

Social Norms and Gender Discrimination: The Impact on Global Economic Viability

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between gender inequality and economic well-being, highlighting how social norms and systemic barriers impede women's full participation in the global economy. According to the World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Gender Gap Report, it may take an astonishing 169 years to close the economic gender gap, with women still earning about 20% less than men worldwide.

The findings are drawn from respected sources, including UNESCO, the World Bank, the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), and the OECD. These organisations show how disparities in access to education, job opportunities, and leadership roles not only affect women but also, in the long run, hinder sustainable economic growth for all. By highlighting these inequalities, the study emphasises the urgent need for change to create a more just and flourishing global economy.

Contrasting examples of gender norms influencing economic outcomes can be found in nations such as Iceland, Saudi Arabia, and India. Despite government programs like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, and Mudra Yojana, cultural prejudices and unfair inheritance laws in India still restrict women's economic empowerment. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reforms have begun to boost female workforce participation and entrepreneurship, marking a gradual yet noticeable change. With nearly equal representation of men and women in politics, education, and the workforce, Iceland serves as a global model, demonstrating how inclusive policies and a culture that values women in leadership roles can foster social progress and economic resilience.

Keywords: Economic Viability, Gender Discrimination, and Social Norms

1. Introduction

The World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Gender Gap Report estimates that closing the gender gap in the global economy will take 169 years.¹ This indicates that despite some progress in narrowing income gaps, almost half (48.1%) of the overall earned income gap remains unclosed.² Gender discrimination

¹ Which region will reach gender parity first? #gendergap23. (2023, June 26). World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/06/global-gender-gap-report-in-numbers/>

² Which region will reach gender parity first? #gendergap23. (2024, September 10). World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/06/global-gender-gap-report-in-numbers/> [accessed on april 3, 2024]

cannot be eliminated unless communities alter their social structuring and value systems³. This highlights the need to understand how entrenched gender norms and systemic barriers impact economic viability globally. To further explicate the topic, I will first unpack some key terms: economic viability is the positive impact of increased economic growth on society while accounting for monetary benefits. The allocation of female labour increases economic competitiveness, and various goods are produced and exported. Ultimately, gender equality is a moral obligation indispensable for sustainable development⁴. According to UNESCO, 773 million adults are illiterate, and women account for two-thirds of this number. World Bank studies demonstrate that eliminating inequalities in education can lead to a significant decline in a country's GDP. The SIGI⁵ 2019 estimates that discrimination against women in different industries can cause economic losses of \$6 trillion⁶. This bias towards a particular gender underscores the urgency of addressing deeply embedded societal norms. The tendency to segregate specific jobs into predominantly male or female jobs is due to labour market mobility, skills, and technical education. Not only do girls have access to fewer educational avenues, but they are also paid lower wages than their male counterparts for similar job profiles. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 2024, women will continue to be paid about 20% less than men globally.⁷

Fortunately, there have been substantial improvements globally, with unprecedented representation of women in global politics. Surveys from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have shown reduced gender gaps in education over the past 50 years. Pay disparity is also gradually normalising. For example, between 1960 and 1990, South Korea experienced excellent economic viability, with a rise in the GDP per capita from \$158 in 1960 to over \$6,000 by 1990⁸. Women's increasing participation in the workforce was pivotal, especially in labour-intensive export sectors like textiles and electronics. Female labour force participation rose from 25% in 1960 to 46% in 1990, according to a World Bank study⁹. Women's work options increased due to these advances, particularly in the manufacturing sector, which made a substantial economic contribution to South Korea. Korean women's labour force participation rate had risen to 56 per cent by 2000.¹⁰ Immediate benefits included a surge in household income and manufacturing productivity, while long-term impacts included improved gender norms, increased investments in education, and a highly skilled workforce.¹¹

³ Groenman, S. "Social Aspects of Backwardness in Developed Countries." *Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks*, 1969, pp. 21–34. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-15315-2_2 [accessed on april 3, 2024]

⁴ Calviño, N. (2024, June 7). *The economic power of gender equality*. European Investment Bank. <https://www.eib.org/en/stories/gender-equality-power> [accessed on april 4, 2024]

⁵ "How to Close Gender Gaps and Grow the Global Economy." *IMF*, 8 Sept. 2022, www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2022/09/08/how-to-close-gender-gaps-and-grow-the-global-economy. [accessed on april, 4 2024]

⁶ Rostow, W. W. "THE STAGES OF ECONOMIC GROWTH." *The Economic History Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, Aug. 1959, pp. 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0289.1959.tb01829.x>. [accessed on april, 4 2024]

⁷ Bakshi, P. (2024, September 25). Mind the (Pay) gap: Decoding gender wage inequality in India. *The Secretariat*. <https://thesecretariat.in/article/mind-the-pay-gap-decoding-gender-wage-inequality-in-india> [accessed on april, 5 2024]

⁸ *Overview*. (n.d.). World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/korea/overview> [accessed on april, 5 2024]

⁹ Grootaert, C. & The World Bank. (1987). *The Labor Force Participaionof Women in the Republic of Korea: Evolution and Policy issues* (No. IDP2). <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/398531468915040832/pdf/The-labor-force-participation-of-women-in-the-republic-of-Korea-evolution-and-policy-issues.pdf> [accessed on april, 5 2024]

¹⁰ Lee, S. H. & Chang Yun-Shik. (2006). Transformations in twentieth century Korea. In *Routledge advances in Korean studies*. <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/24070/1006062.pdf#page=305> [accessed on april, 5 2024]

¹¹ *Gender equality boosts economic growth and stability*. (2022, September 27). IMF. <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/09/27/sp092722-ggopinath-kgef-gender-korea> [accessed on april, 6 2024]

Causes of Gender Discrimination

Firstly, the most prominent cause of gender discrimination is the **cultural norms and stereotypes** that continue to discourage social progress on this front. These include a preference for male progeny, honour killings, and archaic practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) and dowry killings. These practices limit women's education and economic participation. Even educated women face barriers, relegating them to lower-paid, lower-skilled jobs, reducing productivity and perpetuating poverty. For example, in rural India, socio-cultural norms often prevent women from working outside their homes despite possessing relevant skills.¹²

Secondly, one of the causes is **disparities in employment opportunities, which** significantly contribute to gender discrimination, with women in the U.S. earning only 83.7% of the average salary of men, and the disparity is considerably more pronounced for women of colour¹³. Wage inequality often starts during hiring, as women's salary expectations are lower, making it harder for them to attain leadership roles. Consequently, women hold only 17% of executive officer positions in S&P hundred companies¹⁴. Altrata's 2022 Global Gender Diversity report states that women comprise just 28.2% of board members. Primarily in non-executive roles, limiting their influence on decision-making. Among C-suite positions, only 5% of CEOs are women. This is particularly evident for women of colour since there are only two Black female CEOs on the 2021 Fortune 500 list, and only 1.2% of CEOs are women of colour¹⁵.

Consequences and Comparison

Firstly, the **Economic impact:** In developing nations, gender discrimination results in a loss of \$9 trillion annually for women, denying them the purchasing power that could positively impact families and communities, ultimately leading to economic viability¹⁶. For example, in Latin America, the increase in female employment from 2000 to 2010 contributed 30% of the decline in income inequality¹⁷. This demonstrates the potential for cost reductions, sustainable innovations, and a competitive global edge. Secondly, the **political impact:** gender discrimination has many significant political consequences that affect a country's governance and economic viability. Women hold only 26% of parliamentary seats globally (IPU, 2023)¹⁸, limiting diverse policy-making and inclusive governance. Gender discrimination in leadership correlates with weaker democratic institutions and lower public trust. Countries with higher gender inequality score 15% lower on the World Governance Indicators (World Bank, 2023)¹⁹. This lack

¹² World's Women 2020. (n.d.). World's Women 2020. <https://worlds-women-2020-data-undesa.hub.arcgis.com/> [accessed on april, 6 2024]

¹³ Graf, N. (2024, April 14). Gender pay gap in U.S. hasn't changed much in two decades. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/03/01/gender-pay-gap-facts/> [accessed on april, 9 2024]

¹⁴ The Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance. (2024, October 18). *Gender Diversity in the C-suite: Women's representation in the 2024 S&P 100*. <https://corpgov.law.harvard.edu/2024/10/18/gender-diversity-in-the-c-suite-womens-representation-in-the-2024-sp-100/> [accessed on april, 9 2024]

¹⁵ IMD Business School. (2024, November 19). *8 Successful leadership Transition knowledge transfer Strategies*. IMD Business School for Management and Leadership Courses. <https://www.imd.org/blog/leadership/gender-inequality-in-the-workplace/> [accessed on april, 9 2024]

¹⁶ *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2024*. (2023, September 7). UN Women – Headquarters. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/resources/gender-snapshot> [accessed on april, 10 2024]

¹⁷ World Bank. (2020). *CLOSING GENDER GAPS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/484401532010525429/pdf/Closing-Gender-Gaps-in-Latin-America-and-the-Caribbean.pdf> [accessed on april, 10 2024]

¹⁸ *Women in Parliament in 2023: Concerns over gender-based violence*. (n.d.). Inter-Parliamentary Union. <https://www.ipu.org/digital-stories/women-in-parliament-in-2023-concerns-over-gender-based-violence> [accessed on april, 10 2024]

¹⁹ Grootaert, C. & The World Bank. (1987). *The Labor Force Participaionof Women in the Republic of Korea: Evolution and Policy issues* (No. IDP2). <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/398531468915040832/pdf/The-labor-force-participation-of-women-in-the-republic-of-Korea-evolution-and-policy-issues.pdf> [accessed on april, 14 2024]

of representation perpetuates policies that neglect women's health and education, hindering workforce participation and costing economies up to \$12 trillion annually in lost GDP (McKinsey, 2023)²⁰. Political inclusion of women is essential for equitable growth and economic sustainability worldwide.

Methodology

Throughout my research, I have extensively referred to recent and reliable resources using various secondary sources. The SIGI²¹ has relevant information, as the data collection procedures are based on combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. The global approach caters to all regions, but small sample sizes in some areas, such as Saudi Arabia, may raise concerns of false negatives, inconclusive results or mere assumptions of the findings. Furthermore, as the SIGI tools rely on information from various governments and organisations, the narratives of the regions may result in the imposition of cultural or institutional biases concerning the interpretation of gender norms, as most sources do.

UNESCO has a global network that enhances the strength of the information provided, but certain regions that are not represented would lessen the effectiveness of the global averages. Additionally, the World Bank has conducted studies that report on the economic dimensions of this problem. This issue-oriented approach is problematic when developing countries are excluded, and the focus remains more on financially related aspects.

Lastly, the OECD's longitudinal studies of gender, education and employment gaps also provide helpful historical trends. Likewise, the gaps in data covering countries that do not have OECD membership create inaccuracy. There is a Western bias, where region-specific issues or models from the region are omitted, resulting in a lack of insight.

Using reliable sources such as SIGI, UNESCO, the World Bank, and the OECD has enhanced my report's authenticity. These institutions have provided valuable data on gender discrimination, ensuring my research is well-grounded in factual evidence and diverse perspectives for accurate conclusions.

National Perspective

According to the WEF's²² 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, India is placed 140th out of 156 countries for gender equality. Data from NFHS-5 reveals that only 23.3% of Indian women aged 15-49 participate in the labour force, compared to 76.9% of men²³. Inheritance practices also play a role, with a study indicating that only 13% of rural women in India own agricultural land, reflecting unequal economic empowerment²⁴. Additionally, the social stigma surrounding entrepreneurship inhibits economic viability.

²⁰ Woetzel, L., Madgavkar, A., Ellingrud, K., Labaye, E., Devillard, S., Kutcher, E., Manyika, J., Dobbs, R., & Krishnan, M. (2015, September 1). *The power of parity: How advancing women's equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth*. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth> [accessed on april, 14 2024]

²¹ *Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)*. (n.d.). OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/social-institutions-and-gender-index-sigi.html> [accessed on june, 4 2024]

²² "Global Gender Gap Report 2021." *World Economic Forum*, 9 Nov. 2023, www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2021 [accessed on june 4 ,2024]

²³ 16 Agarwal, Bina, et al. "How Many and Which Women Own Land in India? Inter-gender and Intra-gender Gaps." *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 57, no. 11, Apr. 2021, pp. 1807–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2021.1887478>. [accessed on june 4 ,2024]

²⁴ Agarwal, B., Anthwal, P., & Mahesh, M. (2021). How many and which women own land in India? Inter-gender and intra-gender gaps. *Journal of Development Studies*, 57(11), 1807–1829. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2021.1887478> [accessed on june 4 ,2024]

The GEM²⁵ 2021/22 report highlights that fear of failure and societal attitudes are significant barriers to entrepreneurial activity in India, impacting innovation and job creation²⁶.

Fortunately, with a massive thrust on schemes like "Beti Padhao, Beti Bachao" microfinancing through Gramin Banks, loans for women entrepreneurs and tax rebates aimed at empowering educated women, India is moving ahead to combat this social evil. If women's workforce participation equaled men's, India's GDP could rise by 27%, potentially adding \$770 billion.²⁷ Programs like Mudra Yojana encourage female entrepreneurship but need broader outreach.²⁸

Global Perspective

In Saudi Arabia, gender norms have traditionally restricted women's participation in the workforce. As of 2022, only 0.46% of women were employed in agriculture, 5.49% in industries, and 12.46% of females aged 15-24 were used. Additionally, only 4.90% of firms had women in ownership positions. In 2020, just 2.31% of females had completed their masters²⁹. However, the Saudi 2030 vision, which previously focused on gender-segregated policies, has been revised to empower Saudi women and enable their contribution to the economy and social growth. Female entrepreneurship in the kingdom is also gaining more recognition.³⁰ According to a forecast by S&P Global Ratings, Female entrepreneurship and rising labour participation could boost Saudi Arabia's economy by \$39 billion by 2032³¹.

With a score of 93.5% as of 2024, Iceland routinely ranks first in the Global Gender Gap Index, making it a global leader in gender equality³². The government has achieved near-universal female literacy rates at 99.7% for women aged 15-24 (World Bank). Regarding economic participation, women represent 71.7% of the labour force, although there is still a 7.8 percentage point gap in labour force participation between men and women as of 2022 (World Bank). Politically, women hold 47.6% of parliamentary seats as of February 2024³³. Despite these advancements, challenges remain. Despite these advancements, challenges remain. About 3% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 said they had been the victim of physical or sexual abuse by an intimate relationship within the previous 12 months³⁴. Moreover, while Iceland has implemented mandatory equal pay certification policies, barriers to women's full economic empowerment still exist, particularly in achieving equal representation in higher-paying positions³⁵.

²⁵ Global entrepreneurship monitor [accessed on June 4, 2024]

²⁶ GEM Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. (n.d.). GEM Global Entrepreneurship Monitor. <https://www.gemconsortium.org/report/gem-20212022-global-report-opportunity-amid-disruptio> [accessed on June 4, 2024]

²⁷ Siddiqi, A. (2023, October 5). *Advancing women's role in India's economic progress*. orfonline.org. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/advancing-women-s-role-in-india-s-economic-progress> [accessed on June 4, 2024]

²⁸ Desk, P. (2024, March 6). Women entrepreneurs from smaller cities frontrunners in adopting digital solutions. *Financial Express*. <https://www.financialexpress.com/money/women-entrepreneurs-from-smaller-cities-frontrunners-in-adopting-digital-solutions-3415425/> [accessed on June 4, 2024]

²⁹ *World Development Indicators | DataBank*. (n.d.). <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators> [accessed on June 24, 2024]

³⁰ Ho, M. (n.d.). *Saudi Arabia: The changing role of women*. HKTDC Research. <https://research.hktcdc.com/en/article/MzQ1OTIzMjY1> [accessed on June 24, 2024]

³¹ Walid, R. (2024, August 18). Saudi Arabia's surge in female workforce participation drives economic impact. *Arab News*. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2567745/business-economy> [accessed on June 24, 2024]

³² *Global Gender Gap Report 2024*. (n.d.). World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/digest/> [accessed on June 25, 2024]

³³ *Country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub*. (n.d.). <https://data.unwomen.org/country/iceland> [accessed on June 25, 2024]

³⁴ *country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub*. (n.d.). <https://data.unwomen.org/country/iceland> [accessed on June 25, 2024]

³⁵ *Equality*. (n.d.). <https://www.government.is/topics/human-rights-and-equality/equality/> [accessed on July 15, 2024]

Iceland's strong legal frameworks and cultural shifts make it a model for enhancing women's rights and participation in society.

Course of Action

Solutions require public-private and NGO collaboration. Strong policies and compliance mechanisms can ensure funding. Groups like the World Bank and Gates Foundation are narrowing gender gaps in employment and entrepreneurship³⁶. The Gates Foundation's 'Equal is Greater' campaign promotes workplace gender parity³⁷.

Access to higher education alone cannot ensure a nation's economic sustainability. An ILO research from 2019 states that 41% of educated women do not have a job. Workforce involvement is hampered by the "motherhood pay gap and penalty" and the weight of unpaid domestic duties³⁸. The UN Care Accelerator encourages gender diversity in leadership, childcare, and women's reskilling.

Collaboration between NGOs and the public and the business sectors is the most important. This is because it includes more extensive systemic funding and assistance, which can concurrently address multiple aspects of gender discrimination. These partnerships can provide comprehensive and long-lasting programs that address the underlying causes of gender inequality by using many stakeholders' networks, resources, and expertise. A comprehensive approach may significantly and permanently impact gender equality and economic viability.

Conclusion

Examining gender inequality brought opportunities and difficulties to light. The stigma associated with the gender gap in economic participation and the relationship between public policy and societal norms has yielded significant findings. A complex strategy, including targeted support mechanisms, cultural changes, and policy measures, is needed to address these problems. It is impossible to overstate young people's part in questioning these conventions since they are more receptive to diversity. My knowledge of sociopolitical norms and cooperative solutions has increased due to this research.

My awareness of the complex relationship between gender discrimination and economic viability has grown due to conducting this research, which has been profound. At first, I had preconceived notions about how gender norms shape society. However, learning more about behavioural economics and gender inequality has broadened and challenged my viewpoints. For example, I now see the extensive impact of unpaid household labour on economic production, which I previously underestimated.

Access to numerous reliable sources has strengthened my analytical and critical thinking skills. It has also brought attention to how crucial it is to separate trustworthy information from possible biases. In the end, this study has strengthened the idea that social norms are dynamic, ever-changing structures that have the power to either inhibit or stimulate advancement. Promoting inclusion can help create just and thriving

³⁶ World Bank Group. (2024). Strengthening gender statistics. In *World Bank*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/brief/strengthening-gender-statistics> [accessed on July 15, 2024]

³⁷ World Bank. (2022). *Transformative grassroots leadership training*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099235408312227816/pdf/P1755910ca6cb409d0913d03db69e82220d.pdf> [accessed on July 15, 2024]

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communities. I'm motivated to look for other ways to address these concerns, maybe by supporting campaigns that advance gender equality in entrepreneurship and education.

All things considered, this study shows that enduring gender inequality still impedes stability and economic growth worldwide. Individual potential and national productivity are constrained by disparities in leadership opportunities, education, and employment. Closing the gender gap could boost long-term development and contribute trillions to the global economy, according to data from the OECD, SIGI, the World Bank, and UNESCO. A comparative study of nations like Saudi Arabia, Iceland, and India demonstrates how inclusive social policies and cultural changes can greatly improve governance, innovation, and income equality. As a result, combating gender discrimination is not only morally required but also economically necessary to ensure fair and long-lasting global advancement.

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