



Social and Economic Implications of Gender Inequality

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Abstract

Gender equality is one of the fundamental values that enables individuals to live in dignity. Yet this goal has repeatedly been hindered by historical, cultural, and structural barriers. This study treats gender inequality not only as a violation of rights but also as one of the greatest obstacles to social welfare and sustainable development. Gender is not merely biological; it is constructed and reproduced by social, cultural, and economic structures. The inequalities faced by women in economic, political, social, and cultural spheres point to structural problems that hinder societies' potential for development, beyond individual rights violations. Education remains the most critical lever for effective participation in social and economic life, yet women have historically been excluded from education systems and their access to knowledge curtailed. The article synthesizes scholarship and international evidence to map the economic, social, cultural, and health channels through which gendered institutions shape outcomes; it concludes with policy recommendations that link institutional design to measurable accountability.

Keywords: Gender Equality; Cultural Norms; Women in STEM; Employment; Economic Independence

Introduction

The effects of gender on economic dynamics

Across history, economic systems have appeared neutral on the surface but were in fact shaped by male-dominated norms that deepened gender inequality [6,7]. Failing to secure women's equal participation in economic life is not only a violation of individual freedoms and rights; it is also one of the largest obstacles to economic growth and sustainable development.

The apparent objectivity and rationality of economic orders allowed women's labor to be marginalised and rendered invisible. Feminist economics argues that women's work has been systematically undervalued and that many headline indicators were constructed from a male-centric perspective [8]. Domestic labor, childcare, and roles in health and social services have

been kept outside the core of "development," confining women to auxiliary or secondary positions [7].

A key indicator is persistently lower female labour-force participation. Globally, women's participation stands around 47.4% versus 72.3% for men [4]. In Türkiye, it is 36.6%—among the lowest across the OECD [9]. These patterns reflect not mere individual choices but historical, cultural, and structural barriers.

Gender scripts shape roles and opportunities in labour markets. Sectors with a high concentration of women are typically low-wage, low-status, and insecure, revealing how deeply gender norms permeate economic systems [10]. Men's predominance in high-paying sectors such as technology, engineering, and finance exposes the gendered architecture of contemporary economies.

The macroeconomic consequences are considerable. Equalising women's participation would expand talent utilisation, managerial diversity, and innovation. McKinsey Global Institute (2020) estimates that achieving parity could add 12 trillion USD to global output—yet women remain concentrated in low-paid roles and excluded from leadership, acting as a systematic brake on growth [11].

A feminist-economics lens is therefore indispensable for analysing how inequality is reproduced within economic systems [6]. The exclusion of unpaid care from national accounts is emblematic of a narrow-growth paradigm that ignores women's contributions [7]. This study asks: (1) What structural factors marginalise women economically? (2) How does gender inequality shape growth and social justice? (3) Which policies can secure equal participation? We argue that gender equality is not only a human-rights imperative but a precondition for sustainable prosperity and development.

Gender and the paradox of economic order

Gender as the invisible dynamic of economic systems

Economic systems have long been portrayed as neutral and rational, yet they routinely overlook gender's constitutive role [6]. The way women participate in economic life reveals how male-centred architectures have been normalised—imposing serious constraints on both justice and sustainable growth.

Feminist economics shows how systems reproduce inequality, explaining why women's labour is marginalised both in national accounting and in policy design [7]. Gendered construction of processes keeps women in secondary positions and entrenches disadvantage.

The systematic neglect of women's labour

Unpaid domestic and care work is excluded from national accounts and rarely recognised as a pillar of economic reproduction [8]. Childrearing, elder care, and household management sustain the system yet are omitted from growth strategies, with predictable consequences for women's status and bargaining power [7].

The result is channelling women toward low-wage, insecure jobs. Female labour-force participation remains around 25

percentage points below men globally [4]; in Türkiye it is only 36.6%—evidence that much of women's economic potential is left untapped [9].

Glass ceiling, glass walls, and the glass cliff

- **Glass Ceiling:** Invisible barriers to reaching top leadership despite comparable credentials [12].
- **Glass Walls:** Horizontal segregation that concentrates women in care, health, and education—often lower-paid—while men dominate profit-and-loss functions [13].
- **Glass Cliff:** Women appointed to risky leadership roles during crises, heightening failure risks and subsequent penalties [11].

These structures restrict mobility and embed gender inequality at the core of economic life.

Gender dynamics in capitalist development

Capitalist production and consumption regimes historically devalued women's work, assigning them to low-paid and insecure positions [6]. Feminist economists highlight how women have been treated as a “secondary labour force,” placed at the periphery of accumulation [7]. This constrains economic independence and deepens inequality.

A Brief Historical Arc

- **Agrarian Societies:** Women's central productive roles were naturalised as “family duties,” erasing their economic value [14].
- **Industrial Revolution:** Women were pushed from the centre of production toward domestic and low-wage roles, narrowing opportunities.
- **Modern Economies:** Continued concentration in low-paid sectors and under-representation in leadership illustrates the contemporary reproduction of historic patterns.

Why a feminist-economics perspective matters

The theory offers a powerful framework for analysing how institutions reproduce inequality and for arguing that development is unsustainable without gender equality [6]. Barriers faced by women arise from deep structural factors, not simply individual preferences. Economic analysis must therefore place gender at its centre.

The structural effects of gender in labour markets

Re-making labour markets through the lens of gender

Modern labour markets mirror social norms and power relations, not just supply–demand forces. Their ostensibly “neutral” design is the product of histories that channelled women into low-wage, insecure, and low-status work while men dominate high-paying leadership tracks [6,13]. Since the industrial era, women were construed as “auxiliary” or “secondary” workers, limiting full participation and independence [14].

Structural discrimination: Vertical and horizontal

- Vertical discrimination blocks women’s ascent to leadership (“glass ceiling”) [12].
- Horizontal discrimination concentrates women in low-wage sectors like care, education, and social services, while men dominate engineering, finance, and technology [10].

Globally, women’s labour-force participation is ~25 percentage points below men [4]; in Türkiye it is 36.6%, one of the lowest in the OECD [9].

Wage inequality and economic injustice

Women are systematically paid less for comparable work—by roughly 20–30% worldwide, and by ~15.6% in Türkiye [9,15]. Drivers include concentration in low-paid sectors, barriers to leadership, and unequal pay within the same roles. This undermines economic independence and depresses growth [6].

The glass cliff, glass walls, and other invisible barriers

Crisis-era appointments to precarious leadership (“glass cliff”) expose women to higher failure risk and reputational penalties [11]. Glass walls restrict cross-functional mobility, concentrating women in support roles even when they hold leadership titles [13]. These dynamics make labour markets a key site of gendered disadvantage.

Exclusion from STEM: Academic and professional echoes

Women remain under-represented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. This reflects bias along the pipeline—from schooling and credentialing to hiring and promotion—and limits access to high-income sectors [3,10]. Policies that expand scholarships, apprenticeships, mentorship, pay transparency, and bias-aware hiring are essential.

The feminisation of poverty and social consequences

Marginalisation in labour markets contributes to the feminisation of poverty [16]. Concentration in informal employment leaves many women without social insurance and exposes households to shocks. In Türkiye, many women are clustered in agriculture and domestic services, often outside formal protection [9].

Policy search: The nordic experience and beyond

Nordic countries demonstrate that universal childcare, generous and shared parental leave, and flexible secure work raise women’s participation [3]. Replicating these outcomes elsewhere requires adapting policies to local institutional capacity and extending reforms to formalise work and enforce equal-pay rules.

Economic and social consequences of gender inequality

A structural brake on development

Gender inequality is not only unjust for individuals; it compromises the sustainability of development. Achieving parity in participation could add an estimated 12 trillion USD annually to global GDP (McKinsey, 2020), revealing a tight link between equality and growth.

Global and regional patterns of participation

Women’s participation is about 25 percentage points lower than men globally, and 36.6% in Türkiye [9]. In contrast, several Nordic economies approach 70% female participation and reap measurable growth benefits [3].

Multiplier effects of women’s participation

Higher women’s earnings raise investments in children’s education and household health, with compounding intergenerational returns [8]. Equality is thus a precondition for sustainable development, not merely an ethical add-on.

Marginalisation and the feminisation of poverty

Structural drivers

Informality, weak social insurance, and unpaid care burdens heighten women’s poverty risk. In many developing contexts, over 60% of women workers are informal [4].

Intergenerational effects

Economic marginalisation perpetuates disadvantage across generations by limiting access to health, nutrition, and schooling—especially in low- and middle-income settings.

Wage gaps and macroeconomic losses

The erosion of “Equal Pay for Equal Work”

Despite doing the same jobs, women often earn 20–30% less than men worldwide and ~15.6% less in Türkiye [9,15]. Causes include sectoral sorting, barriers to leadership, and unequal pay within firms.

Economic independence and aggregate demand

Lower women’s pay depresses household consumption and savings. By contrast, closing gaps strengthens aggregate demand and tax capacity; without equality, growth remains fragile [6].

Education and gender: Foundations of economic participation

Exclusion from STEM

STEM education is a gateway to high-income sectors, yet women’s representation among STEM graduates is ~35% in OECD settings [3]. Gendered educational pathways restrict access to innovation-intensive careers.

Transforming education policy

Gender-responsive curricula, safe schools, mentoring, and targeted scholarships for girls and women improve persistence and transition into high-productivity jobs [10].

Leadership and diversity: The missing women in decision-making

Glass ceiling and access to leadership

Only about 28% of leadership posts globally are held by women [17]. Barriers in promotion pipelines and biased evaluation reduce organisational diversity and performance.

The glass cliff in crises

Women are more likely to be elevated during crises into precarious roles, inviting harsher blame for failure and reinforcing stereotypes [11].

Cultural and psychosocial dimensions of gender

The determining role of cultural norms in gender

Gender inequality does not arise solely from economic or legal contexts; it is reproduced in everyday cultural practices, language, and symbolic orders. Cultural norms mark “appropriate” roles

for women and men, policing bodies, mobility, dress, speech, and aspirations. By naturalising care as women’s duty and paid work and public leadership as men’s domain, these norms make inequality appear legitimate and inevitable [6-8,13,15].

A historical perspective: How gender was constructed

Across history, gender roles were synchronised with the needs of economic and political systems. Agrarian societies embedded women’s productive work within the family sphere, devaluing it as “help.” Early industrial capitalism narrowed women’s opportunities by relocating production from the household to the factory and by erecting legal and social barriers to training, guilds, and property. Contemporary economies still retain traces of these formations in sectoral sorting and leadership gaps [10,14].

The reproduction of cultural norms

Cultural norms are reproduced through schools, media, religious and community organisations, and workplace routines. Textbooks and curricula that mirror stereotypes constrain girls’ aspirations; media that sexualise or trivialise women’s authority undermine legitimacy; workplace rituals and networking practices exclude those outside the dominant script. The result is a “sticky” equilibrium: even as formal barriers recede, informal rules continue to channel men and women along unequal paths [2,3,15].

Transformation and resistance

Norms are neither static nor uncontested. Legal reforms, grassroots movements, and visibility of women in leadership create new role models and shift expectations. Evidence shows that where girls see women scientists, engineers, judges, and ministers, self-efficacy rises and stereotype threat declines; mentoring and allyship amplify these gains. Still, norm change faces backlash, requiring protection of activists and institutional anchoring of reforms [10,11,16,17].

Psychosocial dynamics: Individual and social perception

Gender scripts shape identities, self-concept, and perceived possibilities. Internalised bias depresses ambition and raises self-censorship; stereotype threat can erode performance under evaluation. At the social level, descriptive norms (“what others do”)

and injunctive norms (“what others approve”) sustain conformity. Intersectionality matters: class, ethnicity, disability, and migration status can intensify constraints or generate distinct forms of marginalisation [6,16,17].

Women’s self-concept and internalised inequality

Internalised norms lead many women to over-invest in unpaid care and under-invest in their careers, constraining human-capital accumulation and bargaining power. Organisational climates that penalise caregiving or expect constant availability disproportionately harm mothers. Interventions that enhance self-efficacy—coaching, sponsorship, leadership training, transparent criteria—reduce these penalties and accelerate advancement [11,12,22].

The effects of gendered norms on men

Rigid masculinity norms also harm men by stigmatising care work, discouraging help-seeking, and rewarding risk-taking. Equal parental leave taken by fathers reduces gender gaps at home and at work; men’s allyship in the workplace changes norms around flexible work and anti-harassment policies. Gender equality is thus a collective good: it expands choices for everyone [5,11,12,21].

Family and gender: A mechanism of reproduction

Families are key sites where gender is learned and enacted. Division of labour within households, expectations around obedience and autonomy, and investment in sons versus daughters reproduce inequality across generations. Policy either reinforces or disrupts these patterns depending on its design [8,17,21].

Domestic division of labour and unpaid care

Unpaid care remains unequally distributed. Women perform a greater share of childcare, eldercare, and domestic management, curbing their labour-market attachment and earnings. Time-use data show persistent gaps even where female education and employment have expanded. Recognising, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care—through childcare services, eldercare, shared leave, and workplace flexibility—is central to equality [4,9,22].

The role of family policy in equality

Family policy can either entrench or alleviate inequality. Universal, affordable childcare; parental leave that is paid,

non-transferable, and incentivised for fathers; and caregiver credits in pension systems reduce penalties associated with motherhood. Tax-benefit design should avoid second-earner disincentives and high effective marginal tax rates that trap women in inactivity or informality [3,4,22].

The economic dimensions of gender

Economic foundations of gender inequality

Gender inequality rests on economic structures that have historically marginalised women’s labour and limited access to assets, credit, and social insurance. These constraints are not mere residues of tradition; they are embedded in market rules, property regimes, and organisational practices that shape bargaining power and lifetime earnings [6-9,19].

Historical evolution of the economic system: The marginalisation of women’s work

With industrialisation, wage labour outside the household became the norm and unpaid domestic labour was rendered invisible in national accounts. The male breadwinner model oriented policy around continuous, full-time careers, penalising discontinuous employment patterns common among caregivers. These historical legacies continue to affect today’s pay systems and promotion criteria [7,8,14].

Structural dimensions of economic inequality

Persistent wage gaps reflect sectoral sorting, unequal access to high-return credentials, bargaining asymmetries, discrimination, and the motherhood penalty. Asset-ownership gaps and restricted access to collateral further limit women’s entrepreneurship. Intersecting disadvantages—rural residence, disability, minority status—compound constraints [9-13,16].

Factors limiting women’s economic participation

Constraints operate on multiple margins: time (care burdens), information (networks and mentorship), finance (credit and collateral), and institutional rules (pay setting, promotion, and social-insurance eligibility). Effective reform must address each margin simultaneously to avoid substitution effects [4,9,22].

Care work and the invisible burden

Care responsibilities reduce hours worked, constrain job choice, and interrupt careers. Without childcare services and supportive

leave policies, women concentrate in part-time and informal work with lower pay and weaker protections. Recognising care as economic infrastructure—like roads and energy—elevates it from a private matter to a public investment priority [4,9,22].

Gender inequality in education

While gender gaps in enrolment have narrowed in many settings, field-of-study segregation remains stark. Women are less represented in STEM and over-represented in care-heavy disciplines, which translates into lower wages and fewer leadership tracks. Gender-responsive curricula, mentorship, and safe learning environments improve persistence and transition into high-productivity sectors [2,3,10,15,16].

Discrimination in access to finance

Women face higher rejection rates, smaller loan sizes, and shorter maturities even after controlling for fundamentals. Remedies include collateral-light instruments, public guarantees, relationship-banking reforms, gender targets in SME finance, and financial-literacy programmes combined with business development services [19,22].

Women's economic empowerment: Strategic proposals

Securing full economic participation requires coordinated legal, fiscal, and organisational reforms backed by accountability. We outline a portfolio of interventions with demonstrated impact in diverse contexts [3,4,9,22].

Expanding access to education and employment

- ****Support for Women in STEM****: Scholarships, apprenticeships, and mentorship networks to raise participation and retention; partnerships between universities and industry to ensure smooth school-to-work transitions [3,10].
- ****TVET Pathways****: High-quality technical and vocational programmes tailored to women's entry into growth sectors (advanced manufacturing, digital services, green jobs), with wrap-around services (childcare, transport).

Ensuring equal pay and decent working conditions

- ****Equal-Pay Laws and Enforcement****: Mandatory pay-equity audits, transparency, and penalties for non-compliance; salary-history bans to prevent past discrimination from compounding [4,11,12].

- ****Flexible and Secure Work****: Right to request flexibility without career penalties; predictable scheduling; safe workplaces free from harassment; shared parental leave to rebalance care burdens [22].

Easing access to finance

- ****Women's Entrepreneurship****: Gender-targeted credit lines, public guarantee schemes, seed-grant programmes, and procurement set-asides; coupled with mentorship and advisory services.
- ****Inclusive Finance****: Expanding microcredit responsibly, mobile banking, and savings products; strengthening consumer protection to avoid over-indebtedness; collecting sex-disaggregated finance data to steer policy [19,22].

Global and regional effects of women's economic participation

Raising women's participation lifts household incomes, broadens the tax base, and accelerates poverty reduction. At the regional level, convergence is faster where gender gaps close, because talent allocation improves and care externalities are better socialised. International evidence links equality to higher innovation, export diversification, and resilience to shocks [3,4,15,22].

Regional inequalities in global education systems

Gender inequality in education is most acute in low- and lower-middle-income contexts, where poverty, conflict, and entrenched norms restrict girls' access to safe and continuous schooling. These barriers are not only moral failures; they also depress human-capital formation, narrow innovation capacity, and slow demographic and economic transitions [2,3,15,19].

Illustrative regional patterns include:

- ****Sub-Saharan Africa****: Girls' attendance and completion rates trail boys' due to poverty, school distance and safety, early marriage, and care burdens. Crises (conflict, displacement, epidemics) compound these disadvantages and trigger permanent drop-out [19].
- ****Türkiye (rural/peripheral settings)****: In rural areas, lower household income, traditional norms, and long travel distances undermine girls' continuity in secondary education; early school-leaving narrows access to STEM and leadership tracks later in life [9].

Strategies to achieve gender equality in education

Securing equality in education requires coherent reforms that align curricula, staffing, infrastructure, and incentives:

- ****Gender-responsive curricula****: Remove stereotypes from textbooks; embed role models and critical thinking; integrate digital and financial literacy to widen girls' aspirations toward high-productivity fields [2,3].
- ****Affirmative measures****: Scholarships and conditional cash transfers targeted to girls in rural/low-income districts; safe-transport schemes; menstrual-hygiene and school-health programmes to prevent absenteeism [2,3,17].
- ****Women teachers and leadership****: Raising the share of women teachers and principals improves safety perceptions, expands mentorship, and normalises women's authority—effects that are strongest in conservative settings [3,15].

Women in science: Structural barriers and practical solutions

Women remain under-represented in science. The shortfall emerges along the pipeline—from socialisation and subject choice to hiring, promotion, funding, and recognition. Correctives must therefore be comprehensive [3,10,16].

- ****Transparent hiring and promotion****: With bias-aware panels, clear criteria, and feedback loops.
- ****Mentoring, sponsorship, and peer networks****: That build self-efficacy and open access to high-impact projects and labs.
- ****Family-friendly academic policies****: Predictable teaching loads, childcare on campus, shared parental leave, and evaluation criteria that discount caregiving interruptions.
- ****Grant-making reforms****: Blind review where feasible; dedicated tracks for returners after career breaks; monitoring of success rates by sex [2,3,22].

The Impact of social policies on gender equality

Social policy is a principal lever for redistributing care, smoothing income shocks, and altering incentives that shape women's labour-market attachment. Design matters: the same budget can either entrench or reduce inequality depending on eligibility rules, benefit formulas, and service capacity [4,9,22].

Social assistance and work incentives

Cash transfers reduce poverty risks for women and improve child health and schooling. Yet benefit withdrawal rules can create high effective marginal tax rates (EMTRs) that deter second earners—most often women—from entering work. Best practice combines adequate benefits with gradual tapering, earnings disregards, and active-labour-market programmes [4,22].

Childcare, parental leave, and work–family reconciliation

- ****Universal, affordable childcare****: Raises female participation and earnings; quality standards protect child outcomes [3,22].
- ****Parental leave****: That is paid, sufficiently long, and ****non-transferable for fathers**** increases men's take-up and reduces motherhood penalties [3].
- ****Flexible, secure work****: (Predictable schedules, right to request flexibility without career penalties) supports attachment during caregiving phases [22].

Tax-benefit design and second-earner penalties

Joint taxation, spousal allowances, and steep benefit tapering create second-earner disincentives. Moving toward individual taxation, neutral credits, and shallow tapers reduces EMTR spikes and strengthens women's labour-supply responses [4,22].

Legal frameworks and enforcement

Equal-pay statutes, salary-history bans, pay-transparency obligations, and effective anti-harassment regimes are necessary to change organisational behaviour. Enforcement capacity—labour inspectorates, ombuds mechanisms, collective bargaining—determines whether rights translate into practice [5,11,12].

Monitoring, data, and accountability

Sex-disaggregated indicators across education, work, health, violence, and finance are essential for governance. Public dashboards, independent audits, and time-bound targets with sanctions for non-compliance convert commitments into measurable progress [2-4,15,17].

Conclusion and Evaluation

Gender inequality is not a residual of culture; it is an institutional equilibrium reproduced by norms, markets, and

policies. The evidence reviewed across education, labour markets, health systems, and social protection shows that equality is simultaneously a human-rights imperative and a macroeconomic strategy: it expands the talent pool, strengthens resilience, and accelerates inclusive growth [2-4,15,22].

Countries that recognise, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care; remove barriers to STEM and leadership; reform tax-benefit systems to avoid second-earner traps; and embed gender-sensitive health and safety policies will reap compounding returns in productivity and human development. Success depends on coherent design, adequate funding, enforcement capacity, and transparent monitoring [3,4,17,22].

Future Strategic Steps

- ****Adopt a national gender-equality strategy****: That aligns education, labour, health, and social-protection reforms with measurable targets, budgets, and timelines [2-4].
- ****Invest in care infrastructure****: (Childcare, eldercare, disability support) as economic infrastructure with ring-fenced funding and quality standards [3,22].
- ****Close the STEM gap****: Via scholarships, mentorship, and partnerships between universities and firms; set public-procurement incentives for gender-diverse teams [3,10,16].
- ****Reform pay systems****: Through mandatory pay-equity audits, transparency, salary-history bans, and enforcement mechanisms [11,12].
- ****Fix second-earner disincentives****: By moving toward individual taxation, earnings disregards, and shallow tapers in benefit withdrawal [4,22].
- ****Strengthen safety and health****: With gender-sensitive primary care, SRH services, GBV prevention/response, and mental-health integration [17,21,23].
- ****Build data and accountability****: Sex-disaggregated indicators, public dashboards, independent audits, and sanctions for non-compliance [2-4,15,17].

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