

The Gender Gap in Artificial Intelligence: Ethical Challenges and Inclusive Futures

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Abstract: *As artificial intelligence (AI) systems become increasingly integrated into sectors such as healthcare, finance, and education, the ethical challenges associated with their design and deployment grow more urgent. This article highlights the important role of women in tackling these issues, particularly in addressing algorithmic bias, data privacy concerns, and a lack of transparency in decision-making processes. It argues that the underrepresentation of women in the AI industry worsens these ethical issues and restricts the development of inclusive, responsible AI systems. Central to this discussion is the question: How can increasing gender diversity, especially by including women, help address the ethical challenges of artificial intelligence and promote more inclusive AI development? Drawing on case studies and research, this article underscores the importance of diverse gender perspectives in AI ethics and highlights initiatives to increase female participation in the field. It also examines the role of gender-responsive pedagogy in empowering women to make meaningful contributions to AI development. By promoting greater gender diversity and inclusive design principles, the article argues that the AI industry can develop more equitable, ethical technologies that benefit society as a whole.*

Keywords: Ethical AI, Gender Gap, Gender-Responsive Pedagogy, Technology and Gender

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1. Introduction

The rapid development of Artificial Intelligence is reshaping society and creating opportunities across sectors like healthcare, finance, education, and transportation. AI has great potential. It can optimize logistics, personalize learning experiences, and accelerate scientific discoveries. However, with its transformative power comes an ethical dilemma: algorithmic bias. These biases could worsen existing inequalities, lead to data breaches and misuse, and raise concerns about transparency and accountability in AI decision-making. These are not minor technical issues; they are serious ethical challenges that affect fairness, human rights, and democratic values.

This article highlights an important aspect that remains largely overlooked in tackling these ethical issues: the need for gender diversity in the AI industry. The significant underrepresentation of women in designing, developing, and deploying AI makes these ethical problems worse. It drastically limits the chance of building truly inclusive, responsible, and beneficial AI. Lacking these perspectives is particularly harmful for women because their experiences expose crucial blind spots and gaps in data collection, algorithm design, and ethical oversight. As a result, AI technologies may often unintentionally discriminate against a significant portion of the population or reinforce biases they were meant to diminish. As such, they fail to serve an internationally diverse population.

AI mimics human-like cognition by processing information and making decisions. It ranges from narrow AI (for specific tasks) to hypothetical super AI. Most current AI can be classified as general AI, with narrow AI in the theoretical realm and capable of learning through machine learning methods such as supervised, unsupervised, and reinforcement learning. Deep learning techniques are used in the most advanced applications like NLP. The lack of autonomy is a key factor driving transformation and innovation. However, this power also necessitates an ethical AI framework—a guiding philosophy grounded in moral principles such as fairness and non-discrimination, ensuring AI treats all users equitably. Algorithmic bias can lead to discrimination due to poor data or flawed design (O'Neil, 2016).

Transparency and explainability (XAI) are modern concepts. UNESCO (2023) emphasizes the need for ethical oversight and transparency in the deployment of generative AI in education and research. Ethical AI requires understanding how these systems operate and make decisions. This "black box" hinders trust, while explainable AI helps to rebuild it. As AI systems become more autonomous, it is essential for all stakeholders to ensure responsibility and accountability, particularly regarding liability.

Respect for human values safeguards rights and dignity while also addressing issues related to security, data privacy, autonomy, public interest, and dignity (Noble, 2018). It demonstrates how ethical oversight can prevent the erosion of dignity. Essentially, ethical AI aims to prevent harm and promote an equitable society. Therefore, incorporating a gender perspective is essential.

2. Review of the Literature

The literature on artificial intelligence (AI) ethics has grown rapidly. It focuses on issues such as algorithmic bias, transparency, accountability, and the social effects of automated decision-making. A related area examines how gender inequality shapes AI development and adoption, and how, in turn, AI development and adoption shape gender inequality. This review gathers important insights from key scholarly texts, global organizations, and significant reports. Together, these sources argue that gender diversity is essential for creating responsible and legitimate AI systems, not merely an optional addition.

Safiya Noble's book, *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), is crucial for understanding how seemingly neutral computational systems reinforce social hierarchies through data, platform economics, and institutional power. While Noble emphasizes race, her central point is that algorithmic systems are socio-political artefacts, a point that directly applies to gendered harms, including the reinforcement of stereotypes through search, recommendation, and classification systems. Building on these discussions, McKinsey & Company's diversity research presents a well-known organizational argument: gender-diverse leadership leads to better performance and decision-making, including improved risk detection. This insight is often applied to AI ethics, as diverse teams can more readily spot blind spots in design and deployment. The World Economic Forum (2024) further reports that women remain underrepresented in AI roles worldwide. Women constitute only 25–30% of the global AI workforce, and their share drops sharply in positions of power, with fewer than 15% in senior executive roles. This pattern signals entrenched gender hierarchies within AI governance and leadership structures. It warns that the rapid spread of generative AI could worsen inequality if the creators and users of these tools come from a narrow demographic.

UNESCO's science reporting also identifies gender inequality as a structural issue. It highlights the cumulative effects of stereotypes, unequal opportunities, and limited access to leadership and resources in STEM. These factors restrict who creates AI and whose interests it serves (UNESCO, 2021). Evidence of funding disparities in innovation ecosystems shows how exclusion persists through capital allocation. Women-led ventures receive a disproportionately small share of venture capital, and similar patterns appear in research funding and recognition. This is particularly important in AI, where access to computing, data, and scaling opportunities is closely tied to funding. In addition to these structural issues, UNESCO's framework for feminist AI governance advocates participatory, justice-focused approaches that go beyond mere representation to change decision-making power throughout the AI lifecycle (UNESCO, 2024).

Recent research shifts the focus from "who builds AI" to "who uses AI," a topic that's increasingly relevant in the age of generative AI. The Stanford Social Innovation Review's "AI gender gap paradox" shows that women may adopt AI tools less often, influenced by differences in exposure, confidence, and ethical concerns. This adoption gap can exacerbate workplace inequalities, even when access is technically available (Bolis, 2025). Similarly, research from Harvard Business School Working Knowledge (2025) synthesizes data from multiple countries, revealing consistent gender gaps in generative AI use across regions and professions. This suggests the gap is widespread and not confined to a single labour market. The public-facing HBS Working Knowledge piece highlights a key factor: women's lower adoption may stem from ethical concerns about using these tools, suggesting that cautious hesitation could lead to career setbacks if workplaces favour early adopters.

Newer policy and civil-society discussions also broaden the framework for understanding the problem. UN Women (2024) links gender equality to the digital divide and data gaps that contribute to bias. It emphasizes that AI reflects the inequalities present in the environments that generate its data and governance. Meanwhile, Pal, Lazzaroni, and Mendoza (2024) provide a brief overview of the EU, quantifying women's underrepresentation in the AI talent pool and in senior positions, thereby confirming that gender gaps persist even in high-skill fields with established technology sectors. Lastly, Kelan's (2024) *Patterns of Inclusion* offers a detailed analysis of how "inclusion" is defined, managed, and sometimes depoliticized in the context of automation and AI futures. It shows that gender is influenced not only by barriers to entry but also by how technological work and value are perceived.

Research gap and contribution of this article: Existing literature clearly shows (1) a gender imbalance in AI production, (2) structural barriers in education, organizations, and funding, and (3) emerging gender differences in the adoption of generative AI. However, a significant gap remains in integrating these strands into a single socio-technical account. This account should connect participation in AI education, the workforce, and leadership governance with ethical oversight and feminist governance approaches. It will explore who benefits from generative AI at work, using one analytical framework that includes practical strategies. This article addresses that gap by linking insights on representation, institutional barriers, and the dynamics of generative AI adoption to a practical agenda for inclusive ethical AI. This agenda emphasizes gender-responsive teaching, mentorship and sponsorship, fair funding, workplace reforms, and feminist AI governance as mutually supportive measures instead of separate actions.

3. What Matters in AI Ethics: A Deeper Dive into the Problem

The argument that women are valuable to AI ethics is not just about equal representation; it is essential to maintaining integrity and ensuring the public benefit of AI systems. Women bring diverse lived experiences, different perspectives, and the critical thinking needed to detect, avoid, and proactively prevent ethical failures in AI development. If AI development teams are largely homogeneous, they inevitably develop hidden blind spots, unintentionally embedding biases in algorithms and datasets that reinforce existing societal inequalities.

The consequences are not just theoretical; they cause real harm to society. Therefore, including women, especially those from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, is a practical necessity. One of the strongest reasons for women's invaluable contributions is their greater ability to recognize ethical risks and biases. As McKinsey & Co. (2020) suggests, the more women on a team, the better the team is at spotting ethical issues. This is especially clear in facial recognition software: an ACLU-MN study found a shocking 34.7% error rate for women and people of colour. In contrast, it recorded only 0.8% for light-skinned men (ACLU of Minnesota, 2024). Such disparities result directly from homogeneous training datasets and a lack of diversity. Women data scientists and engineers, whose questions and ideas may differ, are more likely to question data collection practices and the representativeness of training data, and to anticipate exclusionary or discriminatory outcomes. This vigilance is vital for applications like hiring algorithms, healthcare AI, and predictive policing, where biased results can ruin people's lives and opportunities (O'Neil, 2016).

Finally, representation ensures accountability and fosters an ethical design culture. More women, especially in leadership and decision-making roles, naturally strengthen ethical accountability in AI development. Such teams are more reflective, asking: "Who might be hurt by this technology, and how do we prevent it?" They are more likely to revisit or adjust designs when ethics are at risk. AI systems mirror their underlying data and logic. Homogeneous teams may unintentionally embed societal biases, reinforcing deep-rooted inequalities. Women—particularly those from diverse backgrounds—are crucial for identifying and addressing these blind spots in training data, improving evaluation methods, and ensuring AI's positive impact on users.

Their voices are essential to advocating for strong ethical regulation, ensuring that AI is a force for good rather than a source of discrimination. Women often bring qualities such as empathy, care, and emotional intelligence to their work. Integrating these attributes into AI development could lead to more human-centred, compassionate, and socially responsive technologies—broadening the scope and impact of ethical AI.

4. The Impact of Women in Technology: A Theoretical and Critical Perspective

The participation of women in technology goes beyond mere representation; it reshapes the foundational ideas and ethics of technological development. From a socio-technical perspective, technology is not neutral. It is influenced by social values, institutional frameworks, and embedded power dynamics in its design processes (Bijker et al., 1987). The persistent underrepresentation of women in technology has led to dominant design ideas that reflect limited social experiences. Increasing women's involvement challenges these ideas and introduces new ways of thinking and designing.

Feminist standpoint theory offers a useful lens for understanding this change. Knowledge production is shaped by social context, and marginalized groups can provide unique insights into structural inequalities (Harding, 1991; Haraway, 1988). In artificial intelligence (AI), women's experiences help identify gender

biases in datasets, question underlying algorithmic assumptions, and push for more inclusive design. This is crucial, especially given documented examples of algorithmic bias that reinforce existing social inequalities (O’Neil, 2016).

Innovation theory supports the need for diversity in tech development. Research shows that diverse teams are more effective than homogeneous ones at solving problems creatively and making decisions (Page, 2007). Diversity boosts collective intelligence, minimizes groupthink, and improves adaptability in complex situations. In AI ethics, this leads to systems that are clearer, more accountable, and more responsive to society. Thus, gender diversity not only promotes fairness but also strengthens the reliability and sustainability of technology.

Responsible innovation frameworks emphasize anticipation, reflection, inclusion, and responsiveness in managing technology (Stilgoe et al., 2013). Including women strengthens these aspects by broadening stakeholder representation and integrating social factors into technical processes. In fields like cybersecurity and engineering, cooperative, systems-oriented methods, often associated with diverse teams, enable more robust threat assessments and socially aware technology design.

Ultimately, including women in AI and other tech areas should be viewed as both an ethical necessity and a structural change. It challenges established power structures, broadens the diversity of knowledge, and enhances the legitimacy and accountability of technological systems. Gender inclusion is therefore essential for creating socially responsible and ethically sound innovation ecosystems.

5. The Gender Gap in Artificial Intelligence: Structural Inequality in an Era of Generative AI Expansion

Artificial intelligence (AI) is one of the fastest-growing industries worldwide. The global AI market is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 37.3% from 2023 to 2030 (Forbes Advisor, 2024). Recently, the quick advancement of generative AI technologies, especially large language models and foundation models, has increased the need for workers skilled in AI across various sectors. According to the World Economic Forum (2024), generative AI is likely to change nearly 44% of essential work skills in the next five years, significantly altering job markets. However, this change is happening within highly unequal gender structures.

Women currently make up about 22% of AI professionals around the world (World Economic Forum, 2024). In high-impact research settings, the gap is even wider: women hold only 15% of AI research positions at Meta (formerly Facebook) and 10% at Google (UNESCO, 2021). Data on conference authorship also show that women represent around 18% of contributors in top AI research venues. Cross-national data further highlight this imbalance. In developed digital economies like the United States (23%), India (22%), Germany (16%), Switzerland (19%), Canada (24%), France (21%), Spain (19%), Sweden (20%), the United Kingdom (20%), and Singapore (28%), women consistently make up less than one-third of AI-skilled professionals.

Is this a Pipeline Problem or Structural Exclusion? Debates about gender gaps in AI often mention the “pipeline problem.” This idea suggests that women are underrepresented in AI because fewer women study STEM subjects. While we still see gender imbalances in engineering and computer science programs, this explanation is becoming less convincing. Women’s participation in higher education is increasing worldwide, and in many areas, women now outnumber men in overall college enrolment (UNESCO, 2021). The ongoing gaps in AI research and leadership roles indicate that institutional factors, rather than just a shortage of candidates, contribute to exclusion.

Recent studies point out structural and organizational obstacles, such as biased hiring practices, unfair promotion processes, exclusion from prominent research projects, and unequal caregiving responsibilities (West et al., 2019; World Economic Forum, 2024). In the generative AI sector, leadership and model development roles are still mostly held by men, especially in designing foundation models and developing large-scale AI infrastructure. This concentration of technical control within uniform networks influences research priorities, risk assessments, and the underlying assumptions found in AI systems (Crawford, 2021).

The rise of generative AI in 2024 and 2025 brings new concerns. Large-scale AI systems are starting to influence hiring, credit scoring, healthcare diagnostics, and educational evaluation. Without diverse

participation in system design, generative AI risks reinforcing historical biases found in training data (Benjamin, 2019). Additionally, labour market projections indicate that AI will primarily automate administrative and clerical tasks, roles where women are often overrepresented worldwide (World Economic Forum, 2024). This situation raises the possibility of a dual inequity: underrepresentation in high-status AI development roles along with increased risk of job loss driven by AI.

Therefore, the gender gap in AI is not just about representation; it highlights deeper issues in technological power. Exclusion from design spaces means exclusion from decision-making roles over digital systems that influence social life. From a governance standpoint, this imbalance weakens the legitimacy and inclusivity of upcoming AI regulations (European Commission, 2021; OECD, 2023).

As AI systems are integrated into public administration, finance, healthcare, and education, the gender imbalance within AI ecosystems raises ethical concerns and has societal impacts. To tackle this issue, we need to shift from focusing only on the pipeline to implementing structural changes. These changes should include clear hiring practices, fair research funding, diverse leadership opportunities, and gender-sensitive AI governance.

In a time when generative AI is being deployed quickly, ensuring women's active involvement is essential for democracy and necessary for ethical technological progress. Without structural changes, rapid AI growth may deepen existing inequalities instead of promoting inclusive innovation.

6. Understanding the Issue: Structural and Institutional Challenges Facing Women in AI

Despite growing global focus on gender equity in science and technology, women still encounter systemic obstacles that limit their participation and growth in artificial intelligence (AI). These challenges begin early in education and continue into professional, financial, and policy areas, reflecting structural inequalities rather than personal failings. According to UNESCO (2021), women make up only 28% of engineering graduates and 40% of computer science graduates worldwide. While women's overall presence in higher education has increased, persistent gender stereotypes still affect subject choices and career paths. Fields like AI and machine learning are often seen as male territories, while women are frequently steered—either directly or indirectly—toward less technical or more socially focused careers. This social conditioning restricts access to high-growth AI fields even though women show capability in STEM subjects.

These gaps are further deepened in innovation and funding environments. Women-led startups received only 2.3% of global venture capital funding in 2020 (Bittner, A., & Lau, B, 2021) revealing a significant disparity in financial backing for tech entrepreneurship. In academic settings, women often obtain less research funding despite matching or exceeding the productivity of their male counterparts. Since AI innovation relies heavily on research funding, startup growth, and institutional visibility, unequal access to money limits women's roles in high-impact tech development. Funding inequalities act not just as financial setbacks but as structural barriers that reduce women's influence in shaping AI's direction and priorities.

Institutional practices in AI hiring and workplace culture further worsen these issues. Recruitment processes that prioritize narrow technical terms, competitive coding environments, and informal professional connections may unintentionally favour certain groups while sidelining others. Implicit bias in evaluations and promotions leads to slower career progress, fewer women in leadership roles, and limited entry into decision-making positions. These trends show broader organizational gatekeeping that maintains gender hierarchies in technology sectors (West et al., 2019). Even after joining the workforce, women in AI frequently face unequal promotion paths, fewer mentorship opportunities, and increased scrutiny regarding their skills, creating ongoing disadvantages over time.

The lack of women's representation also affects policy and governance structures. With fewer women in senior research and executive positions in AI, the number of female experts available to serve on regulatory boards, ethics committees, and national policymaking bodies remains disproportionately low. As AI increasingly influences public services, financial systems, healthcare, and education, the lack of gender diversity in governance risks limiting the viewpoints that shape regulation and oversight. Therefore, the gender gap in AI is not merely a workforce issue but a structural problem that affects who gets to shape technological futures. Solving these intertwined barriers requires systemic changes in education, funding, institutional practices, and governance models to make AI development truly inclusive and accountable to society.

7. Strategies To Address and Overcome the Challenges

Addressing gender disparities in artificial intelligence (AI) needs various solutions that cover education, institutional practices, research environments, and governance. One important strategy is adopting gender-focused teaching methods. These practices challenge stereotypes, encourage all students to participate, and boost women's involvement in technology. By creating learning spaces that acknowledge diverse experiences and challenge biases, these methods can help increase women's presence in AI-related fields and improve long-term representation in the digital workforce.

Targeted educational programs strengthen these efforts. Initiatives like AI4All, which runs summer camps to introduce young women to AI (AI4All, n.d.), Women in Data Science (WiDS) India, which supports mentorship and networking (WiDS Worldwide, n.d.), and AI-for-Women by GUVI, which offers accessible AI training, show how structured programs can increase early exposure, skill development, and confidence in women in tech (GUVI, n.d.). These programs demonstrate the value of combining technical training with mentorship, role models, and community support. Early involvement and ongoing guidance are especially important for reducing dropout rates and encouraging leadership in AI careers.

Beyond formal education, it is crucial to expand AI literacy and training programs. Mentorship, particularly informal mentorship, plays a key role in helping women navigate challenges within institutions, professional networks, and career growth. Creating clear training pathways in AI ethics, policy, and governance can prepare women and other underrepresented groups to take on roles in regulatory and advisory positions. These initiatives support diversity not just within tech development teams but also in decision-making bodies that influence AI standards and accountability.

Institutions must reform alongside educational initiatives. Supporting diverse AI research with targeted funding for scholars at the intersections of AI ethics, law, and social justice broadens the expertise guiding technological growth. Involving women's organizations, minority groups, and civil society in policymaking strengthens legitimacy and ensures better representation in AI governance. AI firms and research institutions need to make diversity, equity, and inclusion a priority in recruitment, leadership, and evaluation practices to encourage broad participation throughout the AI life cycle.

Additionally, transparency and accountability are vital. Institutions developing AI should regularly publish representation data and set measurable diversity goals to track progress. New frameworks in feminist AI governance support these strategies by embedding equality, inclusivity, and justice into policy, research, and technology design (UNESCO, 2024). Feminist approaches to AI governance focus on tackling systemic inequalities and addressing structural harms within AI systems, pushing for participatory models that uplift marginalized voices. Supporting these initiatives can enhance ethical oversight and promote the creation of fair and socially responsible AI systems.

Together, these strategies emphasize that tackling gender disparities in AI requires coordinated efforts in education, funding, institutional reform, and governance innovation. Sustainable inclusion calls for not just representation but also meaningful changes in the systems shaping AI development.

8. Conclusion

Conclusion: Building an Inclusive and Contextually Grounded AI Future

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into governance, industry, education, and public life has highlighted both its transformative potential and its ethical risks. This study argues that women are not on the sidelines; they are crucial to addressing the ethical issues in AI systems. Gender imbalances in AI development create algorithmic blind spots, narrow design assumptions, and governance frameworks that fail to reflect social diversity. Therefore, increasing women's participation in technical, research, and policy areas is not just about representation; it is essential for responsible technological growth.

Closing the gender gap in AI requires sustained commitment to gender-sensitive education, institutional reform, and inclusive policymaking. Educational systems must go beyond access by fostering environments that challenge stereotypes and support women's continued participation in advanced AI fields. Policy measures should promote fair funding structures, transparent recruitment practices, and leadership pathways that enable women to influence AI research and governance. Without systemic reform, the rapid growth of AI may deepen existing inequalities rather than reduce them.

On a larger scale, AI development should prioritize ethics, inclusiveness, and transparency as guiding principles, not as afterthoughts. Ethical AI cannot be limited to meeting technical standards; it requires participatory governance, accountability, and socially aware innovation. Inclusive design must be embedded throughout the AI life cycle—from data collection and model development to deployment and regulation—to ensure that technological systems fairly serve diverse populations.

In this context, national AI strategies also warrant careful examination. For countries like India, the future of AI shouldn't merely mimic dominant global models—whether driven by corporations in the United States, regulation-focused approaches in Europe, or centralized authoritarian models elsewhere. India can instead shape a unique AI path rooted in its democratic values, diverse social fabric, and commitment to social justice. This model can blend innovation with ethical responsibility, diversity with technological goals, and inclusion with economic growth.

Ultimately, creating an inclusive AI future requires collective action. Supporting women in AI through mentorship, advocacy, research funding, and leadership development is not only an ethical duty but also a smart investment in sustainable innovation. By integrating gender equity and democratic values into AI systems, societies can progress toward technological futures that are intelligent, just, accountable, and socially transformative.

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