higher public participation. This mechanism underlines the critical distinction between resource-driven, supportive participation and grievance-based mobilization. Consequently, parity in behavioral participation counts should not be conflated with substantive political voice or equitable influence. Democratic institutions must expand their evaluation frameworks beyond mere turnout metrics to assess whether marginalized groups experience genuine agency, political efficacy, and policy responsiveness. Achieving substantive gender equality in public life requires structural policy reforms focused on civic skill development, inclusive political recruitment, institutional accountability, and transparent decision-making channels.

X. DECLARATIONS

Ethics Statement

This study is a secondary analysis of anonymized, publicly available survey data. No new participants were recruited, and no identifying information was accessed. Institutional confirmation of exemption should be obtained where required by the author's institution or target journal.

Data Availability

The European Social Survey Round 9 integrated data and documentation are available through the official ESS Data Portal under the conditions specified by ESS ERIC. The study used data file edition 3.1, DOI 10.21338/NSD-ESS9-2018.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Appendices

1. APPENDIX A. COUNTRY COVERAGE AND WEIGHTED OUTCOME MEANS

Table A1. Country sample sizes and weighted principal-outcome means.

Country	N	Women %	Trust	Connectedness	Empowerment	Actions
Austria	2,499	51.4	5.89	5.77	3.59	1.17
Belgium	1,767	51.0	5.27	5.50	2.72	1.00
Bulgaria	2,198	52.0	3.81	5.63	1.70	0.24
Switzerland	1,542	50.8	6.10	5.66	4.35	1.15
Cyprus	781	51.1	3.98	4.70	2.44	0.57
Czechia	2,398	51.2	5.10	5.17	2.46	0.87
Germany	2,358	50.7	5.60	5.33	3.68	1.26
Denmark	1,572	50.6	6.79	6.08	4.35	1.31
Estonia	1,904	53.8	5.55	4.68	2.62	0.65
Spain	1,668	51.4	5.04	5.63	2.61	1.06
Finland	1,755	51.1	6.70	5.47	3.39	1.48
France	2,010	52.2	5.11	5.85	2.68	1.29
United Kingdom	2,204	51.0	5.55	5.29	3.31	1.24
Croatia	1,810	52.2	4.26	5.68	1.72	0.85
Hungary	1,661	52.9	4.85	4.00	2.35	0.23
Ireland	2,216	50.9	5.90	5.24	3.38	1.10
Iceland	861	48.2	6.71	6.01	4.10	1.96
Italy	2,745	51.8	4.62	5.45	2.28	0.60
Lithuania	1,835	54.9	4.77	5.04	2.47	0.47
Latvia	918	55.1	5.00	4.88	2.01	0.61
Montenegro	1,200	50.1	3.76	5.99	2.65	0.76
Netherlands	1,673	50.7	6.14	5.96	3.23	0.86
Norway	1,406	48.1	6.55	6.28	4.44	1.80
Poland	1,500	52.2	4.32	4.43	2.95	0.53
Portugal	1,055	53.3	4.52	5.85	2.49	0.89
Serbia	2,043	50.5	3.66	5.98	2.14	0.73
Sweden	1,539	49.2	6.31	6.07	4.16	1.76

Country	N	Women %	Trust	Connectedness	Empowerment	Actions
Slovenia	1,318	50.5	4.86	5.10	2.28	0.61
Slovakia	1,083	52.1	4.10	5.03	2.30	0.64

2. *APPENDIX B. MISSING-DATA PROFILE*

Table B1. Valid cases and missingness for analytical variables.

Variable	Valid N	Missing %
Gender	49,519	0.00
Social trust	48,985	1.08
Social connectedness	48,585	1.89
Civic empowerment	46,327	6.45
Civic actions	49,259	0.53
Reported discrimination	49,076	0.89
Gender discrimination	49,076	0.89
Minority status	49,158	0.73
Education years	48,797	1.46
Income decile	39,865	19.50
Age	49,297	0.45
Self-rated health	49,460	0.12
Residence	49,480	0.08