

The Economic Power of Women: Gender Equality as a Driver of Sustainable Growth

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Abstract

Gender inequality remains a global challenge, limiting women's access to education, labor markets, and leadership positions. Recognizing women's contributions is essential not only for social justice but also for sustainable economic growth and societal stability. Despite historical and ongoing efforts, women's labor continues to be undervalued, and their participation in the labor market or other high-skilled fields remains disproportionately low, according to recent reports. This paper aims to highlight contributions of women to families, economies, and societies, challenging stereotypes and advocating for gender equity. This paper synthesizes historical analysis, economic theories, and empirical evidence from global reports and studies, such as the World Bank, UNDP, and so on. Women's invisible labor supports household functioning and human capital development, while their participation enhances productivity, stabilization, and intergenerational spillover effects. Women's empowerment in education, entrepreneurship, and governance drives innovation and social welfare, demonstrating economic and social benefits. Increasing public awareness of women's contributions and their significant impact on economic development is very necessary. Moreover, a deep understanding of women's economic value can encourage governments to implement appropriate policies that foster social equality, reduce structural barriers, and support sustainable growth.

Keywords

Women's Empowerment; Gender Inequality; Invisible Labor; Human Capital Development; Long-Term Economic Growth.

1. Introduction

During industrialization, production activities shifted from households to factories, and men worked as paid labor while women were responsible for domestic work. This stereotype that women's contributions often remained invisible or underestimated was gradually deepened in most people over time, and gender inequality was formed as a structural, cultural, and institutional problem in society. Even though the first-wave feminism and the second-wave feminism increased women's rights and status, women are still facing unfairness in labor force participation, wage equality, and leadership representation today. Recently, the report shows that the Labor Force Participation of males is 73%, but women have only 49% [1]. Under 20% in the emerging and strategic sectors like technology [2]. These effects from gender inequality led to human capital reduction and productivity loss. However, Ester Boserup points out that the subsistence activities usually omitted in the statistics of production and income are largely women's work [3]. Women's invisible labor remains a crucial component of social stability, sustaining families and enabling broader economic participation. Beyond the household, women's empowerment might have more significant achievements, influencing the development of world science and national economics. From

the study by Dollar and Gatti, we realize that countries with higher female education levels have a huge and significant positive impact on economic growth [4]. Moreover, during the Great Moderation in the early 1980s, economists found that rising female labor force participation contributed significantly to economic stabilization [5]. This paper introduces the misunderstandings and advantages of women, proposing to vindicate women's identification and contribution. It aims to show that women are not only contributors to their families but also drivers of economic growth and social stability. Therefore, when more people recognize women's contributions, it is better to achieve gender equity in society.

2. Contemporary Conditions of Women Worldwide

2.1. Global Gender Landscape

Until 2025, women will have already gained their rights, and women's status will have increased through the frequent struggles and crusades. However, the inequality phenomenon of women still exists in the world, which can be demonstrated in economics, education, culture, and other fields. According to the statistics from the Global Bank Group, the Labor Force Participation rate is higher for males than for females. In general, the labor force participation rate for males is 73%, while for women, it is 49% [1]. This evidence exactly shows the gender gap in employment, in which men are employed more easily than women, and women face challenges in looking for jobs. In the recent decade, even though the labor participation and the share of women in top-management roles increased, the increments have still not been significant. The gap between women in mid-level and top-level leadership has remained at 5.4 percentage points since 2020. Women's participation and roles in top-level management are still constrained in the healthcare and care service sector. In the report, women hold over 40% of senior management positions, while under 20% in the emerging and strategic sectors like technology and energy [2]. Women are still ignored in the political sphere, such as legislative bodies. While women lead the 161 parliamentary gender equality bodies, their overall political influence remains limited. They hold fewer than one-third of all parliamentary speaker roles and are scarce in powerful cabinet posts governing the economy, infrastructure, and defense [2]. Besides the identity of gender, mother is another important identity for most women. Being a mother takes a very long time in a woman's life. Traditional norms endow the word "Mother" to take care of their children in physical and mental aspects, so most women have to choose full-time caregiving rather than their careers. From the report, 33.6% of women take their career break because of full-time parenting, compared with 7.3% of men, which is the top career break type among women globally and regionally by far [6]. Despite global progress, gender inequality continues to shape women's lives in profound ways. These statistics and reports reveal that women continue to face persistent barriers in the workforce, leadership positions, and political participation. Moreover, cultural expectations further reinforce women's caregiving roles, leading them to sacrifice their professional development for family responsibilities. This imbalance not only limits women's personal growth but also restricts the development of countries, as economies may lose significant potential for innovation, productivity, and sustainable development.

2.2. Case Illustration: Women's Status in India

India, as one of the most gender inequality countries, in which women are amongst the most marginalised sections. India was ranked 108 out of 166 countries in the Gender Inequality Index (GII) 2022 [7]. The intense gender inequality originates from the traditional norms of Indian history. In the medieval period, polygamy, the purdah system, the dowry system, and the sati system negatively affected the position of women and deprived them of their rights. Later, since the 1990s, wealthier families started to practice sex selection, which has created a negative circle and has persecuted women until today [8]. The traditional norm that women

are dominated by their husbands and family makes women's position lower and lower. That is why many cases of domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, and molestation usually appear in India. According to UNDP statistics, India's Gender Norms Social Index (GSNI) in 2023 is 99.22, nearly achieving the highest score (higher GSNI values indicate greater biases against gender equality and women's empowerment) [7]. From Jha and Nagar's study, there are many types of gender inequality at present in India, including mortality inequality, natality inequality, employment inequality, ownership inequality, special opportunity inequality, basic-facility inequality, and household inequality [8]. More detailed data show that the share of seats in parliament, population with at least secondary education, and labor force participation rate still point out the huge gender gap in India. Although progress has been made, Indian women still face serious gender inequality caused by deep-rooted cultural and historical norms. This inequality limits women's contributions to the economy, and India also loses a significant share of its potential talent, innovation, and productivity, slowing its overall economic growth and social development.

3. How Gender Inequality Constrains Economic Growth

3.1. Structural and Institutional Roots of Gender Inequality

Gender norms shape expectations about appropriate economic roles. The stereotype that men are always regarded as strong, aggressive, and bold, while women are expected to be weak, mild, and careful. Patriarchy is a social system in which women are often expected to take supporting roles, like focusing on home and family, and their opportunities can be limited. For example, in ancient Chinese feudal society, only men had the right of succession, while women were at the lowest social status and were treated as mere tools for reproduction rather than being educated or allowed to work. Some research shows that traditional gender role attitudes negatively affect educational equality between women and men [9]. According to the research by Qing, traditional gender role attitudes have a significantly negative impact on the income of women but not men [9]. It is obvious that gender inequality, shaped by historical patriarchy and traditional cultural norms, continues to restrict women's access to education and employment. Gender inequality refers to labor market inequality, education inequality, and other issues. These inequalities lead to unequal participation in economic activities, which limits the efficient allocation of resources, thereby reducing innovation and slowing productivity growth. Gender inequality also constitutes a fundamental structural constraint on economic development. When women are denied equal access to education, employment, and leadership opportunities, the resulting disparities affect not only individual welfare but also the improvement of economic and social conditions.

3.2. Human Capital Reduction and Productivity Loss

Gender inequality in education and labor markets leads to underinvestment in female human capital. Limited educational opportunities, wage discrimination, and occupational segregation not only lower women's individual productivity but also reduce aggregate human capital accumulation. According to the study by Dollar and Gatti, they found that countries with higher female education levels have a huge and significant positive impact on economic growth [4]. This evidence shows that gender inequality in education harms the development of economic growth, while it will be helpful if countries invest in women's education and skills. Gender inequality in education shows that boys have more educational opportunities than girls. If the instinctive intelligence of boys and girls is almost considered equal, then the educational inequality will lead to the less capable person. The lower productivity of the human capital in the economy will result in lower economic growth. Gender inequality can be viewed as a distortionary tax on education, misallocating educational resources in an inefficient manner, which hinders economic development and reduces the investment rate

due to its poor human capital [4]. Labor market inequalities can result in the underutilization of skills and also lead to a misallocation of talent. Gender wage gaps, occupational segregation, and limited access to leadership positions mean that highly capable women are often confined to low-productivity roles. According to the data from 1960 by Hsieh et al., over 90 percent of lawyers and doctors are white men. They show that labor market barriers led to a severe misallocation of talent, as women were historically excluded from high-productivity occupations despite having comparable [10]. This misallocation reduces productivity and imposes substantial costs on economic performance. Gender inequality also loses productivity indirectly through demographic channels. Lower female labor force participation and unequal gender roles reinforce women's involvement in unpaid domestic work and increasing fertility rates. Researchers consider that the opportunity cost of women's time, in foregone labor-market earnings, is lower than that of men because of gender differences in biology and socialization. When women's labor-market participation is considered low, they are expected to return to domestic work in the family and increase their fertility rate. Then, population growth negatively affects long-run economic performance, and human capital accumulates more slowly [11].

3.3. Effects on Economic Growth

In economics, population growth and human capital accumulation affect long-run economic development. Human capital, including knowledge, skills, and other characteristics (congenital and acquired), depends on the individual and is determined by their productivity [12]. The labour market and human capital are interrelated, where gender inequality can hamper the efficiency of using human capital and then harm economic growth. For example, education is a key component of human capital, which helps economic development by enhancing labor productivity, facilitating the adoption of new technologies, and increasing GDP per capita [12]. Female education can generate significant positive externalities: educated mothers tend to invest more in their children's health, nutrition, and schooling, which improves both the quantity and quality of human capital in the next generation [4]. As a result, these positive externalities enhance long-term economic growth by increasing the productivity of workers [4].

4. The Misunderstood Value of Women's Invisible Labor

4.1. Unpaid Domestic Work and Unequal Distribution

People always consider a caregiver, either paid or unpaid, to be a woman. Traditional gender norms expected women to deal with domestic work [13]. For example, the prevalent stereotype is that men are less car-oriented and compassionate than women, as shown by the survey that three-fourths of American adults reported believing this fact, and the percentage still increased over five decades. These stereotypes indirectly reflect the different roles people think men and women play, such as women being more likely to stay at home and serve as primary caretakers. People develop a strong association between women and the home, whereas men are associated with work [13]. The burden of unpaid care and domestic work is borne disproportionately on women, who currently spend 2.8 more hours daily on it than men. While this gap is expected to narrow slightly, women are still set to spend 2.3 extra hours per day (9.5% more time) on this work by 2050 [14]. This persistent imbalance highlights the enduring impact of gender stereotypes that associate women with domestic responsibilities. Stereotypes further reinforce this unequal allocation of labor. This lack of recognition not only perpetuates gender inequality but also hurts women's contributions to social and economic development.

4.2. Historical Construction of Women's Labor Roles

The famous economist Boserup introduced her two famous theories, the female farming system and the male farming system, in early agricultural stages to demonstrate the differences in status between women and men [15]. The traditional division of labor within the family was shaped by the natural and by differences of sex. For example, in African agriculture, women, as the leading agricultural producers, were responsible for significant work, such as sowing and harvesting, related to family planning and the local economy [15]. In pre-industrial England and France, women's activities, including textile work, sewing, food processing, and other forms of domestic production, were fundamental to the survival of the family economy [16]. As Tilly and Scott considered, we do not deny that unpaid household labor is work. Indeed, we suggest that its value to families was often seen as greater than the value of women's wage labor. [16]. Evidence demonstrates that women's labor was valuable in early societies, and women occupied a relatively dominant position within the productive system. However, with the process of modernization and industrialization, the organization of work underwent significant changes. Due to the redefinition of boundaries between home and work, wage labor became associated with men, but women were increasingly confined to domestic work. Women's domestic labor was recast as unpaid work that sustained the wage labor system. In this process, women's contributions became invisible in economic and social terms, even though their unpaid household and caregiving work remained indispensable to the reproduction of the labor force [16].

4.3. The Cognitive and Social Blind Spots Surrounding Invisible Labor

These historical processes form the systematic undervaluation of women's labor in social and official perceptions, creating persistent gaps in economic measurement. This perception led to a widespread norm that women's domestic work is insignificant, inherent, and without economic value. This social norm generated severe gender inequality and deprived women of labor, thereby indirectly deteriorating economic development. Ester Boserup emphasized that the time-consuming nature of these activities, such as domestic work, is that the subsistence activities usually omitted in the statistics of production and income are largely women's work [3]. Fluctuations in official economic growth rates, such as GDP, can be misleading because they often overlook unpaid household production. This omission leads to miscalculations of actual economic growth, and, due to gendered labor divisions, these miscalculations primarily relate to women's work [3]. Therefore, many researchers argue that, even though women's invisible labor is unpaid, it should still be accounted for.

5. Women as Drivers of Economic Development

5.1. Mechanisms Through Which Women Advance Economic Growth

Women contribute to economic growth in multiple ways. Many examples demonstrate that women's participation directly influences organizational strategies, improves productivity, fosters innovation, and promotes long-term sustainable development. One prominent example that illustrates these mechanisms is Indra Nooyi, whose leadership demonstrates how empowering women can generate substantial economic benefits for firms and the broader economy. Indra Nooyi was born into a conservative, middle-class Indian family, but after graduating and working for a while, she chose to pursue further studies and a career. Despite prevailing gender norms, she emerged as a highly capable and excellent. She was recruited by Pepsi and left with a glorious outcome through her professional and outgoing power. After becoming CEO in 2006, Nooyi spent 12 years steering the company through significant expansion, with annual net profits rising from \$2.7 billion to \$6.5 billion. She played a key role in shifting Pepsi's business model toward healthier options in response to

changing consumer demand [17]. In her book, *My Life in Full*, she mentioned work-life balance and said that the truth is, there is no such thing as balancing work and family. It's a constant juggling act. But family is family rather than female [17]. A successful woman, as well as a mother and a wife, her experience challenges the stereotype that men are superior, while women should sacrifice careers to take on family responsibilities. Empowering women to fully participate in economic and managerial roles can enhance firm performance, promote innovation, and generate measurable, long-term economic gains. This case highlights that women's empowerment is not merely a social ideal but a practical engine of economic growth.

5.2. Long-Term Economic and Social Benefits of Women's Empowerment

Duflo argues that the gender gap in education, political participation, and employment opportunities should therefore be reduced not only because it will have beneficial consequences on many other society-wide outcomes [18]. Women's empowerment enhances economic efficiency and positively contributes to long-run development. First, women's empowerment, particularly through education, plays a fundamental role in human capital accumulation and generates intergenerational spillover effects. Female education enhances cognitive skills, health outcomes, and decision-making capacity. Educated mothers are more willing to invest in their children and foster the next generation as part of long-term capital accumulation. Evidence shows that education can reduce child mortality, suggesting that female education is more important than male education [18]. These intergenerational spillovers contribute to sustained productivity growth and long-run economic stability. Second, increasing women's participation in the labor market expands labor supply and improves the allocation of human capital. According to the OECD's estimates, closing gender gaps in labor force participation (both in the numbers of men and women and in paid working hours) could increase annual growth by 0.22 percentage points, boosting GDP per capita by 8.8% on average by 2060 [19]. Historical evidence from the United States further illustrates this mechanism. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, inflation hit 13.5 percent, and unemployment reached 11 percent [5]. Until around 1983, the Great Moderation, economists found that stabilizing the economy was due to rising labor force participation among women. Women's labor force participation increased from 37 percent to 61 percent between 1960 and 1997, marking a remarkable economic development [5]. Women's labor force participation helps the US avoid a hard landing and drives economic growth, underscoring women's power in the labor market.

Third, women's participation in decision-making roles can enhance **productivity and innovation**. Even though the rate of male entrepreneurs was about 50-100% higher than that of female entrepreneurs [20], women entrepreneurs understand the resulting business disruptions and new market realities, and they have shown remarkable resilience and ingenuity [20]. Marion's research mainly discussed the potential, current state, challenges, and future development direction of female entrepreneurship in the US economy. His statistics prove that women entrepreneurs represent a significant and untapped resource for generating jobs and high-growth businesses [21]. From surveys, women usually absorb lessons from failure better than men do, which leads them to succeed [21]. Moreover, women will better reflect their own priorities and improve their bargaining power within the household in political participation [18]. Duflo conducted research in Rajasthan, India, showing that women care more about drinking water and roads than men do, suggesting that the gender responsibilities of women and men differ [18]. These investments promote long-term growth by strengthening the foundations of productivity and social welfare. Overall, women are underutilized resources worldwide. Expanding women's access to education, employment, leadership, and political participation strengthens human capital accumulation, enhances productivity, and supports sustainable economic growth.

6. The Necessity of Advancing Gender Equality

6.1. Economic and Social Rationale for Gender Equality

Gender inequality is not just a moral or political issue, but also an economic problem that imposes a hidden cost on nations and impedes the full realization of global prosperity. Over the past decades, awareness of gender equality has led every country to pay closer attention. According to the report, gender equity has increased by 4.8 points since 2006, indicating that the gender gap in the world's senior economic leadership, higher education, governing cabinets, and legislative bodies has decreased [2]. Despite these improvements, gender equality is still facing challenges. Women are concentrated in lower-paid sectors, and they account for only 29.5% of tertiary-educated senior managers, indicating systemic inefficiency in turning education into economic and leadership outcomes. In policy fields, women are underrepresented in the economy, infrastructure, and defense portfolios. The proportion of women in top management increased from 25.7% to 28.1%, but progress slowed after 2022 [2]. These problems continue to weaken the foundations of economic resilience and hinder global economic development. Although legal and policy reforms have expanded opportunities, a persistent implementation gap means that many women still lack access to the resources, networks, and support systems needed to advance.

6.2. Policy Directions and Strategic Interventions

In fact, no country has achieved gender equality or eliminated gender gaps, but sustained policy efforts can continuously narrow these gaps and improve women's status and well-being. As we mentioned earlier, women's participation in the labor market and entrepreneurship benefits economic recovery, productivity growth, and resilience. Achieving this goal requires not only shifts in social norms but also active state intervention. Increasing the financial capabilities of women to ensure that they can receive enough investments and encouraging more women to try to invest and start is a fundamental method. Providing job opportunities, study opportunities, excellent experiences, or implementing family-friendly policies allows women to be flexible and responsive outside of family responsibilities [21]. In addition, some countries use a controversial way to allocate political quotas by gender, which requires women to take a minimum share of a group, list, or institution, helping women participate in elections or appointments and overcome challenges [22]. An Indian Study shows that quotas provide real experience for women, reduce the bias against female leaders, and encourage women's political participation [22]. Emerging technologies also pose new challenges for gender equality. In the AI era, women account for only 32% of AI and data professionals, 20% of engineers, and 14% of cloud computing roles, raising concerns about future inequities and bias [23]. The UAE pays attention to these problems through the Gender Balance Council, which offers coding bootcamps, AI mentorship programmes, and partnerships with non-profits. In the national university, 70% women study in STEM, and they go on to apply their expertise in different professional fields after graduating, from healthcare to environmental sustainability [23]. Achieving gender equality requires coordinated and forward-looking policies across education, labor markets, political representation, and emerging technologies. Rational interventions can prevent the misallocation of female human capital, enhance productivity, and promote sustainable economic growth.

7. Conclusion

Although women have historically contributed to economic and social development, they still face structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that limit their ability to fully participate in public life. Gender inequalities were embodied in many different aspects in many countries.

These persistent gender inequalities lead to the underutilization of human capital and impede sustainable economic growth. This paper discusses that women are not only domestic roles but also are vital contributors to national productivity, global innovation, and long-term economic development. Many examples show that when women have access to education and financial resources, it strengthens human capital accumulation and generates intergenerational spillover effects, improving children's health and educational outcomes, decreasing poverty rates, and helping families achieve greater stability. Women's participation in the labor market also expands the effective labor supply and enhances productivity, while women's involvement in leadership, governance, and entrepreneurship leads to more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable policy decisions. Empirical evidence suggests that narrowing gender gaps can generate significant economic gains. Countries that reduce gender inequality have higher GDP growth, greater economic resilience, and improved social welfare. These achievements highlight the undeniable impact of women's empowerment on social and economic outcomes. Therefore, gender equality is both a moral imperative and an economic necessity. Empowering women can advance individual rights and build stronger economies, more cohesive communities, and a more resilient and prosperous future for all. In this context, governments play a necessary role in addressing entrenched gender inequalities through appropriate policy intervention, particularly in changing social norms that undervalue women's labor.

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