

Understanding Gender in Development: Core Concepts, Theories, and Contemporary Issues

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Gender has become a central analytical lens in development studies, shaping how scholars and practitioners understand the social, economic, and political structures that influence human well-being. This paper clarifies the core concepts of gender, sex, masculinity, feminism, and development, and examines their implications for development analysis. It explores the interrelationship between gender, sex, and development, highlighting why gender is a critical development issue. Using an intersectional framework, the study analyses how gender interacts with ethnicity, race, and class to produce differentiated development outcomes. The paper further reviews major theoretical discourses in Women and Gender Studies, assessing their relevance for understanding gendered inequalities. Drawing on contemporary empirical evidence, it demonstrates the continued importance of gender in shaping access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making. The study concludes by identifying practical strategies for promoting gender inclusion in the development process to enhance equity, participation, and sustainable development.

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Background to the Study

Gender remains a central organising principle of social, economic, and political life, shaping access to resources, decision-making processes, and development outcomes across societies (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999). Contemporary empirical evidence highlights that closing gender gaps contributes significantly to human development, economic growth, and social cohesion. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2024, the global gender gap is only 68.5% closed, with notable disparities in economic participation, political empowerment, health, and educational attainment (World Economic Forum, 2024). These gaps persist despite improvements in years of schooling and global progress in reducing maternal mortality rates in some regions.

Legal and institutional environments continue to limit women's economic prospects. The World Bank's Women, Business and the Law 2024 reveal that when factors such as safeguards from violence, parental leave, occupational safety, and childcare policies are included, women enjoy less than two-thirds of the legal protections available to men in most countries (World Bank, 2024). This legal inequality contributes to a global female labour-force participation rate that remains stagnant at around 48–49% (World Bank, 2024), compared to significantly higher participation rates for men. Studies show that closing gender gaps could increase global GDP by more than 20%, reflecting the economic value of inclusive labour markets (Reuters, 2024).

Political representation also remains uneven. Although women held 26.9% of parliamentary seats worldwide as of January 2024, according to Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024), their participation in executive leadership positions remains much lower. Evidence shows that women in legislatures are more likely to champion policies related to health, education, and social welfare, making their under-representation a barrier to inclusive governance (UN Women, 2023). However, country-specific variations demonstrate that structures matter. For instance, Rwanda maintains one of the highest female parliamentary representation rates globally, with women occupying over 60% of seats in the lower house — a result of post-genocide constitutional reforms and gender quotas (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). Yet, even with political advances, gaps in labour-market access and social protections persist, underscoring that representation alone does not guarantee full gender equality.

Health, education, and human-capital indicators further demonstrate the development consequences of gender inequality. Countries with high gender inequality scores continue to struggle with elevated maternal mortality, low secondary school completion among girls, and high rates of child marriage (UN Women, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2024). Conversely, investments in girls' education correlate strongly with lower fertility rates, higher household incomes, and greater civic participation (Sen, 1999). Such findings affirm that gender-responsive planning is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in developing countries where structural and institutional weaknesses exacerbate exclusion.

In both Nigerian and international contexts, the intersection of ethnicity, class, and race shapes the lived experiences of gender (Aina, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991). These intersectional dynamics deepen inequalities in access to employment, credit, political participation, health services, and education. Gender debates are therefore inseparable from broader struggles around social justice, empowerment, and equity. Contemporary policy approaches emphasise legal reform, institutional strengthening, gender sensitisation, inclusive economic planning, and social-norm change as essential tools for achieving gender equality (Moser, 2003; World Bank, 2024). As a result, gender has evolved from a marginal concern in early development discourse to a mainstream global development priority backed by extensive empirical evidence and policy commitments.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to:

1. To clarify the concepts of gender, sex, masculinity, feminism, and development and analyse their implications for development analysis.
2. To examine the interrelationship between gender, sex, and development, and assess why gender is a central development issue.
3. To analyse how intersectionality—gender, ethnicity, race, and class shapes development outcomes.
4. To review key theoretical perspectives in Women and Gender Studies and evaluate their relevance to development.
5. To critically examine the core concepts underpinning gender and development, and to analyse the dominant perspectives shaping contemporary gender and development issues.
6. To present contemporary empirical evidence demonstrating the importance of gender in development.
7. To identify effective strategies for promoting gender inclusion in the development process.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research design consistent with its conceptual and theoretical orientation. A desk-based research approach is utilised, drawing extensively on secondary data from academic literature, policy documents, institutional reports, and global development indices. Key sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, gender and development textbooks, reports from international organisations such as the United Nations, UNDP, UN Women, the World Bank, and the World Economic Forum, as well as country-specific gender analyses.

A thematic content-analysis strategy is employed to organise and interpret the literature. This approach enables the identification of core concepts, theoretical perspectives, and emerging issues in gender and development studies. It also facilitates examination of intersectional patterns by synthesising research on how ethnicity, race, and class shape gendered experiences. The study does not involve primary data collection; therefore, its analysis is based on established knowledge and contemporary evidence from existing

scholarly and institutional sources. Ethical considerations centre on accurate citation, responsible representation of the literature, and adherence to academic integrity throughout the research process.

Conceptual Clarification: Gender, Sex, Masculinity, Feminism and Development and their Implications for Development Analysis

1. Concept of Sex

Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that classify individuals as male, female, or intersex (WHO, 2023). These attributes include chromosomes (XX or XY), reproductive organs, hormonal structures, and secondary sexual characteristics. While sex is often considered binary, contemporary medical research and socio-biological studies emphasise its diversity. For example, intersex variations occur naturally and challenge traditional binary classifications (Connell, 2009; WHO, 2023).

In development analysis, biological sex is important for understanding health-related indicators such as reproductive health needs, maternal mortality, fertility rates, and life expectancy. According to WHO (2023), women globally face a maternal mortality ratio of 223 deaths per 100,000 live births, with Sub-Saharan Africa accounting for 70% of maternal deaths. This underscores the biological factors that influence health outcomes in development planning. However, overreliance on sex-based analysis has historically led to gender-blind policies. Agarwal (1994) argues that early development interventions assumed that biological differences alone determined women's economic roles, resulting in limited recognition of socioeconomic barriers.

2. Concept of Gender and Gender Studies

Gender encompasses the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, behaviours, expectations, and norms assigned to individuals based on their perceived sex (Butler, 1990; UN Women, 2023). Gender is dynamic, varies across cultures, and is shaped by historical, political, and economic processes (Aina, 1998; Mohanty, 1991). Unlike sex, gender is not biologically determined; it is socially negotiated. Kabeer (1999) conceptualises gender in terms of resources, agency, and achievements, arguing that inequality persists when women lack access to economic assets, education, and decision-making power. Connell (2009) introduces the concept of “gender regimes,” highlighting how institutions reproduce gendered power structures. Acker's (1992) theory of gendered institutions further argues that organisations embed gender inequality into their rules, norms, and practices. In development analysis, gender is central because it reveals power relations, discriminatory practices, and structural inequalities that shape participation, opportunities, and wellbeing. For instance, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2024) shows that no country has yet achieved full gender parity, although Iceland (93.3%), Norway (87.9%), and Finland (86.0%) remain leading examples.

Gender Studies evolved from Women's Studies to include all genders and identities. It examines how gender roles are socially constructed and reproduced through institutions

such as family, religion, school, media and the state (Butler, 1990). Gender Studies critiques binary understandings of male and female, offering broader frameworks to analyse gender-fluid and non-conforming identities. Empirical evidence indicates that inclusive gender policies in schools, workplaces and communities reduce stigma, improve mental health outcomes, and foster more equitable social environments (OECD, 2021).

A growing body of empirical literature demonstrates the impact of gender dynamics on development outcomes:

- (i) **Economic participation:** Studies show that enhancing women's access to credit, land, and skills training leads to significant increases in household income, children's educational attainment and community wellbeing (Duflo, 2012).
- (ii) **Political representation:** Research from Rwanda, Nigeria and India indicates that women's political participation improves policy responsiveness to social welfare, health and education issues (Beaman et al., 2012; Afolabi et al., 2003).
- (iii) **Education:** Female education has strong correlations with reduced fertility rates, improved maternal health, and higher economic productivity (UNESCO, 2020).
- (iv) **Healthcare and autonomy:** Empirical findings highlight that women with greater autonomy in decision-making experience better maternal health outcomes and improved child nutrition (Smith & Haddad, 2015).
- (v) **Violence and insecurity:** Gender-based violence affects women's productivity, mobility, and psychological wellbeing, thereby undermining national development (UN Women, 2020).
- (vi) **Cultural norms:** Research in Nigeria and other African contexts confirms that patriarchy and cultural expectations restrict women's access to property, inheritance, formal employment and political power (Ajayi & Afolabi, 2020).

3. Concept of Masculinity

Masculinity refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, attributes, and expectations associated with being male within a given society (Connell, 1995). Unlike biological maleness, masculinity is not an innate or fixed attribute; it is a cultural construct shaped by societal norms, institutions, historical contexts, and power relations. Masculinity encompasses beliefs about how men should act, speak, dress, and perform roles within social, economic, and political spaces.

Connell's (1995) work on *hegemonic masculinity* highlights masculinity as a hierarchical construct, where certain forms of masculinity (e.g., those associated with dominance, authority, physical strength, and economic provision) are socially privileged over others. This dominant form of masculinity tends to legitimise male supremacy and reinforce gender inequalities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). At the same time, alternative or

subordinate masculinities—such as caring masculinity, queer masculinity, or marginalised masculinities—are often devalued or stigmatized.

Conceptually, masculinity interacts with gender norms, power structures, and cultural expectations. This shapes men's identities, influences their behaviour, and can produce negative outcomes such as risk-taking, emotional suppression, and gender-based violence (World Health Organization, 2019). In many African contexts, masculinity is intertwined with cultural expectations of leadership, economic provision, physical resilience, and authority, often reinforcing patriarchal structures and affecting both men's and women's social experiences (Ratele, 2016).

4. Concept of Feminism

Feminism is a broad intellectual, political, and social movement that seeks to understand and eliminate gender inequality, advocate for women's rights, and promote equal opportunities for all genders (hooks, 2000). Conceptually, feminism challenges the structural, cultural, political, and economic systems that perpetuate gender-based oppression and discrimination. Feminism is diverse and includes several theoretical strands:

- (i) **Liberal Feminism:** Liberal feminism emphasises equal rights, legal reforms, and access to opportunities. It argues that discriminatory laws and institutional barriers limit women's potential and must be restructured to achieve gender equality (Tong, 2014).
- (ii) **Radical Feminism:** Radical feminism focuses on patriarchy as the root cause of women's oppression, highlighting issues such as reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and control over women's bodies. It views gender inequality as deeply embedded in social systems and cultural norms (Firestone, 1970).
- (iii) **Socialist/Marxist Feminism:** Socialist feminism links gender inequality with class oppression and capitalist exploitation, emphasising the economic dimensions of unpaid care work, wage disparity, and economic dependency (Hartmann, 1979).
- (iv) **Postcolonial Feminism:** Postcolonial feminism examines how colonial histories, race, class, and global power structures shape women's experiences, especially in non-Western contexts. It challenges universalist assumptions of Western feminism and highlights intersectional oppression (Mohanty, 2003).
- (v) **Intersectional Feminism:** Intersectional feminism, rooted in Crenshaw's (1991) framework, examines how overlapping identities such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality, create complex experiences of discrimination and privilege.

Conceptually, masculinity and feminism offer critical lenses through which gender relations and development can be understood. Masculinity highlights the constructed expectations and power structures shaping men's roles, while feminism provides frameworks for understanding, critiquing, and addressing gender inequalities. Both concepts contribute significantly to development discourse by illuminating the socio-cultural foundations of inequality and identifying pathways toward gender justice.

5. Concept of Development

Development refers to the process of improving human wellbeing, expanding freedoms, reducing poverty, and enhancing sustainability (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2019). It encompasses economic growth, social inclusion, gender equality, human rights, good governance, and institutional transformation. Development is multidimensional, including health, education, income, political participation, and security.

Traditional development models prioritised economic growth over social equity. Feminist scholars such as Molyneux (1985) and Firestone (1970) argue that this approach ignored women's roles and reinforced patriarchal structures. The shift from Women-in-Development (WID) to Gender-and-Development (GAD) frameworks (Razavi & Miller, 1995) marked a transition from integrating women into development to transforming gender relations and institutions. Contemporary literature emphasises that equitable development requires gender-responsive policies that address the structural and institutional barriers underlying gendered inequalities (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

Interrelationship between Gender, Sex, and Development

(a) Integration of Biological and Social Dimensions

Sex (biological) and gender (social) interact to shape development outcomes. For instance:

- (i) **Health Outcomes:** Biological sex influences reproductive health risks, but gender norms determine access to healthcare. Maternal mortality rates remain highest in societies with restrictive gender norms, limited mobility, or low female autonomy (WHO, 2023; UN Women, 2023).
- (ii) **Education:** While sex differences do not determine intellectual ability, gender norms influence school attendance rates. UNESCO (2022) reports that in Sub-Saharan Africa, 30% of girls are out of school due to early marriage, domestic labour, and cultural constraints.
- (iii) **Economic Participation:** Gender norms around unpaid care work reduce women's labour participation. The World Bank (2024) notes that global female labour-force participation stands at 47%, compared to 72% for men.

(b) Intersectionality

Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework reveals that gender interacts with race, ethnicity, class, and location to produce layered inequalities. For example:

- a. Black women in the U.S. face higher employment discrimination and pay gaps (Collins, 2000).
- b. Indigenous women in Latin America experience limited educational access due to ethnic marginalisation (UN Women, 2023).
- c. Rural Nigerian women face triple marginalisation: gender, class, and geographic location (NBS, 2023).

The interrelationship between gender, sex and development have implications for development analysis as shown below,

1. **Gender-Sensitive Development Planning:** Gender analysis helps policymakers account for the different needs, roles, and constraints faced by men and women. Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) is increasingly used in African countries such as South Africa, Uganda, and Rwanda to allocate resources in ways that promote gender equality (Budlender, 2017).
2. **Equity-Based Growth and Development:** Agarwal (1994) shows that women's access to land rights in South Asia increases household wellbeing and food security. Similarly, strengthening women's political participation enhances policy responsiveness. Rwanda's parliament is 61% female, the highest in the world, resulting in stronger gender legislation (Parliament of Rwanda, 2023).
3. **Economic Returns to Gender Equality:** Gender equality is economically beneficial. Reuters (2024) reports that closing gender gaps could lift global GDP by more than 20%. Iceland and Norway's high gender equality scores correlate with high human development indices and inclusive governance systems (WEF, 2024; UNDP, 2023).
4. **Improving Monitoring and Evaluation:** Development analysis requires sex-disaggregated and gender-sensitive data. UNDP's Gender Inequality Index (2023) and the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law (2024) provide valuable assessments of legal and institutional barriers affecting women globally.

Conceptual clarity on sex, gender, and development is crucial for understanding inequality, designing effective policies, and achieving sustainable development. While sex highlights biological needs and vulnerabilities, gender illuminates social power dynamics, discriminatory norms, and institutional biases. Contemporary global evidence demonstrates that societies that prioritise gender equality not only enhance social justice but also achieve higher levels of economic productivity, political stability, and human wellbeing.

Intersectionality: Gender, Ethnicity, Race, and Class

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Crenshaw (1991), describes how different axes of identity – such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, disability, and age – interact to produce complex and mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination. Rather than viewing gender inequality in isolation, intersectionality argues that individuals' experiences of oppression are shaped by multiple, intersecting social structures (Collins, 2000). This theoretical lens allows researchers and policymakers to understand why women from different backgrounds face diverse levels of vulnerability and marginalisation.

Intersectionality reveals that gender inequality does not operate in a vacuum. Social hierarchies and institutional arrangements such as labour markets, educational systems, political structures, and cultural norms, distribute opportunities unevenly across identities (Cho et al., 2013). For instance:

- a) **Class** shapes access to resources, education, and economic mobility.

- b) **Ethnicity and race** determine treatment within state institutions, labour markets, and communities.
- c) **Religion** influences gender norms and expectations around family, sexuality, and leadership.
- d) **Disability** compounds marginalisation through limited access to education, employment, and healthcare.

This multi-layered approach highlights that women lived experiences are not monolithic; rather, they vary significantly based on structural and cultural intersections.

Empirical Evidence from Nigeria

Empirical studies in Nigeria reveal how intersectionality magnifies gender disparities across socio-economic and cultural contexts.

1. **Class and Economic Status:** Women from low-income households face compounded disadvantages, including limited access to education, credit, land ownership, and formal employment. Aina (1998) found that household poverty significantly limits women's participation in decision-making and economic empowerment programmes. Recent studies show that poverty disproportionately affects women's access to labour markets, with female unemployment rates consistently higher in rural regions (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022).
2. **Ethnicity and Rural-Urban Location:** Ethnic minority groups and rural communities face structural barriers in accessing healthcare, education, and political representation. Okonjo-Iweala (2021) emphasises that women from ethnic minority groups – particularly in northern Nigeria – experience restricted mobility, limited decision-making power, and reduced access to healthcare due to socio-cultural norms. Empirical data also indicate that rural women have higher maternal mortality rates and lower literacy levels than urban women (UNICEF Nigeria, 2021).
3. **Religion and Cultural Norms:** Religious interpretations and cultural practices influence gender expectations and rights. Research shows that patriarchal religious norms in certain regions restrict women's autonomy, reinforcing gender segregation and limiting political participation (Isiugo-Abanihe & Obono, 2019). These norms intersect with class and ethnicity to deepen marginalisation.
4. **Disability:** Women with disabilities face intersectional disadvantages in education, employment, and healthcare. A study by the Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities (2020) found that disabled women experience higher rates of gender-based violence and exclusion from economic programmes.

Global Empirical Perspectives

Intersectionality has been widely documented across global contexts through empirical research.

1. **Race and Labour Market Disparities:** Black, Indigenous, and migrant women face systemic discrimination in labour markets. Research in the United States reveals that Black women earn significantly less than white men and white women in equivalent positions due to intersecting racial and gender biases (NWLC, 2021). In Europe, migrant women face disproportionately high unemployment and precarious work conditions (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022).
2. **Reproductive Rights and Healthcare:** Intersectional inequalities are evident in reproductive health outcomes. Studies show that Black and Indigenous women experience higher rates of maternal mortality due to systemic racism in healthcare systems (UN Women, 2023; Bailey et al., 2017). This indicates that gender discrimination intersects with race, culture, and economic status.
3. **Access to Justice and Violence:** Globally, marginalised women – particularly those from racial minority and migrant populations – face greater obstacles in accessing justice for gender-based violence. Collins (2000) and UN Women (2023) highlight how structural racism, xenophobia, and socio-economic exclusion restrict women's ability to seek justice and protection.

Intersectionality is essential for understanding and addressing unequal development outcomes because:

- (i) It reveals how development policies may inadvertently benefit elite or urban women while neglecting rural, poor, or disabled women.
- (ii) It highlights the need for gender-responsive budgeting and targeted interventions.
- (iii) It strengthens policy design by identifying structural barriers that vary across groups.
- (iv) It provides a holistic framework for analysing how socio-economic and political systems reproduce inequality.

Thus, adopting an intersectional approach ensures that gender and development. Intersectionality offers a critical analytical framework for understanding the multi-dimensional nature of gender inequality. Empirical evidence from Nigeria and global contexts demonstrates that gender, ethnicity, race, and class intersect to shape women's experiences and access to opportunities. By recognising these intersections, policymakers and scholars can develop more comprehensive strategies for addressing gender disparities in development.

Theoretical Discourses in Women and Gender Studies

Women's Studies emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s as a corrective response to the epistemological marginalisation of women in mainstream academic inquiry. The discipline challenged male-centred assumptions that had historically defined what counted as knowledge, while foregrounding women lived experiences as valid sources of theory and analysis (Evans, 2015). As the field developed, it became increasingly interdisciplinary, drawing from sociology, anthropology, political science, history,

psychology, and literary studies, to provide richer insights into the structural and cultural mechanisms underpinning gender inequalities. Gender Studies later expanded this intellectual terrain by interrogating broader gender identities, masculinities, sexualities, and the power relations institutionalised through social norms, policies, and economic systems (Connell, 2009).

The theoretical discourses that shape Women's Studies and Gender Studies offer varying perspectives on the origins, manifestations, and persistence of gender inequalities. The following subsections discuss the relevance, contributions, empirical evidence, and limitations of major feminist theories.

1. Liberal Feminism

Liberal feminism is centred on the principles of individual rights, autonomy, and equal opportunity. It argues that gender inequalities arise from discriminatory laws, institutional barriers, and cultural practices that limit women's access to education, employment, and political participation (Tong, 2014). Liberal feminists advocate legal reforms, gender-responsive policies, and equitable social structures to promote women's empowerment. The approach has influenced major global frameworks, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and national affirmative action policies.

Evidence shows that legal reforms contribute significantly to women's socio-economic participation. World Bank (2023) studies reveal that countries with gender-equality legislation – such as equal pay laws, maternity protection, and political quotas – record higher levels of female labour-force participation, improved access to finance, and greater representation in governance. In Rwanda, gender quotas embedded in the constitution have led to a world-leading 61% female parliamentary representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022).

Limitations:

Liberal feminism is criticised for its focus on formal equality rather than deeper structural or cultural barriers. Critics argue that it prioritises middle-class women and does not sufficiently address intersectional differences, structural patriarchy, or capitalist exploitation (Hooks, 2000).

2. Radical Feminism

Radical feminists locate the root of gender inequality in patriarchy – a pervasive system of male dominance that shapes sexuality, reproduction, social norms, and institutional practices (Firestone, 1970; Tong, 2014). The theory has been instrumental in highlighting gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, reproductive rights, domestic labour, and power over women's bodies. Its critiques have influenced global activism, including anti-violence movements and campaigns for sexual and reproductive autonomy.

Empirical research consistently confirms links between patriarchal norms and gender-based violence. Jewkes et al. (2015), examining multiple African and Asian contexts, found that male entitlement, rigid gender roles, and dominance norms correlate strongly with intimate partner violence and sexual abuse. Studies in Nigeria also demonstrate that patriarchal cultural expectations limit women's participation in leadership and decision-making at home and in public spaces (Makama, 2013).

Limitations:

The theory has been criticised for essentialising women's experiences and placing excessive focus on male oppression without sufficiently acknowledging intersectional differences or broader economic structures (McCann & Kim, 2013). It may also overlook agency and cultural diversity in gender relations.

3. Socialist/Marxist Feminism

Socialist and Marxist feminists emphasise the intersection of gender and class, arguing that capitalist systems depend on women's unpaid labour in the home and reinforce economic dependency and exploitation (Hartmann, 1979). They highlight the structural links between patriarchy and capitalism, drawing attention to wage gaps, labour segmentation, and care work.

Empirical data from the International Labour Organization shows that women perform nearly two-thirds of global unpaid care work, which significantly restricts their labour-force participation and economic mobility (ILO, 2018). Research in Nigeria indicates that rural women's contributions to agriculture are often unpaid or undercompensated, resulting in persistent poverty and exclusion from formal economic systems (Aina, 1998; Nwosu et al., 2019).

Limitations:

Critics argue that socialist feminism may overemphasise economic structures at the expense of cultural and ideological dimensions of gender inequality. Additionally, its dependence on Marxist theory is challenged for inadequate engagement with race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

4. Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism challenges Western feminist assumptions by emphasising how colonial histories, global power hierarchies, and cultural differences shape gender relations in developing regions (Mohanty, 2003). It critiques universalising narratives that ignore context-specific realities and highlights the intersection of gender with race, ethnicity, culture, and national identity.

Studies in African contexts show that colonial economic and political systems reconfigured indigenous gender relations, often imposing new patriarchal structures, restricting women's land rights, and privileging male authority (Amadiume, 2011). Research in India, South Africa, and Nigeria demonstrates persistent inequalities linked to historical legacies of hierarchy and exploitation (Oy  w  m  , 1997; Tamale, 2020).

Limitations:

Postcolonial feminism is sometimes criticised for its theoretical abstractness and its emphasis on historical critique without offering concrete strategies for policy and development intervention (Narayan, 1997). Some scholars argue that it risks overgeneralising “Western feminism” as homogenous.

5. Intersectional Feminism

Intersectionality, developed by Crenshaw (1991), recognises that gender does not operate in isolation but interacts with race, class, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexuality and other identities to produce layered inequalities. It provides a nuanced framework for understanding diverse experiences of marginalisation and privilege.

UN Women (2020) reports that women with multiple vulnerabilities – such as poverty, disability, minority ethnicity, or migration status – experience greater barriers in accessing education, healthcare, employment, and political opportunities. Studies in Nigeria find that rural women from marginalised groups face systemic discrimination in land ownership, inheritance rights, maternal health services, and political representation (Okonjo-Iweala, 2021; Aina, 1998).

Limitations:

Critics argue that intersectionality's broad scope sometimes makes it analytically diffuse and challenging to operationalise in empirical research and policy design (Davis, 2008). Additionally, the theory is occasionally criticised for lacking a unified methodology.

Core Concepts in Gender and Development

The discourse on gender and development is anchored on a range of interrelated concepts that shape how institutions, communities, and policymakers understand and respond to gender inequalities. These concepts provide the theoretical and analytical foundation for evaluating the gendered dynamics of development processes.

1. Gender, Sex, and Social Construction of Roles

Gender differs fundamentally from sex. While sex refers to biological and physiological characteristics that distinguish males and females, gender refers to socially constructed roles, behaviours, responsibilities, and expectations attributed to individuals based on perceived sex categories (Butler, 1990; Acker, 1992). Gender is culturally mediated and historically situated; hence, what is considered “masculine” or “feminine” varies across societies and time (Connell, 2009). This recognition establishes gender not as a static attribute but as a fluid social construct shaped by economic structures, cultural norms, and political institutions.

2. Gender Equity, Gender Equality, and Gender Justice

Gender equity and gender equality are foundational to gender-development scholarship. Gender equity focuses on fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits, responsibilities, and opportunities, taking into account the historical disadvantages faced by women, girls, and other marginalised groups (UNDP, 2019). Achieving equity often

requires affirmative action measures, including quotas, scholarships, or targeted welfare programmes.

Gender equality, in contrast, emphasises equal access to rights, resources, opportunities, and protections for all genders (World Economic Forum, 2024). Equality operates on the premise of non-discrimination in legislation, institutional frameworks, and socio-cultural practices. Gender justice merges both concepts by addressing structural inequalities and institutional power imbalances through legal reform, policy change, and inclusive governance (Agarwal, 1994; Fraser, 2009). It recognises that equality cannot be realised without dismantling systemic barriers that sustain gender-based oppression.

3. Gender Parity and Gender Responsiveness

Gender parity refers primarily to statistical representation, especially in education, employment, and political participation. It is often used as a quantitative indicator of progress (World Bank, 2020). For instance, while global primary school parity rates are close to equality, secondary and tertiary education still reflect persistent gendered disparities in many regions (UNESCO, 2022).

Gender responsiveness goes beyond numbers to focus on ensuring that policies, budgets, and programmes are sensitive to gender-specific needs and realities (Moser, 2003). Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) is increasingly being adopted by governments worldwide as a practical tool for integrating gender considerations into fiscal policies. Countries such as Rwanda and South Africa have institutionalised GRB in national development planning processes, demonstrating measurable improvements in maternal health, girls' enrolment, and women's participation in decision-making (Budlender, 2017).

4. Practical and Strategic Gender Needs

Molyneux's (1985) conceptual distinction between practical and strategic gender needs remains a cornerstone in gender analysis. Practical gender needs are immediate, daily needs shaped by existing gender roles and responsibilities – such as access to food, clean water, healthcare, childcare, and income-generating opportunities. These needs typically address short-term welfare improvements without necessarily challenging underlying inequalities. Strategic gender needs, however, refer to longer-term structural reforms that challenge power hierarchies and transform gender relations. These include legal rights, access to education, political empowerment, freedom from violence, and economic autonomy (Molyneux, 1985; Razavi & Miller, 1995). Strategic interventions aim to dismantle patriarchal structures that limit women's decision-making power and socio-economic mobility.

5. Empowerment and Agency

Empowerment is widely recognised as a critical dimension of gender and development. Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied. Empowerment

encompasses three dimensions: access to resources, agency (decision-making power), and achievements (outcomes). Empowerment can be individual or collective. Collective empowerment often emerges through women's movements, community mobilisations, and advocacy networks that challenge discriminatory norms and influence policy reform (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). International development agencies increasingly emphasise empowerment as an essential driver of human development, poverty reduction, and inclusive governance (UN Women, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

Perspectives Shaping Contemporary Gender as a Development Issue

Development is a multidimensional and dynamic process involving improvements in economic, social, political, and cultural conditions that enhance the well-being and quality of life of individuals and societies. Traditionally, development was measured through economic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and industrial growth (Todaro & Smith, 2015). However, contemporary perspectives conceptualise development more broadly to include human capabilities, social justice, gender equality, access to education, health, and political participation (Sen, 1999; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020).

Development exhibits several interrelated features:

1. **Holistic and multidimensional** – Development encompasses economic growth, human development, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability (UNDP, 2020).
2. **Equity and fairness** – Development ensures equitable access to resources, opportunities, and services, irrespective of gender, class, ethnicity, or geography (World Bank, 2012).
3. **Sustainability** – Development must address the needs of the present without compromising future generations (Brundtland Commission, 1987).
4. **Participation and empowerment** – Development encourages active involvement of all stakeholders, including marginalised groups, in decision-making processes (Chambers, 1997).
5. **Human-centred** – Human welfare, dignity and capabilities are at the core of the development process (Sen, 1999).

The Relationship Between Gender and Development

Gender influences access to resources, participation in economic activities, power dynamics, and opportunities for personal growth. Over the decades, scholars have demonstrated that gender roles and power relations significantly shape development outcomes. Gender determines who has access to land, education, healthcare, political representation, labour opportunities and decision-making authority (Kabeer, 1994).

The concept of gender is central to development analysis because unequal gender relations can hinder economic growth, social progress and overall national development. Development outcomes improve when gender equity is promoted. The relationship between gender and development is seen in the following areas:

1. **Economic Growth and Productivity:** Women constitute a substantial portion of the labour force in agriculture, informal trade, and household production. However, gender biases in access to credit, land and employment limit their productivity (World Bank, 2012). Empowering women economically contributes to higher household welfare and national growth.
2. **Human Development:** Women's education and health have direct impacts on child survival, nutrition, maternal mortality, and family welfare (UN Women, 2015). Gender-inclusive development contributes to improved human development indicators.
3. **Political Participation:** Gender equality improves democratic governance, transparency, and accountability. Female participation in political institutions leads to more inclusive policy-making and greater representation of community needs (Afolabi et al., 2003).
4. **Social Justice and Human Rights:** Development must address structural inequalities, discrimination, and violence against women. Ensuring gender equality is an essential human rights imperative (United Nations, 2015). Thus, gender and development are inherently linked; addressing gender disparities enhances development outcomes across sectors.

In recent decades, several contemporary issues continue to affect the interplay between gender and development:

1. **Gender-Based Violence (GBV):** GBV remains a major obstacle to women's empowerment and development. It includes domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and harmful practices such as early marriage. In many regions, GBV impacts women's mental and physical health, their economic productivity, and their mobility (UN Women, 2015).
2. **Economic Inequality and Labour Market Discrimination:** Women continue to face wage gaps, occupational segregation, unequal access to economic resources and limited representation in leadership positions (World Economic Forum, 2021). Many women work in the informal sector without social protection or job security.
3. **Limited Access to Education and Health Services:** Despite progress, gender disparities persist in access to quality education, particularly in rural areas. Healthcare inequalities, including limited access to reproductive health services, undermine women's development outcomes (UNDP, 2020).
4. **Climate Change and Environmental Stress:** Women, especially in rural communities, bear disproportionate burdens from climate-related challenges because they depend heavily on natural resources for livelihoods. Climate change exacerbates poverty, food insecurity and displacement (UN Women, 2018).
5. **Cultural Norms and Patriarchy:** Patriarchal systems perpetuate gender inequalities by restricting women's autonomy, voice, property rights, and participation in decision-making. Cultural expectations often place domestic responsibilities disproportionately on women, limiting their development opportunities (Aina, 1998).

6. **Intersectionality and Multiple Forms of Discrimination:** Women experience overlapping forms of discrimination based on class, ethnicity, disability, religion, or other identities (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectional perspectives highlight the complexity of gender inequalities and provide a more holistic development analysis.

Gender is a critical dimension of the development discourse. Addressing gender inequalities enhances economic efficiency, promotes inclusive human development, and strengthens social justice. Contemporary development strategies must therefore integrate gender-responsive policies that address economic disparities, violence, cultural norms, and intersectional forms of marginalisation.

Contemporary Evidence on the Relevance of Gender in Development

Contemporary research demonstrates a strong correlation between gender equality and national development performance. Countries with narrower gender gaps consistently show higher levels of economic productivity, political stability, and human development, while countries with wider gaps face structural economic and social constraints. The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report* (2024) finds that only 68.5% of the global gender gap has been closed, with progress slowing in political empowerment and economic participation (World Economic Forum, 2024). This underscores the urgent need for global policy interventions that address structural gender inequalities.

1. Legal and Institutional Gaps: Global Trends

Legal barriers remain a critical impediment to gender equality. The World Bank's *Women, Business and the Law 2024* reveals that women around the world enjoy just 64% of the legal rights that men do when issues such as violence, childcare, and workplace protection are included (World Bank, 2024). Notably, no country provides full legal equality in workplace rights. This legal inequality is particularly acute in regions such as the Middle East and North Africa, where restrictions on mobility, property ownership, and employment continue to limit women's opportunities (World Bank, 2024). These institutional constraints contribute directly to gender gaps in labour-force participation and economic empowerment.

2. Labour-Market Participation: Regional and Country Comparisons

Women's participation in the labour force remains uneven across countries and regions. Globally, women represent about 42% of the paid workforce but occupy only 31.7% of senior leadership positions, reflecting persistent barriers such as discrimination, unpaid care responsibilities, and limited access to career advancement (World Economic Forum, 2024).

- (i) Nordic countries (Sweden, Iceland, Norway, Finland) show some of the highest rates of female labour-force participation and have implemented progressive family policies—paid parental leave, subsidised childcare, and flexible work arrangements—that promote women's economic inclusion. These countries have

- closed approximately 75% of their gender gaps (World Economic Forum, 2024).
- (ii) Rwanda, often cited as a success story in political and economic empowerment, has also demonstrated increasing female labour-force participation, bolstered by constitutional reforms and gender-focused development policies.
 - (iii) In contrast, countries in South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) experience significant labour-market disparities, with cultural norms and domestic responsibilities limiting women's involvement in formal employment. India's female labour-force participation rate remains below 25% in many recent estimates (World Bank, 2024).
 - (iv) Middle Eastern countries continue to show some of the lowest female labour-force participation rates due to legal restrictions and socio-cultural norms; for instance, labour-force participation for women in Saudi Arabia, despite improvements, remains significantly lower than men's (World Bank, 2024). These patterns reflect the role of social norms, institutional structure, and policy environments in shaping gendered labour-market outcomes.

3. Human Development, Health, and Education: Cross-Country Evidence

Human development indicators are strongly influenced by gender gaps. According to UNDP's *Gender Inequality Index (GII)* (2023), countries with high gender inequality tend to suffer from elevated maternal mortality rates, low educational attainment among women, and reduced participation in decision-making.

- (i) Sub-Saharan African countries such as Nigeria, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of Congo show high GII scores, linked to low access to reproductive healthcare, high adolescent birth rates, and high mortality risks.
- (ii) Latin American countries (Brazil, Mexico, Colombia) have made progress in education parity but continue to experience high rates of gender-based violence, which undermines gender equality and women's safety.
- (iii) South-East Asian countries (Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam) demonstrate progress in educational attainment but still struggle with wage gaps, underrepresentation in leadership, and cultural norms that limit decision-making autonomy for women.
- (iv) High-income countries, including the United States, Canada, and Australia, also face challenges such as persistent wage gaps, underrepresentation in executive roles, and high rates of gender-based violence despite strong institutional frameworks (UNDP, 2023).

Political Representation: Country-Level Outcomes

Political empowerment remains the area with the widest global gender gap.

- (i) Rwanda stands out with women holding over 60% of seats in the lower house of parliament, the highest globally, largely due to the constitutional quota system and supportive political structures (Parliament of Rwanda, 2023).
- (ii) Senegal and South Africa have also made significant strides, with women holding 43% and 46% of parliamentary seats respectively. This representation has been linked to more gender-sensitive policy reforms in education, health, and social protection.

- (iii) In Europe, countries such as Sweden, Finland, and Norway consistently rank high due to proportional representation systems and affirmative-action mechanisms. Conversely, Nigeria, despite constitutional guarantees, has one of the lowest rates of female parliamentary representation in Africa—less than 7% of seats in the National Assembly (UNSD, 2023). This has contributed to limited gender-responsive legislation.
- (iv) Japan and South Korea exhibit low female political representation relative to their economic status, demonstrating that economic development does not automatically translate into gender parity in political leadership. Political representation matters because evidence shows that higher female representation correlates with increased adoption of gender-sensitive laws and policies that improve welfare outcomes (World Bank, 2020).

Across diverse regions and economic contexts, evidence shows that gender equality is a key driver of national development. Higher female labour-force participation raises GDP, enhances household income security, and drives economic diversification (World Bank, 2020). Countries with gender-responsive legal systems tend to implement stronger social protections and inclusive welfare policies. Improved health and education outcomes for women generate intergenerational human-capital gains, reduce mortality, and contribute to long-term development stability (UNDP, 2023). Thus, gender equality is not merely a social issue; it is a foundation for sustainable economic growth, political stability, and human wellbeing.

Strategies to Promote Gender Inclusion in the Development Process

Promoting gender inclusion in the development process requires deliberate, multidimensional, and sustained policy, institutional, and community interventions. Development scholars argue that gender inclusion enhances socioeconomic productivity, strengthens governance systems, and improves overall human development outcomes (Kabeer, 1999; UNDP, 2022). The following strategies are central to advancing gender inclusion in policy and practice.

1. Gender-Responsive Policy Formulation and Implementation

Gender-responsive policies integrate the needs, experiences, and rights of women, men, and non-binary individuals into development planning. Evidence from African countries demonstrates that gender-sensitive budgeting and targeted national gender policies increase women's access to credit facilities, education, and reproductive health services (Budlender & Hewitt, 2003; World Bank, 2020). In Nigeria, the National Gender Policy has promoted legislative advocacy for women's political representation and the reduction of gender-based violence (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2006). However, policy implementation gaps persist due to insufficient political will and cultural resistance (Abara, 2012). Strengthening monitoring, accountability, and enforcement mechanisms is therefore fundamental.

2. Gender Mainstreaming in Public Institutions

Gender mainstreaming is defined as the systematic integration of gender perspectives into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programmes. It remains a global best practice (UN Women, 2023). Research shows that mainstreaming is most effective when public institutions adopt gender focal units, conduct gender audits, and train staff in gender sensitivity (Moser & Moser, 2005). In the Nigerian public sector, gender mainstreaming initiatives have improved women's participation in rural development programmes, agricultural extension services, and local governance structures (Oluwadare & Kayode, 2014). However, limited funding and institutional capacity weaken long-term sustainability.

3. Enhancing Access to Education and Skills Development

Education remains one of the most powerful strategies for promoting gender inclusion. Empirical evidence shows that increased female enrolment in secondary and tertiary education leads to improved labour market outcomes, reduced fertility rates, and enhanced decision-making power in households (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). In Sub-Saharan Africa, investment in girls' education correlates with higher national income levels and reduced maternal mortality (UNESCO, 2020). In Nigeria, programmes such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) and girl-child education initiatives in northern states have increased female school attendance, though challenges such as early marriage, cultural norms, insecurity, and inadequate school facilities remain (Eboh, 2017).

4. Economic Empowerment through Financial Inclusion

Economic empowerment initiatives—including microfinance, women's cooperatives, entrepreneurship training, and access to agricultural inputs—strengthen women's economic autonomy. Studies reveal that microfinance programmes in Bangladesh, Kenya, and Nigeria significantly increase women's income-generating activities, asset ownership, and household decision-making power (Hashemi, Schuler & Riley, 1996; Fapohunda, 2012). In rural Nigeria, targeted support for women farmers through extension services, credit schemes, and cooperative groups increases agricultural productivity and sustainable livelihoods (Adebayo & Lawal, 2014). However, discriminatory land tenure systems and financial institutions' collateral requirements continue to limit women's access to credit (Aina, 1998).

5. Strengthening Legal and Institutional Frameworks

Legal reforms play a vital role in eliminating discrimination in property rights, inheritance, employment, and political representation. Evidence indicates that countries with strong gender equality laws experience lower rates of domestic violence, improved maternal health, and higher female labour force participation (World Economic Forum, 2022). In Nigeria, the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (2015) and Child Rights Act (2003) provide legal protection against harmful practices such as domestic violence, child marriage, and female genital mutilation. However, uneven adoption across states undermines their effectiveness (Amnesty International, 2021). Enforcement, public awareness, and legal literacy campaigns are essential.

6. Promoting Women's Political Participation and Leadership

Political empowerment enhances gender inclusion by positioning women in decision-making bodies. Research indicates that women's political leadership results in more inclusive social policies, better resource allocation to health and education, and improved conflict resolution outcomes (Paxton, Hughes & Painter, 2010; Krook, 2020). Rwanda provides a strong example, achieving over 60% female parliamentary representation and improved national development indicators (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021). In Nigeria, women constitute less than 7% of elected officials due to sociocultural constraints, political violence, inadequate funding, and weak party support (Adebayo, 2019). Strengthening affirmative action policies, introducing legislative quotas, and addressing electoral violence could improve women's representation.

7. Community-Based Advocacy and Social Norm Transformation

Changing entrenched patriarchal norms requires community mobilisation, awareness campaigns, and collaboration with traditional and religious leaders. Empirical studies show that community-driven gender dialogues reduce harmful practices such as early marriage and increase acceptance of women's leadership roles (Jewkes et al., 2015; Olanrewaju, 2021). In Nigeria, civil society organisations such as Women in Nigeria (WIN), Project Alert, and the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations (FOMWAN) have influenced gender equality discourse, improved legal literacy, and provided shelters for survivors of gender-based violence (Ojo, 2019).

8. Leveraging Technology and Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion empowers women to participate in modern economies. Evidence shows that access to digital platforms, mobile banking, and online learning enhances women's entrepreneurship and access to information (GSMA, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, women in urban Nigeria used digital tools for remote work, online marketing, and e-commerce (Arokoyo & Adu, 2021). However, the digital gender gap persists due to affordability, digital literacy, and cultural restrictions. Expanding ICT training and affordable broadband access remains critical.

Conclusion

Gender is a critical dimension of development, shaping access to opportunities and influencing socio-economic outcomes. Key concepts such as gender equity, equality, justice, parity, responsiveness, practical and strategic needs, and empowerment provide essential tools for analysing and addressing gender inequalities. The evolution of gender scholarship from women's studies to feminist, gender, and masculinity studies, has broadened the analytical scope, offering diverse theoretical interpretations.

The integration of intersectionality reveals that gender does not act alone but interacts with class, ethnicity, race, and other variables to produce diverse experiences of inequality. In Nigeria and other developing societies, these intersections significantly affect access to education, employment, healthcare, political participation, and economic empowerment. Achieving inclusive development requires gender-responsive policies,

transformative institutional reforms, and sustained efforts to challenge discriminatory cultural norms. As global conversations on gender continue to evolve, the prospects for gender studies remain strong, offering invaluable insights for shaping equitable and sustainable development strategies.

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