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# THE STRUCTURAL EVOLUTION OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION: GLOBAL TRENDS, INTERSECTIONAL REALITIES, AND THE PATH TO PARITY (2024-2026)

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## ABSTRACT

The global landscape of gender discrimination in the mid-2020s is defined by a paradoxical shift where legal architectures increasingly recognize parity as a strategic necessity, yet lived realities are reshaped by digitized and intersectional marginalization. As of 2025, the global gender gap stands at 68.8% closed, with a projected 134 years remaining to reach full parity. This paper investigates the macroeconomic imperatives of gender equality, highlighting a potential \$342 trillion boost to the global economy by 2050 through targeted investment. Central to this study is the analysis of the "digital gender divide" and the disproportionate automation risks posed by Generative AI to female-dominated clerical roles. Furthermore, the research employs an intersectional lens to examine the compounded effects of caste and religion on socio-economic deprivation in South Asia. Through a systematic review of landmark judicial rulings in India and international monitoring by CEDAW, the paper argues that a transition from "judicial empathy" to "judicial insistence" is critical. The research concludes that sustainable global growth requires dismantling systemic barriers such as the "broken rung" in management and addressing the psychosocial entrapment resulting from pervasive discrimination.

**Keywords:** Gender Discrimination, Intersectionality, Generative AI, Economic Parity, Judicial Jurisprudence.

## Introduction

The global landscape of gender discrimination in the mid-2020s is defined by a paradoxical shift: while legal architectures and economic frameworks are increasingly recognizing gender parity as a strategic necessity, the lived realities of women and gender-diverse individuals are being reshaped by new, digitized, and intersectional forms of marginalization. As of 2025, the global gender gap stands at 68.8% closed, yet the projected timeline to reach full parity remains a staggering 134 years at the current pace of progress. This stagnation occurs despite the clear economic imperative articulated by international bodies; achieving gender equality is no longer viewed solely through a human rights lens but as a primary driver of sustainable development<sup>1</sup>. The United Nations and World Bank have identified a definitive crossroads for the global community: a choice between continued systemic neglect or a \$342 trillion boost to the global economy by 2050 through targeted investment in women's economic, digital, and social empowerment.

## The Macroeconomic Imperative and Global Stagnation

The economic exclusion of women remains a profound inefficiency within the global financial system. Current assessments indicate that approximately 10% of women live in extreme poverty, a statistic that has remained largely unchanged since 2020. Projections suggest that without immediate and coordinated intervention, 351 million women and girls will remain trapped in extreme poverty by 2030<sup>2</sup>. This economic entrapment is driven by a lack of access to land ownership, financial instruments, and decent work opportunities, coupled with a disproportionate burden of unpaid care duties. Globally, women perform nearly 76% of unpaid care work, a burden that in India alone is equivalent to 3.1 billion hours of uncompensated labor daily.

The disparity in economic participation is further illuminated by the persistent gender pay gap. Women globally earn between 77 and 83 cents for every dollar earned by men, a gap that widens significantly when unpaid labor is integrated into the analysis. In regions where unpaid work is factored in, women's earnings drop to just 32% of those of men. This economic invisibility suppresses national growth trajectories; for example, India's share of women's

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<sup>1</sup> Obodo CA (2021).

<sup>2</sup> World Bank (2026).

contribution to GDP stands at 17%, far below the global average of 37%.

## Research Questions

1. How has the emergence of Generative AI created new "digital gender divides" and disproportionate automation risks for women?
2. What is the impact of intersectional identities (caste, religion, and class) on the socio-economic and nutritional outcomes of female-headed households in South Asia?
3. How do recent judicial rulings in India (2024–2026) signal a shift from recognizing rights to creating a concrete architecture for their enforcement?
4. What are the specific mental health consequences of "perceived familial discrimination" and the psychological phenomenon of "entrapment" among young women?
5. Why is a purely legalistic approach insufficient for achieving parity, and what multi-dimensional strategies are necessary for long-term impact?

## Methodology Section

This research report employs a qualitative, multi-disciplinary methodology to synthesize a vast array of primary and secondary data sources. The analytical framework is grounded in structural feminism and intersectionality, interpreting systemic behavior through power balancing and social rank theories.

The methodology includes:

- **Qualitative Content Analysis:** A systematic review of official documents and reports from the International Labour Organization (ILO), UN Women, and NITI Aayog regarding workplace parity.
- **Jurisprudential Review:** Mapping the evolution of the Supreme Court of India's stance from 2024 to 2026, focusing on the principle of "reasonable accommodation."
- **Geopolitical Risk Assessment:** Evaluating the impact of digital harms, including AI-

facilitated abuse and algorithmic bias, on global social stability.

- **Epidemiological Synthesis:** Integrating mental health data to understand the correlation between pay disparity and common mental disorders.

## Literature Review

The following six foundational research highlights constitute the core evidence for this analysis:

### 1. "Gen AI, occupational segregation and gender equality in the world of work" (ILO, 2026)

This report identifies that women face nearly twice the exposure to Generative AI automation as men (29% vs 16%) due to their concentration in clerical and administrative roles. It argues that AI deployment within existing structures of segregation risks deepening the "digital gender divide" unless women are integrated into tech architecture.

### 2. "Discrimination and Gender: An Umbrella Review of Psychological Evidence" (G. Lausi, 2026)

Lausi provides a comprehensive review of how gender discrimination functions as a population-level determinant of mental health. The research robustly links "perceived gender discrimination" to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms.

### 3. "Females in higher education and leadership: insights from a multi-regional study" (A. Correa et al., 2024)

Correa documents a persistent "submission gap" in scientific publishing, where women are 11.7% less likely than men to submit research to elite journals like *Science* or *Nature*, despite having similar acceptance rates once submitted.

### 4. "Intersections of religion, gender and caste among sanitation workers in South Asia" (Frontiers, 2026)

This study explores the "triple marginalization" of sanitation workers, where caste-based occupational segregation and religious identity compound gender-based inequities in access to

social protection and safe working conditions.

### 5. "Analysing gender pay disparities and structural barriers among software developers" (A. Prakash & I. S. Yadav, 2025)

Prakash and Yadav examine the tech sector, identifying that while women in senior technical roles actually lead their male counterparts in AI adoption by 12-16%, they still face a "broken rung" at the entry-level manager stage.

### 6. "The Gender Snapshot 2025" (UN Women & UNDESA, 2025)

This definitive report details the "USD 342 Trillion Choice," arguing that targeted investment in women's economic and digital inclusion is the smartest growth strategy currently available to national governments.

### Comparative Regional Gender Parity and Economic Indicators

| Region / Indicator               | Gender Gap Closed (%)   | Pay Gap (\$ Women/\$1 Men) | Projected Time to Parity   |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Global Average (2025)            | 68.8%                   | \$0.77 - \$0.83            | 134 Years                  |
| Iceland (Global Leader)          | 92.6%                   | > \$0.90                   | Achieved (90%+ since 2022) |
| United States                    | 64.8% (Economic Pillar) | \$0.85                     | 162 Years (Political)      |
| United Kingdom                   | 83.8%                   | \$0.82 (est.)              | < 50 Years                 |
| India                            | 49.0% (SDG Score)       | \$0.76                     | > 100 Years                |
| South Korea                      | --                      | \$0.68                     | --                         |
| European Union (High Performers) | 74.3% (Aggregate)       | \$0.87                     | 123 Years (Overall)        |

The failure to bridge these gaps is not an inevitability but a political outcome shaped by stalled investments and systemic neglect. High-income economies have closed 74.3% of their gender gaps, yet even within these nations, progress is fragile. The United States, for instance, exhibits a narrowing gap among younger workers (95 cents per dollar for ages 25-34), but leadership representation remains a significant barrier. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index highlights that while health and survival gaps are 96.2% closed, and educational

attainment stands at 95.1%, the areas of economic participation and political empowerment remain the most significant challenges, closed at only 61.0% and 22.9%, respectively.

### Technological Paradigm Shifts and the Digital Gender Divide

The emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in 2024-2026 has introduced a transformative yet disruptive force into the labor market. Generative AI is not entering a neutral economic environment; rather, it is being deployed within a framework of existing occupational segregation that disproportionately exposes women to automation risks. International Labour Organization (ILO) data reveals that occupations dominated by women are nearly twice as likely to be exposed to GenAI as those dominated by men. Approximately 29% of female-dominated occupations are exposed to automation, compared to 16% for men.

### Automation Risk by Sector and Gender Exposure

| Category                      | Women's Exposure (%)   | Men's Exposure (%) | Risk Type                  |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Overall GenAI Exposure        | 29.0%                  | 16.0%              | General Substitution       |
| High Automation Risk          | 16.0%                  | 3.0%               | Routine / Codifiable Tasks |
| Clerical & Administrative     | 41.0% (High Income)    | --                 | Substitution               |
| STEM & AI Workforce           | 30.0% (Representation) | 70.0%              | Exclusion from Design      |
| Leadership in AI              | 15.0%                  | 85.0%              | Power Imbalance            |
| Digital Participation (LMICs) | 66.0% (Access)         | 78.0%              | Adoption Barrier           |

This vulnerability stems from the concentration of women in clerical, administrative, and business support roles—functions that are routine, codifiable, and thus high-risk for AI-driven substitution. Conversely, men are more frequently employed in construction, manufacturing, and manual trades, where tasks are less easily automated. In high-income countries, 41% of women's jobs are exposed to GenAI, compared to only 11% in low-income countries, reflecting a stark difference in digital readiness and occupational structures.

Beyond job displacement, a significant "AI gender gap" exists in the architecture and usage of

these technologies. Women comprise only 29% of the AI workforce and just 14-16% of senior technical roles. This underrepresentation has direct consequences for algorithmic bias. UNESCO research found that Large Language Models often associate women with domestic terms like "family" and "home," while defaulting to male forms for professional titles. Furthermore, women are often judged as less competent for using GenAI at work. A study noted that female-identifying engineers using AI for code generation were rated 9% less competent than their male counterparts for identical outputs.

Digital harm also manifests through AI-facilitated abuse. The rise of "deepfakes" and the misuse of Internet of Things (IoT) devices for surveillance and domestic violence disproportionately impact women and girls. Social media algorithms, designed for engagement, frequently amplify misogynistic content, creating radicalization "rabbit holes" that increase the exposure of young men to such content by 400%.

National Progress and Structural Inertia in India

India’s journey toward gender equality, as monitored by NITI Aayog under the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 framework, shows a marked improvement in institutional scores from 36 in 2018 to 49 in 2024. However, this institutional progress often contrasts with the persistent socio-economic barriers facing the majority of Indian women. The sex ratio at birth has stabilized at 929, and the female-to-male Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for the 15-59 age group improved from 0.33 to 0.48 in the last five years. Despite these gains, women hold only 14% of land ownership and comprise only 20% of the market economy workforce—a figure that dropped further to 16% during the pandemic.

India's SDG 5 Performance and Economic Targets

| Metric (NITI Aayog / NHFS-5)   | 2018-19 Value | 2023-24 Value | Target / National Goal |
|--------------------------------|---------------|---------------|------------------------|
| Overall SDG 5 Score            | 36            | 49            | 100 (Full Parity)      |
| Sex Ratio at Birth (per 1,000) | --            | 929           | 950+                   |
| Female-to-Male LFPR (15-59)    | 0.33          | 0.48          | 0.75+                  |
| Female-to-Male Earnings Ratio  | 0.74          | 0.76          | 1.00 (Equal Pay)       |
| Married Women's HH Decision    | --            | 88.7%         | Empowerment            |

| Metric (NITI Aayog / NHFS-5) | 2018-19 Value | 2023-24 Value | Target / National Goal |
|------------------------------|---------------|---------------|------------------------|
| Making                       |               |               | Indicator              |
| Women with Own Mobile Phone  | --            | 53.9%         | Digital Inclusion      |
| Senior Management Positions  | --            | < 20.0%       | Leadership Pipeline    |

To achieve the "Viksit Bharat" vision of a \$30 trillion economy by 2047, India must add 145 million women to its workforce. This requires dismantling systemic barriers such as unconscious bias in hiring, inadequate childcare support, and the "leaky pipeline" where millions of women leave the workforce due to caregiving expectations. More than 90% of working women are in the informal sector, characterized by limited job security and minimal advancement opportunities.

### Intersectional Discrimination: The Compound Effect of Caste and Religion

The analysis of gender discrimination in South Asia is incomplete without an intersectional lens that accounts for the interconnectedness of gender, caste, religion, and socio-economic status. Intersectionality reveals that social positions are shaped by multiple layers of adversity, where disadvantages have a "multiplication effect" rather than a merely additive one.

### Socio-Economic Deprivation by Intersecting Identities

Data from NFHS-5 and recent academic studies illustrate the profound disparities between social groups. Female-headed households from Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC) experience the highest levels of deprivation. ST female-headed households face a poverty rate of 58.3%, nearly triple the 17.2% rate for households in the general category.

| Social Group / Indicator     | Poverty Rate (Female-Headed HH) | Anaemia Prevalence (%) | Children Stunting (%) |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Scheduled Tribes (ST)        | 58.3%                           | 67.1%                  | 43.8%                 |
| Scheduled Castes (SC)        | 42.1%                           | 58.1%                  | 38.2%                 |
| Other Backward Classes (OBC) | --                              | 53.6%                  | 35.1%                 |
| General Category             | 17.2%                           | 48.2%                  | 30.3%                 |

| Social Group / Indicator  | Poverty Rate (Female-Headed HH) | Anaemia Prevalence (%) | Children Stunting (%) |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| ST Women (Jharkhand)      | --                              | 69.8%                  | 45.1%                 |
| General Category (Kerala) | --                              | 29.4%                  | 22.1%                 |

Health outcomes follow a similar trajectory of cumulative disadvantage. Anaemia prevalence is highest among ST women (67.1%) and lowest among the general category (48.2%). In high-burden states like Jharkhand, anaemia among ST women reaches nearly 70%. These findings emphasize that gender-only approaches to empowerment are insufficient; policies must simultaneously target caste, region, and economic class to address the root causes of systemic exclusion.

A critical site of intersectional discrimination is the sanitation sector in South Asia. Caste-based occupational segregation continues to force marginalized caste women and gender-diverse individuals into hazardous work with minimal social protection. These workers face "triple marginalization": religious identity can exacerbate exclusion from state welfare schemes, while gender identity increases vulnerability to harassment and unsafe working conditions. Despite modernization efforts, women and transgender sanitation workers often remain excluded from the benefits of technological innovations like mechanized cleaning.

### Legal Jurisprudence and the Architecture of Enforcement

The 2024-2026 period has witnessed significant judicial interventions aimed at translating constitutional promises into enforceable realities. The Supreme Court of India, in particular, has moved from a phase of "judicial empathy" to one of "judicial insistence" regarding the rights of women and the transgender community.

### Landmark Judicial Rulings (2025-2026)

In the watershed case *Jane Kaushik v. Union of India* (2025), the Supreme Court addressed the systemic failure of state machinery to protect transgender persons from discrimination. The petitioner, a transwoman teacher, had been dismissed from multiple schools after her gender identity was disclosed. The Court ruled that "reasonable accommodation" is an implied obligation under the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act and a facet of substantive

equality under Article 14 of the Constitution. Furthermore, it clarified that transgender individuals are not required to seek employer permission for gender-affirming medical procedures.

| Case Name                           | Year | Key Outcome / Right Recognized                        | Articles Invoked      |
|-------------------------------------|------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Jane Kaushik v. Union of India      | 2025 | Reasonable Accommodation as implied obligation        | Art. 14, Art. 21      |
| Dr. Jaya Thakur v. Govt of India    | 2026 | Access to menstrual hygiene as a constitutional right | Art. 21, Art. 21A     |
| X v. State (Delhi High Court)       | 2024 | Maternity benefits continue beyond employment term    | Maternity Benefit Act |
| Aureliano Fernandes v. State of Goa | 2024 | Strict enforcement of POSH Act mandatory              | POSH Act (2013)       |

Another landmark ruling, *Dr. Jaya Thakur v. The Government of India* (2026), established access to menstrual hygiene facilities as a constitutional right for female students. The Court held that the absence of sanitary products and segregated toilets violates the "right to life" and the "right to education." This judgment requires schools across India to install hygiene management corners, providing spare clothes and toiletries, thereby removing a significant barrier to education continuity for adolescent girls.

At the international level, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) continues to monitor global compliance with the 1979 Convention. However, a financial crisis within the United Nations has forced the cancellation of multiple CEDAW sessions in 2025 and 2026, threatening the primary international mechanism for monitoring women's rights. Despite this, the committee has been active in issuing General Recommendations, including the forthcoming General Recommendation 41 on Gender Stereotypes, which aims to dismantle the structural conditions that prevent women from accessing justice.

### Psychosocial and Health Impacts of Systemic Discrimination

Gender discrimination is increasingly recognized as a population-level determinant of mental and physical health. The gender gap in the prevalence of common mental disorders, such as depression, is attributed largely to sociocultural determinants rather than purely biological

factors. Women are two to three times more likely than men to suffer from depression and anxiety, conditions that are robustly linked to "perceived gender discrimination".

### Psychological Outcomes of Discrimination and Harassment

The psychological impact of discrimination is both acute and cumulative. Workers who experience workplace bias are 2.5 times more likely to report stress and burnout. A study from Columbia University found that women who earn significantly less than their male counterparts (controlling for age and education) were four times more likely to suffer from anxiety and 2.4 times more likely to suffer from depression. This effect holds even at high income levels, suggesting that the psychological harm is rooted in the perception of being undervalued rather than just a lack of resources.

| Health / Psychological Outcome | Statistical Prevalence         | Impact / Associated Factor          |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Anxiety                        | 4.0x Increase                  | Pay Disparity                       |
| Depression                     | 2.4x Increase                  | Perceived Discrimination            |
| Stress & Burnout               | 2.5x Increase                  | Workplace Bias                      |
| Suicidal Ideation / PTSD       | 42.6% Variance                 | Perceived Familial Discrimination   |
| Hunger Gap                     | 64 Million more women than men | Food Insecurity (2024)              |
| Anaemia (Women of Repro Age)   | 1 in 3 Women                   | Chronic Undernutrition (2030 proj.) |

A profound psychological consequence of familial gender discrimination is the feeling of "entrapment"—a perception that all escape routes from challenging circumstances are blocked. Among young female adults, perceived familial discrimination accounts for nearly 43% of the variance in feelings of entrapment, leading to higher rates of defeat, submissiveness, and suicidal behavior. These psychological mechanisms are reinforced by childhood internalization of gender stereotypes, which begins as early as age three, narrowing children's interests and future aspirations.

### Regional Advocacy and Grassroots Resistance

In regions with restrictive socio-political landscapes, such as the Middle East, the journey

toward gender equality is marked by "silent revolutions" online and vocal movements in public spaces. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE have introduced legislative reforms granting women the right to drive, travel, and access traditionally male-dominated industries, challenges such as guardianship norms and wage gaps persist.

### Digital Feminism and the MENA Context

Social media and hashtag activism have enabled a more fluid and hybrid form of social movement in the Middle East, allowing women to transcend traditional spatial boundaries and project their voices from the privacy of their homes. However, this "digital feminism" is often met with ambivalence. A study of young users in the UAE found that many perceive online feminism negatively, citing "performative activism" and Westernization as barriers to authentic change.

| Country / Region           | Movement / Reform                   | Status                               |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Saudi Arabia               | Driving Right / Guardianship Reform | Significant Legal Change             |
| UAE                        | Equal Pay / 50% Council Rep         | Top-down Legislative Reform          |
| Iran                       | "Women, Life, Freedom" (2022-2026)  | Grassroots Resistance                |
| Middle East<br>(Aggregate) | Education (Female Enrollment)       | STEM enrollment > Men in some states |
| South Asia                 | Sanitation Justice / Dalit Activism | Intersectional Resistance            |

The "Women, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran serves as a testament to the resilience of grassroots advocacy in the face of systemic discrimination and harsh legal penalties. Iranian women continue to challenge mandatory hijab laws and state-sponsored repression, underscoring the potential for transformative change driven by local actors rather than international narratives alone.

### Institutional Barriers in Academia and Leadership

Discrimination persists even in sectors dominated by female labor or those intended to be meritocratic. In the United States, 42% of women report facing gender discrimination in professional settings. This bias is particularly evident in academia, where a "gender-equality

paradox" has been observed: women remain underrepresented in math-related and STEM fields even in more egalitarian societies.

The "Glass Ceiling" and "Glass Cliff" in Firm Hierarchies

A systematic review of women in top firm hierarchies identifies three major clusters of research: behavioral traits and firm outcomes, sustainability governance, and the "glass ceiling". Research indicates that while female directors often improve financial reporting quality and corporate social responsibility (CSR), they are more likely to be appointed to leadership roles during periods of financial distress—a phenomenon known as the "glass cliff".

| Academic / Leadership Statistic   | Value              | Context                           |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Elite Journal Submissions (Women) | 37.0%              | Submission gap in Science/Nature  |
| Elite Journal Submissions (Men)   | 48.7%              | Higher frequency of submission    |
| Tech Job Applicant Pool (Junior)  | High               | Declines at mid and senior levels |
| Women in Senior Management (USA)  | 29.0%              | Up from 17% in 2015               |
| Broken Rung (Manager Promotion)   | 81 Women / 100 Men | Primary hurdle for leadership     |

In scientific publishing, women are significantly less likely than men to submit manuscripts to high-impact journals like *Science* or *Nature*, despite having similar acceptance rates once they do submit. This "submission gap" reflects internalized stereotypes about competence and a lack of institutional support. Similarly, in the tech sector, female representation is highest at the junior level but drops precipitously at the mid and senior levels, partly due to a lack of sponsorship and exclusion from strategic GenAI networks.

Conclusion: Strategic Pathways to Gender Parity

The research from 2024 to 2026 provides a comprehensive evidence base for the multifaceted nature of gender discrimination. It is clear that gender equality is not a static goal but a dynamic process that must address traditional patriarchal norms alongside emerging technological biases and intersectional disadvantages. The transition from "intent to impact" requires more than formal equality before the law; it demands transformative action to dismantle systemic

barriers.

Key priorities for achieving global parity include:

1. Addressing the "Broken Rung" in management by implementing unbiased promotion processes and ensuring female representation in high-growth GenAI initiatives.
2. Expanding the definition of "Reasonable Accommodation" to include not only physical infrastructure but also the flexibility needed to balance disproportionate care burdens.
3. Targeting intersectional health and poverty gaps through disaggregated data collection and specialized interventions for marginalized caste and religious groups.
4. Mitigating AI-driven discrimination by ensuring women's representation in tech architecture and establishing robust governance to prevent digital harms and non-consensual imagery.

Ultimately, the choice facing the global community is an economic and moral one. Investing in women is the "smartest growth strategy" available, with the potential to rewrite the global poverty narrative and secure a \$342 trillion payoff by the middle of the century. As constitutional courts and international committees continue to insist on accountability, the path forward requires a shared commitment to rebuilding social structures that value and empower all individuals, regardless of gender.

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