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Gender Inequality: Rethinking Equality in a Changing Society

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Abstract

Gender inequality remains one of the most persistent forms of social inequality despite substantial progress in education, employment, political participation, and legal rights. Although women and girls have gained greater access to opportunities in many societies, significant disparities continue to exist in income, employment, leadership, unpaid care work, political representation, education, healthcare, and access to economic resources. This opinion article argues that contemporary gender inequality should not be understood simply as a consequence of individual discrimination but as a structural phenomenon embedded within institutions, social norms, labour markets, families, and cultural expectations. The article further argues that progress toward gender equality requires attention not only to women's participation but also to the redistribution of unpaid care, transformation of workplace cultures, greater representation in decision-making, and recognition of intersecting forms of disadvantage. Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, present both opportunities and risks for gender equality. A sustainable approach requires governments, employers, educational institutions, communities, and individuals to recognize gender equality as a social and economic priority rather than solely a women's issue.

Keywords: Gender Inequality; Gender Equality; Women; Social Justice; Labour Market; Gender Pay Gap; Unpaid Care Work; Leadership; Intersectionality; Social Policy

Introduction

Gender inequality is one of the oldest and most persistent forms of social inequality. Although substantial progress has been achieved in many parts of the world, gender continues to influence access to education, employment, income, political participation, healthcare, leadership, and social status.

The contemporary gender-equality debate is sometimes presented as evidence that equality has largely been achieved. Women participate extensively in higher education and the labour market, occupy positions of political leadership, and increasingly enter professions that were historically dominated by men. However, visible progress should not be confused with the elimination of structural inequality.

The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2025* estimated that 68.8% of the global gender gap had been closed, leaving 31.2% still to be addressed. At the current rate of progress, full global gender parity remains many decades away. ([weforum.org](https://www.weforum.org))

This continuing gap raises an important question: **Why does gender inequality persist despite decades of legal reform, educational expansion, and changing social attitudes?**

In my view, one explanation is that gender inequality is not maintained by a single institution or discriminatory practice. It is reproduced through interconnected economic, cultural, social, and institutional structures. Addressing it therefore requires more than equal treatment on paper. It requires changes in the conditions under which people live and work.

Gender Inequality Is a Structural Issue

Gender inequality is often discussed in terms of individual behaviour. For example, attention may focus on discriminatory employers, unequal household decisions, or stereotypes about women's abilities.

These individual behaviours matter, but they are only part of the problem.

Institutions can reproduce inequality even without explicitly intending to discriminate. Workplace structures designed around uninterrupted full-time employment may disadvantage workers who carry substantial caregiving responsibilities. Promotion systems based on continuous career progression may disadvantage people who take career breaks. Educational and professional cultures may also influence which fields men and women enter.

Consequently, gender inequality should be understood as a **structural phenomenon**.

The existence of formal equality does not necessarily produce substantive equality. Two individuals may have the same legal right to pursue a career, but their practical opportunities may differ significantly if one person carries a disproportionate share of unpaid care responsibilities.

This distinction between equality of rights and equality of opportunity is central to understanding contemporary gender inequality.

Education: Progress with Persistent Gaps

Education represents one of the areas in which gender progress has been particularly significant. In many countries, girls and women have achieved major gains in school enrolment, higher education, and professional qualifications.

However, educational equality does not automatically translate into economic or social equality.

Women remain underrepresented in some fields, particularly certain areas of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and information technology. At the same time, women are often concentrated in fields associated with education, healthcare, social services, and care work.

These patterns are influenced by multiple factors, including social expectations, role models, family attitudes, workplace culture, and perceptions about which careers are appropriate for men and women.

The challenge is therefore not simply to increase women's educational participation. It is to ensure that educational choices are not unnecessarily constrained by gender expectations and that qualifications translate into comparable employment opportunities.

The Gender Gap in Employment and Income

Employment remains one of the most important areas of gender inequality.

Women participate extensively in labour markets, yet differences remain in employment rates, occupational distribution, wages, career progression, and access to senior positions.

The gender pay gap is particularly important because it reflects several overlapping processes. Pay differences may result from occupational segregation, differences in working hours, career interruptions, unequal access to promotion, discrimination, and the economic undervaluation of traditionally female-dominated occupations.

It is therefore misleading to interpret the gender pay gap simply as a question of whether men and women receive different salaries for exactly the same job.

A broader question is:

Why are women and men distributed differently across occupations, industries, working arrangements, and levels of organizational authority?

Answering that question requires examining the structures that influence career opportunities throughout the life course.

Unpaid Care Work: The Hidden Foundation of Inequality

One of the most important but frequently overlooked dimensions of gender inequality is unpaid care work.

Household responsibilities, childcare, eldercare, cooking, cleaning, and other forms of unpaid domestic labour are essential to the functioning of society. Yet they are often economically invisible.

The United Nations has emphasized that women continue to perform substantially more unpaid care and domestic work than men globally. (unwomen.org)

This imbalance has significant consequences.

When women carry a disproportionate share of unpaid care, they may reduce working hours, decline promotions, interrupt careers, or leave employment altogether. These decisions can subsequently affect lifetime earnings, pensions, professional networks, and leadership opportunities.

The solution cannot simply be to encourage women to "work harder" or remain continuously employed. Gender equality requires **redistributing care responsibilities**.

Men must be encouraged and supported to participate equally in caregiving, while governments and employers should provide accessible childcare, parental leave, eldercare support, and flexible working arrangements.

Care should be recognized as a shared social responsibility rather than primarily a private responsibility assigned to women.

Women's Representation in Leadership

Another persistent dimension of gender inequality is the underrepresentation of women in leadership.

Women remain underrepresented in senior corporate positions, political institutions, scientific leadership, and other high-level decision-making roles. This creates a self-reinforcing problem: when leadership remains disproportionately male, institutional cultures and decision-making processes may continue to reflect historically male-dominated structures.

Representation matters not only because women deserve equal opportunities to lead but also because leadership influences policy priorities, organizational culture, and the distribution of resources.

However, simply placing women in leadership positions is not sufficient. Women leaders need genuine authority and institutional support rather than symbolic representation.

Organizations should therefore examine promotion systems, recruitment processes, mentoring, professional networks, leadership development, and workplace cultures.

Gender Stereotypes and Social Expectations

Gender inequality is also reproduced through cultural expectations.

From childhood, individuals may receive messages about what men and women are expected to be. Boys may be encouraged to be assertive, competitive, and financially independent, while girls may be encouraged to be caring, cooperative, and emotionally supportive.

These expectations can influence educational choices, career decisions, family responsibilities, and leadership aspirations.

Importantly, gender stereotypes affect men as well as women. Expectations surrounding masculinity can discourage men from expressing vulnerability, participating in caregiving, or choosing occupations perceived as feminine.

Gender equality should therefore not be framed exclusively as a women's issue. It involves expanding the range of possibilities available to **all genders**.

Intersectionality and Unequal Experiences

Gender inequality is not experienced equally by all women.

Class, race, ethnicity, disability, migration status, age, sexual orientation, geography, and other social factors can intersect with gender to produce different forms of disadvantage.

A highly educated professional woman in an urban environment may experience gender inequality differently from a low-income woman in a rural community. Similarly, women with disabilities may face barriers that are not adequately addressed by conventional gender-equality policies.

This is why an intersectional perspective is essential.

Policies that treat "women" as a single homogeneous category may benefit some groups while leaving others behind.

Effective gender policy should therefore ask not only whether women are benefiting, but **which women are benefiting and which remain excluded**.

Gender Inequality in the Digital and AI Era

The rapid development of artificial intelligence creates new questions about gender equality.

AI has the potential to expand access to education, employment, entrepreneurship, and information. However, technological systems can also reproduce existing inequalities if they are trained on biased historical data or developed without sufficient diversity among designers.

Employment transformation is particularly important. The International Labour Organization has reported that women are more likely than men to be exposed to generative AI because women are disproportionately represented in highly digitized clerical and administrative occupations. ([ilo.org](https://www.ilo.org/))

This does not necessarily mean that women will experience greater job losses, because exposure can also involve job transformation and productivity enhancement. Nevertheless, it demonstrates why gender considerations should be incorporated into AI policy.

Women must have equal access to digital skills, AI education, technology entrepreneurship, research, and decision-making positions within the technology sector.

The future of AI should not reproduce the gender inequalities of the past.

From Equal Opportunity to Equal Outcomes

One of the central debates surrounding gender equality concerns the distinction between equal opportunity and equal outcomes.

Equal opportunity is essential. Individuals should not be prevented from pursuing education, employment, leadership, or political participation because of gender.

However, equal opportunity alone may not be sufficient when individuals begin from unequal social conditions.

For example, two parents may technically have equal access to employment, but if childcare remains unaffordable and caregiving expectations fall primarily on women, their practical opportunities will differ.

This means that achieving meaningful equality sometimes requires **targeted interventions**.

Such interventions may include parental leave for both parents, affordable childcare, pay transparency, anti-discrimination policies, leadership programmes, flexible work, and measures to increase women's participation in underrepresented fields.

These policies should not be viewed as preferential treatment. Rather, they can help address structural conditions that prevent formal equality from becoming substantive equality.

What Should Governments and Organizations Do?

Governments should strengthen laws against discrimination while also investing in social infrastructure that supports equality.

Affordable childcare, parental leave, healthcare, education, safe transportation, and social protection can significantly influence women's ability to participate fully in economic and social life.

Employers should examine their recruitment and promotion practices, pay structures, workplace flexibility, harassment policies, and leadership pipelines.

Educational institutions should challenge gender stereotypes while providing girls and women with opportunities in fields where they remain underrepresented.

Men should also be included in gender-equality initiatives. Encouraging men's participation in caregiving and challenging restrictive expectations surrounding masculinity are essential components of long-term change.

Gender equality will not be achieved by women alone.

Conclusion

Gender inequality remains a major social challenge despite significant progress in education, employment, political participation, and legal rights. Its persistence demonstrates that formal equality is not sufficient to eliminate structural disadvantage.

The most important issues are interconnected: unequal unpaid care work affects employment; employment inequality affects income; income inequality affects economic independence; and limited economic independence can influence political and social participation.

Addressing these inequalities requires a comprehensive approach.

Gender equality should not be understood as a competition between men and women. It should be understood as a question of **fairness, opportunity, dignity, and social development**.

A genuinely equal society is one in which gender does not determine the opportunities available to an individual, the value assigned to their work, their responsibility for unpaid care, or their ability to participate in decision-making.

Achieving that society requires more than legislation. It requires changes in institutions, workplaces, families, education systems, cultural expectations, and technologies.

The future of gender equality will ultimately depend on whether societies are willing to move beyond recognizing inequality toward actively transforming the structures that reproduce it.

Gender equality is therefore not merely a women's rights issue. It is a fundamental requirement for a fair, productive, and socially sustainable society.