



Gender Inequality in the Workplace: Organizational Barriers, Social Norms, Institutional Practices, and Policy Interventions

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Abstract

Gender inequality remains a persistent workplace challenge despite advances in legal protection, organizational policy, and women's labor-force participation. Unequal pay, occupational segregation, restricted leadership access, caregiving burdens, discriminatory practices, and institutional norms continue to shape women's employment experiences. This article examines the major organizational, social, institutional, and policy-related factors that sustain gender inequality in the workplace and evaluates the mechanisms through which they affect career progression, leadership representation, employment security, and organizational participation. A narrative review approach was used to synthesize recent literature on gender inequality in employment, with attention to theoretical perspectives, workplace manifestations, organizational barriers, social norms, institutional practices, and equality interventions. The evidence indicates that workplace gender inequality is produced through interconnected mechanisms, including recruitment and promotion bias, gendered organizational cultures, occupational stereotypes, unequal caregiving expectations, limited access to professional networks, weak policy implementation, and structural underrepresentation in decision-making. These inequalities contribute to lower earnings, slower career progression, reduced job satisfaction, weaker organizational commitment, and broader social and economic disparities. Policy and organizational interventions are more effective when supported by transparency, accountability, leadership commitment, and sustained cultural change. Achieving meaningful workplace gender equality requires coordinated organizational reform, institutional accountability, inclusive leadership practices, and policy measures that address both formal barriers and embedded social norms.

Keywords: Gender equality; Gender norms; Institutional inequality; Organizational barriers; Workplace discrimination

1. Introduction

Women have made great strides in education, employment and legal protections from discrimination in the workplace, gender inequality persists. Earnings, occupational distribution, access to leadership roles, career progression, job security and involvement in decision making are still different. No single factor causes these inequalities; they are generated through a combination of social expectations, workplace structures, workplace practices and broader institutional arrangements. The significance of Kalev and Deutsch (2018) is that organisations are crucial settings for the reproduction of gender inequality or its challenge as everyday practices in the workplace shape the allocation of jobs, authority, rewards and opportunities. Thus, the challenges in comprehending workplace gender inequality must be addressed not only at the level of individuals, but also at the level of organizational systems where employment decisions are made.

Other gender norms outside of the workplace influence employment experiences. Career decisions and employer attitudes toward workers might be affected by social norms for caregiving, family duties, leadership and occupations. Gender norms, as highlighted by Gupta et al. (2019), are mediated by social and institutional settings and can lead to unequal opportunities in various aspects of life. These norms can consequently influence women's participation in specific jobs, staying in the workforce, desire to aspire to leadership roles and access to advancement.

Workplace gender inequality is not only an organizational issue, but also a social issue since employment provides access to income, independence, social status, mobility in the workplace and long-term economic security. Gender segregation in employment is still significant, with women and men still overrepresented in certain occupations, industries, and job levels. Carranza et al. (2023) demonstrated that a variety of factors contribute to the influence of gender-based employment segregation, such as social norms, choices in education and occupation, employer practices, care responsibilities, and institutional settings. This segregation may help to the disparities in earning potential, working conditions, progression, and access to decision-making roles.

These differences can be exacerbated by organisational arrangements as well. Baron and Bielby (2018) pointed out that the design and distribution of jobs can limit access to equal occupational opportunities and help perpetuate gender segregation in the workplace. Career inequality can also happen when pressures cause it to be harder for women to go on in their careers or get promoted. Kossek et al. (2017) contended that apparent choices made by women to exit specific career streams do not necessarily mean that they are making a voluntary choice; workplace characteristics, lack of flexibility, caregiving stresses, and unequal career opportunities can affect women's decisions.

Inequality in gender also has implications outside of the career. Restricted access to leadership and decision-making roles can affect institutional governance in terms of diversity; and may limit the diversity of perspectives in decision making processes within institutions. Structural and professional barriers are still hindering women's advancement into higher-level positions within global health, as outlined by Smith and Sinkford (2022). The patterns suggest that leadership inequality can continue even in professions that women play a significant role in and make a large contribution to.

Organizational and institutional contexts are key to sustaining or decreasing gender disparities. Career outcomes are impacted by recruitment practices, promotion requirements, performance assessment, informal professional networks, organizational culture, policies on work–family balance, and leadership structure. Institutions can look gender neutral but have different impacts when functioning in an environment that has been influenced by existing gender norms.

O'Connor (2020) showed that in male dominated institutions, gender inequalities can be difficult to shift as formal equality programmes can exist alongside entrenched institutional cultures, power dynamics, and practices. This implies that the use of equality policies alone might not be enough, unless organisations consider how the day-to-day practices and institutional norms impact on different groups of employees. Likewise, policy action can be beyond individual organizations. Heymann et al. (2019) noted that legal, programmatic and policy interventions can play a role in addressing restrictive gender norms and structural inequality if they attend to the broader context that perpetuates inequitable outcomes.

Though much research has been conducted on gender inequality, most of the analyses have tended to focus on one or two aspects of gender barriers, cultural norms, institutional arrangements, or policy interventions — none of which is considered a single solution. To determine how these dimensions interact, and why there may still be gender gaps even if there are formal equality policies, a more integrated examination is required. Special care also needs to be taken in the implementation of organizational policies in the actual work environment.

The purpose of this article is to critically analyze the organizational, social, institutional and policy-related issues which lead to the continued existence of gender inequalities in work. It aims to map, with precision, key dimensions of workplace inequality, and to identify organisational-level obstacles and social norms that maintain workplace inequality, as well as to analyze institutional practices, and to review policy and organisational interventions to advance gender equality. The article also explores how various factors of influence work together to influence women's employment experiences, career advancement and leadership representation.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Socialization, labour-market structures, organizational processes and intersectionality are complementary lenses through which one might understand workplace gender inequality. These two perspectives tell us how inequalities in opportunity and outcome are created and perpetuated in the context of work. The primary conceptual underpinnings that were reviewed are summarized in Figure 1.

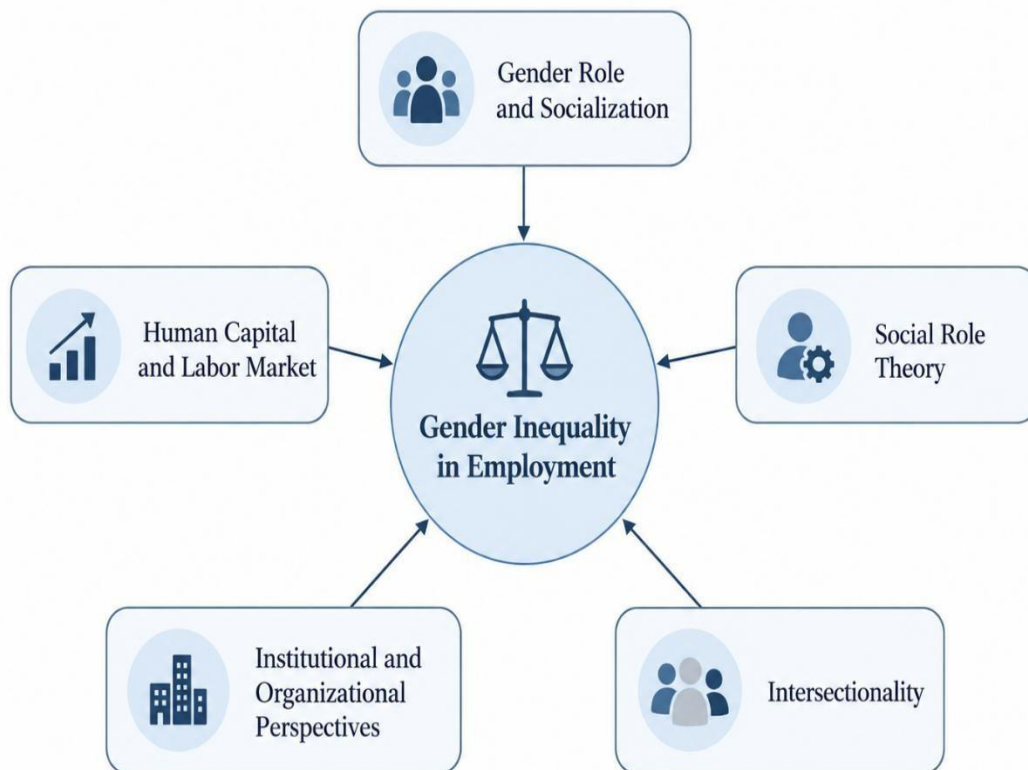


Figure 1. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations of Workplace Gender Inequality

These perspectives indicate that gender inequality is shaped by both social expectations and institutional arrangements. Organizational learning and policy implementation are therefore important for challenging practices that reproduce inequality

2.1 Concept of Gender Inequality in Employment

Gender inequality in employment is the enduring disparity in employment opportunities, wages, promotion, leadership, training and working place security between women and men. This inequalities are not only about individual capability, but also about the structural and social conditions. Joshi and Parmar (2024) have pointed out that women continue to be under-represented in several sectors of employment due to persistent social, cultural and institutional barriers. De Welde and Stepnick (2023) also demonstrate that organizational cultures can lead to the normalization of inequitable treatment, and to the suppression of the discussion of gender disadvantage. Gender inequality needs to be viewed as a problem of the workplace, which is influenced by formal structures as well as daily organizational practice.

2.2 Gender Role and Socialization Perspectives

Gender role and socialization theories help to understand how society's expectations are reinforced and affect career decision making and behavior in the workplace. Values and attitudes about women's roles as carers and men's roles as leaders and decision makers can be passed on to families, education systems, communities and organizations. These expectations can have an impact on employees' expectations and employers' judgements. Stereotyped perceptions of women may create discrimination when they are perceived as being inconsistent with the requirements of specific professions, or when they are perceived as a barrier to holding positions of leadership (Heilman & Caleo, 2018). De Welde and Stepnick (2023) also stress that institutional cultures can perpetuate gendered expectations through 'normal' practices and norms within the profession.

2.3 Human Capital and Labor Market Perspectives

The human capital view of employment differences focuses on education, skills, experience, training, and employment continuity. But social and organizational factors influence access to such resources. Women might encounter breaks in their careers, fewer opportunities for training or focus on jobs where there are fewer

opportunities for promotion. Joshi and Parmar (2024) point out that the gender disparity in employment in some occupations reflects broader employment and social restrictions. Gender segregation in occupations and job levels can also lead to differences in wages, authority and mobility from a labor-market point of view. The differences in human capital should then be taken into account in addition to the structural factors that affect professional opportunities.

2.4 Social Role Theory

Social role theory is related to the concept of gender inequality which stems from socially constructed expectations for women and men. Women are more associated with the care-taking and supportive roles, and men more with the authority and leadership roles. This projection can affect hiring, appraisal and promotion. Discrimination can happen when women are viewed as lacking the qualities that are traditionally considered to be associated with male-dominated occupations, as Heilman and Caleo (2018) state. These preconceptions can hinder women even if they have the same qualifications and work history. This is why social role theory is helpful to understanding how more general cultural expectations are manifested in inequitable work outcomes.

2.5 Institutional and Organizational Perspectives

Institutional/organizational perspectives emphasize the nature of workplace structures and practices and the impact they have on gender inequality. Inequalities can be reproduced or decreased through recruitment systems, promotion procedures, assessment criteria, informal networks, and organizational culture. Macneil and Liu (2017) highlight that in order to improve workplace gender equality, organizational learning can help organizations reflect on current practices and the effectiveness of the implementation of equality policies. De Welde and Stepnick (2023) further demonstrate that existing institutional cultures can make it challenging to question gender inequality. Organizations can therefore be part of the problem by being a setting where inequality manifests as well as being part of the solution as a potential agent of change.

2.6 Intersectionality in Workplace Inequality

Intersectionality acknowledges that the inequality of gender is felt differently according to other social identities and positions. Gender can be compounded by race/ethnicity, disability, age, socioeconomic status, and migration status, which may result in unique patterns of disadvantage. Hariadi et al (2024) point to the fact that race and disability may exacerbate workplace inequalities for women. An intersectional perspective in turn does not seek to assume equality between women but instead looks at how multiple inequalities intersect in determining recruitment and promotion, inclusion and access to opportunities in the workplace. This strategy facilitates more inclusive institutional and policy measures to address gender disparities.

3. Manifestations of Gender Inequality in the Workplace

Gender inequality in the workplace is manifested in a variety of linked mechanisms that impact economic outcomes, career pathways and participation in organizations. These symptoms occur when structural conditions, social norms and institutional practices combine. Table 1 will summarize the key ways gender inequality exists in the workplace and the implications for the organization.

Table 1. Key Manifestations, Underlying Mechanisms, and Consequences of Workplace Gender Inequality

Manifestation	Underlying Mechanisms	Workplace Expression	Potential Consequences	Key References
Gender pay gap	Occupational sorting, unequal promotion, career interruptions, discriminatory wage practices	Differences in earnings and access to higher-paying positions	Reduced lifetime earnings, financial security, and economic independence	Mehta & Sehgal (2025); Jayachandran (2021)
Occupational segregation	Gender norms, stereotypical role expectations, unequal access to occupations	Concentration of women and men in different sectors and job categories	Unequal occupational status, pay, authority, and career mobility	Hay et al. (2019); Heise et al. (2019)
Leadership and promotion inequality	Gender bias, restricted networks, stereotypical leadership expectations	Underrepresentation of women in managerial and senior decision-making roles	Limited organizational influence and slower career progression	Dosunmu & Dichaba (2023); Mehta & Sehgal (2025)
Unequal career development	Limited mentorship, sponsorship, networking, and developmental	Unequal access to training and advancement	Lower promotion prospects and weaker leadership	Dosunmu & Dichaba (2023); Bianco

	assignments	opportunities	pipelines	et al. (2017)
Employment and contractual insecurity	Gendered labor-market structures, caregiving constraints, informal employment	Greater exposure to temporary, part-time, or insecure work	Reduced benefits, employment stability, and long-term career development	Jayachandran (2021); Heise et al. (2019)
Harassment and discrimination	Gender stereotypes, unequal power relations, weak organizational accountability	Exclusion, discriminatory treatment, harassment, and biased decisions	Reduced well-being, workplace participation, safety, and retention	Hay et al. (2019); Mehta & Sehgal (2025); Bianco et al. (2017)

3.1 Gender Pay Gap

Economic segregation of women and men is a situation where women and men are concentrated in the same sector, profession or job category. Women tend to be overrepresented in service oriented, administrative, and caregiving roles, and overrepresented in technical, managerial, and authority-based roles. Gendered norms in professional contexts can influence occupational roles, and generate unequal responsibility and authority (Hay et al., 2019). Similarly, Heise et al. (2019) state that restrictive gender norms affect what is expected of work and social role. This segregation can cause disparities in wages, professional status, job security and opportunity for career advancement.

3.2 Occupational Segregation

Economic segregation of women and men is a situation where women and men are concentrated in the same sector, profession or job category. Women tend to be overrepresented in service oriented, administrative, and caregiving roles, and overrepresented in technical, managerial, and authority-based roles. Gendered norms in professional contexts can influence occupational roles, and generate unequal responsibility and authority (Hay et al., 2019). Similarly, Heise et al. (2019) state that restrictive gender norms affect what is expected of work and social role. This segregation can cause disparities in wages, professional status, job security and opportunity for career advancement.

3.3 Leadership and Promotion Inequalities

The gender gap is also evident in the underrepresentation in management and leadership roles. Gender inequalities in leadership opportunities can stem from the organization's culture, informal networks, stereotypes of leadership, and lack of access to influential decision makers. Dosunmu and Dichaba (2023) have identified organizational barriers which may hinder women's progress and limit their opportunities for promotion to senior roles. Similarly, Mehta and Sehgal (2025) report that gender bias and unequal career opportunities remain to impact workplace advancement. These can lead to a large gender divide between workers and decision-makers, which can persist over time.

3.4 Unequal Access to Training and Career Development

Long-term career mobility is important and training, mentoring, networking, and professional development are important items. Women might be less likely to be involved in these activities if these are not sponsored informally, if the networks are male dominated, or if the career structures clash with domestic responsibilities. According to Dosunmu and Dichaba (2023), organizational practices can have a detrimental effect on professional development and advancement for women. Bianco et al. (2017) also demonstrate that the implementation of measures to change constraining gender norms can improve women's economic engagement and ability to access jobs and employment. Equality of opportunity will therefore be necessary to eliminate inequities in occupational status and leadership representation over time.

3.5 Employment Security and Contractual Inequality

Women might be more likely to be exposed to transitory, non-standard, part-time or less secure types of jobs. These can limit access to benefits, promotion opportunities, income security and long-term career progression. Jayachandran (2021) shows that social norms can shape women's employment patterns, including whether and how they enter into work, in situations where their mobility, family commitments or perceptions of suitable work limit their employment options. Heise et al. (2019) also reiterate that gender norms that are restrictive may result in inequitable social and economic opportunities. Employment security should, therefore, be regarded as an important measure of gender equality in the workplace, in addition to the measure of workforce participation.

3.6 Workplace Harassment and Discrimination

Harassment and discrimination are still major obstacles to a safe and equal workplace. These can be obvious behaviors or subtle behaviours such as excluding someone, stereotyping, treating them differently or making decisions that are biased. Hay et al. (2019) suggest that institutional gender norms need to be shifted to tackle gender inequalities in the institutional setting. Discrimination and workplace bias are also cited as another main impediment to gender equality by Mehta and Sehgal (2025). Concurrently, the push for non-conformity and the empowerment of women in the economy can help bring about a wider cultural shift (Bianco et al., 2017). Therefore, a strong response needs to involve clear organizational policies and procedures, accountability, reporting, and ongoing action to change the culture of the workplace.

4. Organizational Barriers to Gender Equality

Organizational obstacles to gender equality can be seen from the recruitment, assessment, promotion, workplace culture, informal networks, leadership, and work–life balance. These barriers can contribute to the perpetuation of inequities in access to opportunities and hinder the advancement of women in their careers. The main organisational challenges are shown in Figure 2.

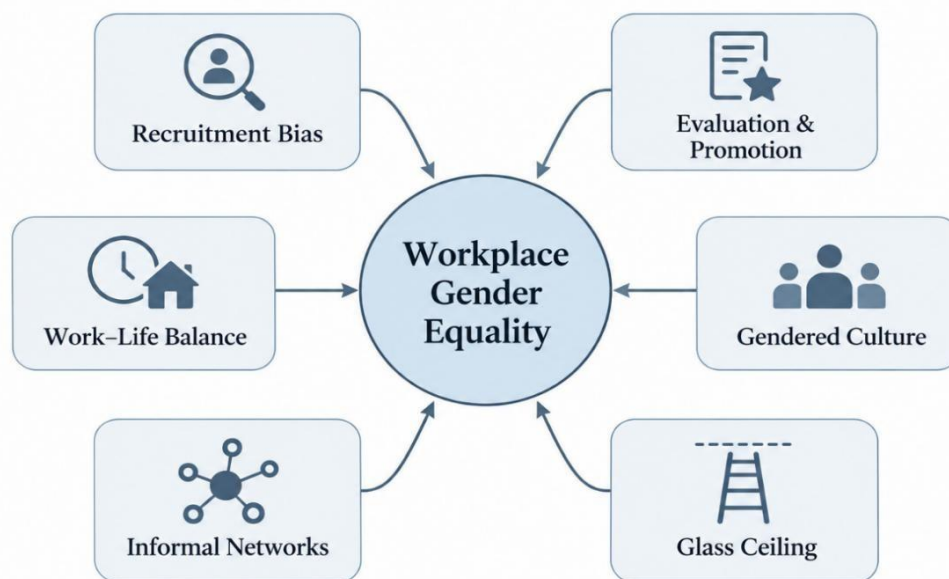


Figure 2. Organizational Barriers to Gender Equality

As shown in Figure 2, gender inequality is sustained by interconnected organizational processes rather than a single workplace practice. Addressing these barriers therefore requires coordinated changes in formal procedures, institutional culture, leadership systems, and accountability mechanisms.

4.1 Recruitment and Selection Bias

The recruitment and selection procedures are one area that can reinforce gender inequality if job descriptions, screening procedures, interview questions, hiring decisions, or the process of determining who can make a good hiring decision are influenced by the implicit assumptions about who is the right person. Women might be disadvantaged when organizations tie leadership, technical expertise and the ability to be available to them for a long time to men. Gender inequality can be reduced through organizational interventions as demonstrated in Guthridge et al. (2022), but appropriate design and implementation of recruitment and selection practices is essential. The importance of formal restrictions and social norms on the economic involvement of women is also highlighted by Milazzo and Goldstein (2019). These are all ways to reduce bias at the door that can be achieved by making the hiring process more transparent, conducting structured interviews, and holding individuals accountable for selection decisions.

4.2 Performance Evaluation and Promotion Practices

Subjective, inconsistent and gendered assessments of performance and promotion systems can work against women. There could be divergent assessment of women's leadership behavior, assertiveness, availability, or career interruptions. Organizational and social barriers can hinder women's career growth at several levels which have been identified by Sarwar and Imran (2019). In addition, Guthridge et al. (2022) suggest that intentions to promote equality are more likely to be effective if they are specific to some aspects of the organization's processes, not just general expressions of commitment. The setting of clear promotion criteria, common promotion measures, an open process of decision making and frequent review of promotion outcomes can aid in minimising unequal promotion.

4.3 Gendered Organizational Culture

Organizational culture has an impact on what people usually expect from one another, how they relate to one another, and how they are expected to behave. Gender norms in a gendered environment can be seen as the norm for leadership and career advancement, and caregiving duties or flexible working hours may be seen as less serious about work. Clavero and Galligan (2021) identify implementation challenges for gender equality programmes if the formal plan is implemented without altering the institutional culture. Similar is also the role that social norms continue to play in women's participation and access to power as noted by Milazzo and Goldstein (2019). This means that cultural change is needed as well as formal policy, and that we need to look at the daily things we do and our expectations and accountability for gender equality.

4.4 Leadership Structures and the Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling is a phenomenon that prevents women from advancing their careers into higher positions, even when they have the necessary skills and experience. The barriers can range from unequal promotion systems and inadequate sponsorship, to lack of representation in leadership positions and a tradition of leadership that prioritizes classic masculine career paths. Thelma and Ngulube (2024) highlight structural, social and organizational barriers as significant factors that hinder women's progression into leadership roles. Sarwar and Imran (2019) also reveal that obstacles can manifest on an individual, organizational, and social level and have the potential to limit women's job opportunities. So, tackling the glass ceiling isn't just about getting more people working, it's also about enhancing leadership pipelines, succession planning, sponsorship, and opportunities to move into decision-making positions.

4.5 Informal Networks and Unequal Access to Opportunities

Informal networks may affect access to mentorship, sponsorship, information, high visibility assignments and leadership opportunities. If such networks are male dominated, women's women might not be extended the same chance to develop strong professional connections. Thelma and Ngulube (2024) report that low network access and mentorship can impede women's leadership development. Additionally, Guthridge et al. (2022) recommend that structured organizational interventions can enhance gender equality if they address specific barriers to advancement. Strategic assignments, mentoring and sponsorship programmes, transparent assignment allocation and increased access to professional networks can thus address skill gaps which are hard to identify by formal policy.

4.6 Work–Life Balance and Career Progression

Caregiving responsibilities remain an important factor in career continuity and advancement and are strongly associated with work–life balance, which in turn is strongly associated with gender equality. Fixed hours, inflexibility, lack of support from family members, negative consequences of parenting at work may limit women's advancement in the workforce. The study by Sarwar and Imran (2019) indicates that work–family pressures is an important factor affecting women's career development. Clavero and Galligan (2021) also demonstrate that there is limited impact of equality policies when institutional practice is not sufficiently supportive. Flexible working conditions, Parental leave, childcare provision and assessment arrangements that do not penalise career breaks for childcare can help to ensure fairer career progression.

5. Social Norms and Gendered Expectations

Social norms affect gender equality in the workplace through their norms about caring, job appropriateness, leadership, and work dedication. These expectations influence career pathways as well as organizational decision making. Table 2 gives a summary of the key ways in which gendered expectations affect employment outcomes.

Table 2. Social Norms and Their Workplace Consequences

Social Norm	Workplace Expression	Main Consequence	References
Traditional gender roles	Unequal expectations for care and leadership	Restricted career progression	Lau et al. (2021); Allen et al. (2021)
Caregiving responsibilities	Reduced mobility and working flexibility	Career interruptions	Torres et al. (2024); Coe et al. (2019)
Motherhood penalty	Lower perceived commitment and fewer opportunities	Slower promotion and earnings growth	Torres et al. (2024); Coe et al. (2019)
Leadership stereotypes	Masculine traits associated with authority	Underrepresentation in senior roles	Mousa et al. (2021); Allen et al. (2021)
Occupational stereotypes	Gendered perceptions of suitable jobs	Occupational segregation	Lau et al. (2021); Mousa et al. (2021)
Cultural norms	Variation in acceptance of women's work and authority	Unequal opportunities across contexts	Lau et al. (2021); Coe et al. (2019)

5.1 Traditional Gender Roles

Traditional gender roles shape the expectations regarding work, roles and behavior of women and men. Women are generally associated with care taking and supportive roles, men with authority, income generation and leadership. Such assumptions can affect employment opportunities and women's representation in decision making roles at work. Lau et al. (2021) reveal that policies can undermine efforts to achieve gender equality if they are developed without thought to the role of women and their needs. Similarly, Allen et al. (2021) assert that gender inequity is exacerbated when institutions are perpetuated on the basis of traditional norms and identities, and not when institutions are restructured to facilitate gender equality.

5.2 Caregiving and Domestic Responsibilities

Gender inequalities in work and domestic roles can have a significant impact on women's employment continuity, hours worked, job mobility, and opportunities for advancing their careers. Family responsibilities can impose additional restrictions on women in regard to reducing paid employment, forgoing promotion to leadership positions, or restriction on moving to other geographical locations. In their article, Torres et al. (2024) point out that caregiving and motherhood are significant factors that influence women's advancement in their careers within professional environments. In addition, Coe et al. (2019) stress the need for gender-equality-enhancing organizational practices, like flexible working, parent-friendly work policies and career structures. To correct the inequity in caregiving, reform in the workplace is needed, as well as a shift in social norms about family responsibilities.

5.3 Motherhood Penalty and Fatherhood Advantage

Career disadvantages of motherhood include missed opportunities for promotion, slower wage growth, interrupted employment, and assuming commitment. Fathers, however, do not face the same kind of consequences and sometimes they are thought of as more stable or responsible. Torres et al. (2024) demonstrate that often, the status of being a mother is a significant disadvantage to women's career progression, and that evidence-based interventions are required to overcome these disparities. Furthermore, organizational systems shouldn't punish breaks in the career path associated with caregiving, as put forth by Coe et al. (2019). A range of measures to make workplaces family friendly, clear promotion processes and equal parental leave can help mitigate the differential career outcomes of parenthood.

5.4 Social Expectations Regarding Leadership and Authority

Some of the characteristics usually attributed to leading are traditionally male-oriented attributes, like dominance, confidence, decisiveness and always being on the job. Women may experience different standards of behaviour expected of their leadership, and the choices made about their promotion, because of these expectations. According to Mousa et al. (2021), organizational culture, leadership development, mentorship, and structural support are factors that can help promote the advancement of women in healthcare leadership. Allen et al. (2021) further note that the solution to women's path to progress is systemic change where institutional norms are disadvantageous. Thus, to diminish leadership inequality, organisations need to make leadership expectations gender inclusive and make leadership an equal to gender without relying on gendered preconceptions about behaviour and career pathway.

5.5 Stereotypes and Occupational Choices

Individual career decisions as well as organizational decisions on the appropriateness of people for certain jobs may be influenced by gender stereotypes. Caring, teaching and administrative jobs might be deemed more feminine, and technical and leadership positions are considered more masculine. Even when the goal is to promote equality, policy and practice can be influenced by unwarranted assumptions about gender, as Lau et al. (2021) show. Additionally, Mousa et al. (2021) demonstrate that in the context of women's advancement, organizational interventions are important to address structural and cultural barriers. Breaking the mold of jobs for occupation demands systemic change in recruitment, education, mentoring and workplace culture.

5.6 Cultural Differences in Workplace Gender Norms

Gender inequality in the workplace is not homogenous: it can manifest in different ways in different societies, industries, and institutions. The expectations for women's participation and their progression into work, family, mobility, authority and leadership may be shaped by cultural norms. Lau et al. (2021) warn that equality efforts can suffer when they are based on general beliefs, instead of factual circumstances. Also, Coe et al. (2019) stress the importance of using organizational practices that take into consideration the specific barriers women encounter in specific workplaces. Therefore, gender-equality strategies should take into account cultural and institutional differences and should not be equivalent in all the settings.

6. Institutional Practices and Structural Inequalities

Institutional practices contribute to workplace gender inequality in terms of policy implementation, organizational routines, representation of women, women's accountability, and women's access to flexible working arrangements. These structural inequalities can perpetuate or exacerbate inequalities. The principal dimensions of the institution are summarized in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Institutional and Structural Barriers to Gender Equality

As shown in Figure 3, structural inequality is sustained through interconnected institutional mechanisms rather than isolated practices. Effective change therefore requires stronger implementation, inclusive decision-making, monitoring, and external institutional support.

6.1 Workplace Policies and Implementation Gaps

Formal gender-equality policies can be in place and yet outcomes be unequal, due to inconsistent or weak implementation. Promises of equal opportunity, anti-discrimination, and fair promotion are not enough if the norms of society and/or managerial discretion still influence the day-to-day work. Syed et al. (2018) demonstrate how relations of gender equality in employment is a result of interplay between organizational practices, social relations, and institutional conditions. Similarly, informal institutional practices have been shown to challenge formal equality measures by Galea et al. (2020). Good implementation will thus need to have clear procedures, managerial accountability, regular review and consistency between the policy and the practice in the workplace.

6.2 Institutional Discrimination

Institutional discrimination is the disadvantageous treatment of women in an institutional or organizational rule, routine or culture that is not obviously discriminatory. This can be captured in the recruitment, evaluation, promotion and task allocation systems as well as professional recognition. While individual-level implicit bias certainly exists, Pritlove et al. (2019) warn that structural conditions that enable inequality to persist are not always captured when looking at individual-level implicit bias. Similarly, Marín-Spiotta et al. (2020) demonstrate that negative professional climates limit inclusion and participation. Solving institutional discrimination, however, will not be a matter of only raising awareness among individuals but also involve changing institutional structures, reporting procedures, accountability systems and culture.

6.3 Flexible Work and Parental Leave Practices

Flexible working/parental leave can assist gender equality by facilitating working and caregiving. But these policies can be less effective if viewed as a career threat for employees taking caregiving leave or if caregiving leave is seen as a woman's job. Family responsibilities and workplace expectations are identified as important barriers for career advancement of women by Al-Asfour et al. (2017). Syed et al. (2018) also note the importance of the broader social and institutional environment, which affects employment outcomes. Policies need to, therefore, offer fair access to flexibility and parental leave, while not negatively impacting promotion,

performance review or future career development.

6.4 Representation in Decision-Making Structures

It is important to have women in senior committees, executive teams, professional boards, and other decision-making bodies as these have an impact on allocation, recruitment, promotion and institutional priorities. Women's underrepresentation may reduce their control over policies that directly impact workplace equality. Al-Asfour et al. (2017) point to limited chances for advancement as an enduring hurdle for women aspiring to higher level careers. Galea et al. (2020) also show how informal institutional arrangements can mediate in access to authority and influence. To increase representation, it is important to have transparent procedures for appointments, leadership opportunities, sponsorship, and informal practices that shape who is included in decision-making.

6.5 Accountability and Gender Monitoring Mechanisms

To ensure that gender-equality policies are effective, there needs to be some form of monitoring to be able to see the persistent gaps and determine if there is a difference in result from interventions. Some examples of relevant indicators might be: recruitment, pay, promotion, retention, leadership representation, complaints, access to professional development. The structural responses are suggested by Pritlove et al (2019) as being needed since they feel that individual-level responses alone are insufficient to address systemic inequality. Marin-Spiotta et al. (2020) also highlight the significance of institutional responsibility as creating inclusive professional environments. Ongoing gender audits, clear reporting, specific goals and targets, and leadership responsibility can therefore help to transform organisations from symbolic to actualized improvements in workplace equality.

6.6 Role of Trade, Professional, and Regulatory Institutions

TUs, professional associations, accreditation bodies and regulatory institutions can have a positive impact on workplace gender equality beyond their own borders. These institutions can do a lot of things, including the development of professional standards, provision of anti-discrimination protections, monitoring of employment practices, and advocacy for just working conditions. Syed et al. (2018) show that the relationship between workplaces and the wider institutional context has an impact on gender equality. Galea et al. (2020) also demonstrate that informal norms in industries can influence gendered employment practices. External institutions, thus, may have the potential to serve an important role in setting expectations, increasing accountability, assisting workers, and urging organizations to address structural inequalities which may not be solvable from within.

7. Consequences of Workplace Gender Inequality

7.1 Effects on Employee Well-Being

Gender inequity in the workplace can have a detrimental impact on psychological well-being, confidence, professional identity, and perceptions of fairness. Stress and a lack of engagement at work can result from repeated experiences of workplace exclusion, unequal recognition, limited opportunities, and discriminatory treatment. Liani et al. (2020) demonstrate how the combination of gender inequalities can impact women's career trajectories and result in compounded hardships throughout their careers. Such impacts might be greater when gender intersects with other forms of social inequality. This can impact career growth and workers' sense of belonging, motivation, and well-being in the workplace.

7.2 Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment

Employees are likely to be dissatisfied with workplace systems when they feel that they are unfair and feel their chances of promotion are less due to the disparity or lack of opportunities. If women are being promoted less frequently, poorly received and not considered in leadership and decision making, it can lead to lower trust among colleagues and lower levels of commitment in the long run. Despite positive trends in women's representation, Lyness and Grotto (2018) show that there are still obstacles to women's representation in leadership positions. Frequent inequitable treatment can lead to decreased engagement or even an increase in willingness to leave the organization. This means gender equality can impact retention, morale and organizational loyalty as well as formal career outcomes.

7.3 Career Advancement and Earnings

Where there is gender inequality, there is gender exclusion from promotion, leadership, professional development and income growth. Women can be progressing slower when faced with unequal access to networks, sponsorship, high-visibility assignments, or senior roles. Liani et al. (2020) cite several overlapping obstacles that affect women's career advancement in the scientific field. Lyness and Grotto (2018) also demonstrate that a lack of leadership can exist even when women's employment rates rise. As time goes on,

the earnings gap may add up and lead to a loss of pension benefits, fewer opportunities to lead and make decisions, and lower participation in leadership roles.

7.4 Organizational Performance and Productivity

Gender imbalance can also impact organizational performance, through underutilization of talent. Organizations can lose out on the skills, knowledge, and leadership potential of employees if they are not provided opportunities for women to perform or evaluated fairly. Lyness and Grotto (2018) point out that there are barriers to women's access to influential positions in the organisation, which persists in leadership. A lack of equality in the workplace can also lead to diminished employee morale, decreased retention and less employee commitment. Fairer systems of recruitment, development, evaluation and promotion of staff can then help optimize the use of talent and build organisational capacity.

7.5 Workforce Diversity and Innovation

Gender Disparity may narrow workforce diversity in specific roles, technical areas, leadership roles and new digital opportunities. Mariscal et al. 2019 emphasize the need to tackle the gender digital divide, since unequal access to digital skills and technologies can limit the economic and professional involvement of women. More diversity can provide more variation in experiences and/or points of view in teams and decision-making. As gender barriers hinder participation, organizations could miss out on becoming more inclusive, reaching out to multiple stakeholders and improving innovation in evolving professional settings.

7.6 Wider Social and Economic Consequences

Inequality in the workplace does not just affect the workplace – inequalities in access to education, employment, technology, income and leadership can affect wider inequalities in society. Gender barriers to education can affect the participation and learning of girls, which can impact their employment and economic life opportunities, as demonstrated by Psaki et al. (2022). Similarly, Mariscal et al. (2019) show digital inequalities can limit women's involvement in increasingly tech-driven economies. These disadvantages may compound throughout the life course, impacting household resources, economic autonomy and social engagement. Decreasing workplace inequality is a part of a larger campaign for gender equality in education, employment and economic development.

8. Policy and Organizational Interventions

Targeting gender inequality in the workplace demands integrated political and institutional measures, which involve both formal and informal arrangements in the workplace. Equal pay policies and increased pay transparency can be used to help uncover inequitable pay gaps and increase pay system accountability. The standardization of salary bands, rules for promotion, and regular pay reviews can help minimize discretionary practices that can help create disparities in pay. Anti-discrimination/harassment policies are also key but will be effective only if there is a confidential reporting system, credible investigation procedures, protection from retaliation, and consistent enforcement.

When diversity, equity and inclusion efforts go beyond symbolic, they can contribute to institutional change when backed by measurable outcomes. Mentorship, sponsorship and leadership development programs might be key for women who don't have access to influential networks in the professional world. Women's leadership development is hindered by structural and cultural issues, as noted in Abalkhail (2017), which suggests that institutional reforms are necessary, not just addressing individual responsibility.

Rewards such as flexible work arrangements, parental leaves, and child care provision can help mitigate work disadvantage related to child care responsibilities, as can policies designed to be family-friendly. Career disadvantages due to child care responsibilities can be mitigated through flexible work arrangements, parental leaves, and child care provision, and through family-friendly policies. These policies work best when they are offered to all genders and don't have negative consequences for promotion or evaluation. There is also emerging evidence on gender-sensitive interventions that addressing structural barriers involves considering social and institutional factors which limit participation and opportunity (Psaki et al., 2022).

Increasing the representation of women in leadership and decision-making, with a particular focus on where progress has been slow, may be achieved by introducing gender quotas, representation targets, and through open appointment processes. Representation measures should go hand-in-hand with supportive organizational cultures and equitable career pathways, though. Last but not least, gender-equality programmes need to be continuously monitored and evaluated. Regularly evaluate issues of pay, promotion, retention, leadership representation, complaints, and access to development opportunities. Senior-level accountability can be useful in helping to make gender equality an institutional responsibility and not a short-term policy effort.

9. Challenges in Implementing Gender Equality Interventions

Gender-equality programs are often hard to put into practice as formal policies may not be reflected in the day-to-day organizational conduct. A key problem is the policy–practice gap, that is, statements of equality, a diversity plan, or anti-discrimination policies are set in place but not consistently implemented. Resistance can also occur from individuals within the organization who see gender initiatives as unneeded, disruptive, and/or disruptive of workplace norms. Another issue is tokenism, which can happen when a few women are hired into highly visible roles, yet few are selected for other roles, jobs, or promotions, or receive better pay. Where traditional gender roles still shape expectations of leadership roles, caring responsibilities and commitment to professions, cultural and social resistance can further undermine progress. Policies may be in place, but not strongly enforced, and may not be met by accountability mechanisms. Furthermore, interventions are not equally effective in all industries and countries due to the variation in workforce composition, institutional culture, regulation of the labor force and social norms across different sectors.

10. Emerging Issues and Future Directions

New questions with regard to workplace gender equality are emerging as a consequence of shifting working patterns. While remote and hybrid work can offer flexibility and accommodate workers with family care needs, it can also present some drawbacks in terms of being seen, networking, promotions and leadership opportunities. Another key concern is digitalization, which has become a central feature with the use of automated systems for recruiting, performance evaluation and workforce management. The development of these systems with historically biased data feeds can perpetuate existing inequalities. The use of AI in recruitment and promotion thus must be transparent, supervised by humans and evaluated for discrimination regularly. Further studies should also use more robust intersectional perspectives, which would involve an exploration of the intersection of race, disability, age, socioeconomic status, and other forms of inequity. The impact of new family forms and expectations of care should be better reflected, especially when organizations are experimenting with more flexible work arrangements. Additional research, both longitudinal and cross country, is required to identify interventions that yield long-term benefits as opposed to short-term ones.

11. Implications for Organizations, Communities, and Policy

Gender equality should be considered as an integral part of the organisation's workforce management system, not a diversity project. Fair recruitment, consistent performance assessment, wage equality, leadership development, mentoring and equal opportunities for advancement opportunities should be part of HR practices. Respectful interaction, a safe environment for reporting, shared responsibilities for caring, and equal involvement in decision-making should also be encouraged in the workplace. An inclusive work environment can help employees feel fair, have greater career confidence, and enjoy greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In the community, higher employment parity can bolster women's economic involvement, the security of women's households, and their social integration. Policymakers can help achieve these outcomes by implementing more robust anti-discrimination measures, parental leave, childcare assistance, pay transparency policies, and organizational accountability measures. Additionally, public policy should take into account the variations among sectors and social groups in order to be responsive to the structural and cultural barriers.

12. Conclusion

Workplace gender inequality is a multi-faceted issue driven by organizational challenges, social norms, institutional norms, the structure of jobs, and access to power and opportunities. It goes beyond compensation and promotion to impact employee health, leadership presence, diversity in the workforce, organizational results, and social and economic engagement at large. While a number of organisations have adopted equality policies and diversity strategies, this may be undermined by lack of implementation or changes in cultural norms may not occur. Organizational, institutional and policy coordination are needed for meaningful improvement. Employers must have clear employment practices, family-friendly leadership, policies, and monitoring systems. Policymakers and regulatory institutions should enhance enforcement efforts and promote accountability; and future research should consider long-term impacts and new risks associated with digitalization and AI. To achieve gender equality and promote sustainable development, it is not only important for women to be involved but to also have access to equal resources, recognition, security, opportunities for advancement and decision making in the workplace.

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