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Public Health

GENDER EQUALITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WELL-BEING: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

KEY WORDS: Gender Equality, Well-being, Global Health, Mental Health, Sdgs, Empowerment, Gender Norms, Social Determinants.

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality is a fundamental requirement for achieving health and well-being across the lifespan. It influences physical, mental, social, and economic health outcomes for all genders. Despite significant progress in areas such as education, health, politics, and employment, substantial inequality persists globally. These inequities manifest through wage disparities, gender-based violence, limitations in reproductive autonomy, unequal caregiving responsibilities, and discriminatory social and cultural norms. Such factors contribute to increased morbidity, mental health challenges, reduced economic security, and diminished social participation across populations. This chapter provides a comprehensive global analysis of gender equality and its direct and indirect influence on well-being. Drawing on evidence from international organizations, epidemiological studies, and public health frameworks, the chapter explores the historical evolution of gender norms, global gaps in equality, mechanisms of impact on well-being, and strategies for promoting gender equity. The chapter concludes that promoting gender equality is essential for sustainable development, economic progress, and better health outcomes for all members of society. **Search Strategy** This narrative review was conducted using a comprehensive search of published literature from PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and relevant reports from international organizations including the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations (UN), UN Women, UNICEF, International Labour Organization (ILO), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the World Economic Forum (WEF). Literature published between 2000 and 2025 was reviewed using keywords such as "gender equality," "well-being," "women's empowerment," "mental health," "social determinants of health," "gender norms," and "sustainable development." Articles, reports, and policy documents relevant to the influence of gender equality on physical, mental, social, economic, and political well-being were included. Sources were selected based on relevance, credibility, and contribution to understanding the relationship between gender equality and well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of individuals regardless of gender. It requires the removal of discriminatory social norms, institutional biases, and structural barriers that limit opportunities for women, men, and gender-diverse populations. Global frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-5), emphasize gender equality as a prerequisite for health, development, and social justice.⁽¹⁾

Well-being is a multidimensional concept encompassing physical health, mental health, social integration, economic stability, autonomy, and emotional safety. Gender inequality influences each of these domains by restricting access to education, healthcare, political participation, and economic resources, while also shaping harmful gender norms that affect men and boys, such as discouraging emotional expression and health-seeking behavior⁽²⁾.

Understanding how gender inequality shapes individual and population well-being is essential for designing effective public health interventions, implementing equitable policies, and strengthening global development initiatives. In particular, recognizing both direct and indirect effects of gender inequality allows policymakers and health practitioners to address root causes of disparities, rather than only managing symptoms.

Global Overview of Gender Equality

Gender inequality has deep historical roots, shaped by patriarchal norms that restricted women's access to education, property, political power, and employment for centuries⁽³⁾. Despite significant progress during the 20th and 21st centuries, global disparities persist.

According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, educational gaps have narrowed substantially worldwide, yet economic and political gaps remain wide, with women

earning 20–30% less than men and holding only about one-quarter of global parliamentary seats⁽⁴⁾ (see Table 1). Cultural norms also vary significantly across regions. Nordic countries such as Iceland, Sweden, and Finland have achieved high levels of gender equality due to strong welfare policies, gender-sensitive social protection, and equal parental leave provisions⁽⁵⁾.

In contrast, South Asian and Sub-Saharan African countries continue to face challenges including child marriage, low female literacy, limited reproductive autonomy, and entrenched cultural restrictions⁽⁶⁾. Middle Eastern countries show progress in female workforce participation but continue to experience legal and cultural constraints that limit full equality. Latin America has advanced in female education and political representation, yet high levels of gender-based violence remain prevalent⁽⁷⁾.

These global differences demonstrate that gender equality is shaped by political, economic, cultural, and social ecosystems, which interact in complex ways to either promote or impede progress. Regional disparities underscore the necessity of context-specific interventions rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Table 1: Global Gender Gaps by Domain

Domain	Global Status	Remaining Gap
Economic participation	Persistent wage gap, low leadership	~40%
Education	Near parity	<5%
Political empowerment	Low representation	~75%
Life expectancy	Women higher than men	Men lower than women
Healthcare use	Sometimes restricted	Low due to norms
NCD burden	Higher post-menopause	Higher earlier

Violence mortality	Higher IPV risk for women	Higher homicide for men
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Mechanisms Linking Gender Equality to Well-Being

Gender inequality affects well-being through multiple, intersecting pathways. (See Table 2) Access to education is a critical determinant of health, as better-educated women experience lower fertility rates, improved maternal health, and greater economic independence. They are also more likely to participate in household and community decision-making processes ⁽⁸⁾.

Reproductive health access plays another crucial role. Limited autonomy, restricted contraceptive access, and inadequate maternal healthcare contribute to higher maternal mortality and morbidity in low-income settings ⁽⁹⁾. Gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, sexual coercion, and intimate partner violence, significantly impacts physical health, mental well-being, and long-term social participation. According to the World Health Organization, one in three women globally experience physical or sexual violence during their lifetime ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Economic inequality further reduces well-being. Wage disparities, occupational segregation, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work limit women's economic security while reducing national productivity ⁽¹¹⁾. Lack of economic independence is strongly associated with depression, anxiety, and domestic violence. Men may also experience social pressure to be primary earners, leading to stress, poor work-life balance, and engagement in high-risk behaviours ⁽¹²⁾. Restrictive masculinity norms discourage help-seeking for mental illness, contributing to higher suicide rates among men in many countries ⁽¹³⁾.

Political participation is another major determinant of societal well-being. Societies with higher female representation in governance tend to invest more in health, education, and social welfare, resulting in improved population well-being ⁽¹⁴⁾. Therefore, gender equality contributes directly to societal stability, inclusive governance, and improved health indicators across the population.

Table 2: Pathways Linking Gender Equality to Well-Being

Mechanism	Impact on Women	Impact on Men	Population-level Outcomes
Education access	Lower fertility, improved maternal health, empowerment	Encourages equitable family norms	Better child health, economic productivity
Reproductive health	Lower maternal mortality, autonomy	Shared reproductive responsibilities	Reduced healthcare burden
Gender-based violence	Reduced injury, trauma, mental health disorders	Lower exposure to retaliation or conflict	Safer communities
Economic participation	Financial independence, reduced stress	Reduced provider stress	National productivity gains
Political representation	More health-focused policy, social programs	Inclusive governance	Improved social welfare and equity

Gender Equality Across Life Stages

Gender inequality begins early in life and influences well-being across the entire lifespan. (See Table 3) In childhood, girls in many regions face restricted mobility, lower nutritional investment, and unequal access to education due to cultural preferences for sons ⁽¹⁵⁾. Boys may also face harmful expectations, such as pressure to exhibit aggression and emotional restraint, which negatively influence their mental

health later in life ⁽¹⁶⁾. During adolescence, girls remain vulnerable to early marriage, reproductive coercion, and limited secondary education, while boys may face peer pressure to engage in risk-taking behaviours, substance abuse, or violence as a demonstration of masculinity ⁽¹⁷⁾.

In adulthood, women often encounter workplace discrimination, wage disparities, and limited leadership opportunities. The burden of unpaid domestic and caregiving work disproportionately affects women, influencing both physical and mental health ⁽¹⁸⁾. Men may experience stress related to economic responsibility and limited emotional support systems.

In older age, gendered inequalities accumulate across the life course. Older women often have limited access to pensions, savings, and property due to lifelong unpaid labour and restricted financial autonomy, making them more vulnerable to poverty, dependency, and elder abuse ⁽¹⁹⁾. Older men may experience loneliness and social isolation due to gender norms discouraging the development of emotional support networks.

The cumulative impact of inequality across life stages highlights the need for early, sustained, gender-sensitive interventions in health, education, and social policy. Preventive measures targeting childhood and adolescence are particularly crucial to reduce compounding effects of inequality in later life.

Gender Equality and Specific Domains of Well-Being

Gender equality profoundly influences physical, mental, social, and economic well-being. (See Table 4) Physically, women in gender-equal societies have better maternal health outcomes, lower rates of sexually transmitted infections, and improved access to reproductive health services ⁽²⁰⁾. Men also benefit from gender equality, as more equitable societies generally exhibit lower rates of violence, injury, and substance use ⁽²¹⁾.

Mental health is strongly shaped by equality. Research demonstrates that gender-equal societies have lower depression rates among women, lower suicide rates among men, and higher overall life satisfaction ⁽²²⁾. Social well-being improves as equality strengthens family stability, reduces interpersonal conflict, and enhances social trust and safety. Economically, gender equality expands the workforce, increases productivity, promotes innovation, and enhances national economic resilience ⁽²³⁾. Political representation plays a major role in community well-being, as greater female leadership fosters more inclusive, health-focused policies ⁽²⁴⁾. Environmental sustainability is also strengthened in gender-equal societies. Women's involvement in resource management contributes to more sustainable and community-centred environmental practices, linking equality to ecological resilience and public health ⁽²⁵⁾.

Global Case Studies

Nordic countries represent the most successful global model for achieving gender equality and improved well-being. Policies supporting paid parental leave for both parents, universal childcare, and flexible work arrangements enable men and women to balance work and family responsibilities. These countries consistently rank among the highest in global happiness and well-being indices ⁽²⁶⁾.

In South Asia, progress is mixed. India, Bangladesh, and Nepal have achieved substantial gains in female education and reductions in maternal mortality, yet early marriage, limited workforce participation, and digital gender divides remain widespread ⁽²⁷⁾.

Sub-Saharan Africa faces significant barriers, including high maternal mortality, low female literacy, and limited

reproductive health services. Community-based programs and microfinance initiatives, however, demonstrate improvements in women's empowerment and economic participation⁽²⁸⁾.

Middle Eastern countries have implemented reforms increasing female participation in higher education and the workforce, although cultural restrictions still limit full equality⁽²⁹⁾.

Latin America has advanced in political representation and reproductive rights, yet gender-based violence continues to be a major public health concern⁽³⁰⁾.

These regional case studies emphasize that progress requires context-specific strategies addressing both structural and cultural determinants.

Strategies for Promoting Gender Equality

Achieving gender equality requires multisectoral interventions. Legal reforms are foundational, including equal pay laws, anti-discrimination legislation, reproductive rights protections, and strong laws against gender-based violence. Education-based interventions, such as conditional cash transfers, school enrollment incentives for girls, and women's leadership programs, strengthen empowerment and reduce inequality⁽³¹⁾.

Health system reforms must incorporate gender-sensitive training for healthcare providers, expansion of reproductive health services, mental health support programs, and the establishment of gender-based violence crisis centres⁽³²⁾. Economic interventions, including microfinance programs, women-led entrepreneurship schemes, and social protection systems (including maternity and paternity leave), help reduce economic disparities and increase female workforce participation⁽³³⁾.

Community engagement is equally important, involving male allies, local leaders, and media campaigns to challenge harmful gender norms and promote equitable behavior⁽³⁴⁾. Collectively, these interventions strengthen gender equality across multiple societal levels.

Challenges to Achieving Gender Equality

Despite global initiatives and policy frameworks, achieving gender equality remains a complex and multifaceted challenge. Deep-rooted patriarchal structures continue to limit women's mobility, autonomy, and decision-making power across political, economic, and social domains⁽³⁵⁾. These structures are often reinforced by cultural and religious norms that dictate traditional gender roles, resulting in persistent disparities in education, employment, and political representation. In many societies, women face significant obstacles to participating in the workforce, including societal expectations to prioritize domestic responsibilities over professional aspirations, limited access to childcare, and discriminatory hiring and promotion practices.

Economic dependence further perpetuates inequality, leaving women vulnerable to financial instability and limiting their ability to leave abusive relationships⁽³⁶⁾. Legal protections often exist on paper but are poorly enforced, with weak institutional accountability and limited awareness among women of their rights. In addition, gender-based violence remains widespread, ranging from domestic abuse and sexual harassment to systemic violence during conflicts, creating a profound barrier to well-being and societal participation⁽³⁶⁾.

Technological disparities also play a critical role in maintaining gender gaps. The digital divide restricts access to information, education, and economic opportunities for women and girls, particularly in low-income settings, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities⁽³⁶⁾. Global crises further intensify these challenges. For instance, the COVID-19

pandemic disproportionately affected women by increasing unpaid caregiving responsibilities, exposing them to higher risks of domestic violence, and limiting access to employment and healthcare⁽³⁶⁾. Similarly, climate change disproportionately impacts women in low-income regions, who often rely on climate-sensitive livelihoods such as subsistence agriculture, making them more vulnerable to resource scarcity, displacement, and economic instability⁽³⁶⁾.

Socio-political challenges compound these issues. In countries with low female political representation, policymaking often fails to prioritize gender-sensitive reforms, leaving structural inequalities unaddressed. Resistance to reform is sometimes fueled by cultural backlash against gender equality initiatives, which can lead to slower adoption of policies and even regression in some cases. Additionally, intersectional factors such as caste, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status intersect with gender, creating compounded vulnerabilities that are often overlooked in mainstream gender equality initiatives⁽³⁵⁾.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines strong legal frameworks, effective policy enforcement, societal awareness, and targeted programs addressing education, economic empowerment, and healthcare access. Community engagement is crucial, particularly involving male allies, local leaders, and influencers to challenge harmful gender norms and advocate for equitable practices⁽³⁴⁾. International cooperation and global commitments remain essential to provide technical, financial, and policy support to countries struggling with entrenched inequalities. Overall, while significant progress has been made, the path to true gender equality is ongoing, requiring sustained commitment across multiple sectors and levels of society^(35,36).

Gender Equality and Sustainable Development

Gender equality is central to sustainable development. It influences poverty reduction, educational attainment, economic growth, health outcomes, and social stability. When women are educated and empowered, child health improves, fertility declines, and community health outcomes strengthen⁽³⁷⁾.

Economically, equal workforce participation can increase global GDP by trillions of dollars. Politically, representation ensures more inclusive governance, while socially, equality fosters safer communities, reduces violence, and enhances social cohesion⁽³⁸⁾. Achieving SDG-5 accelerates progress across all SDGs by strengthening human capital and societal resilience.

CONCLUSION

Gender equality is not merely a social ideal but a fundamental determinant of health, well-being, and sustainable development across the globe. Its influence spans physical, mental, social, economic, and political dimensions, shaping the opportunities, experiences, and outcomes of individuals throughout their life course. This article has demonstrated that inequality manifests in multifaceted ways, from early childhood restrictions in education and nutrition to the compounded economic and social vulnerabilities faced by older adults. Similarly, harmful gender norms affect both men and women, influencing emotional expression, health-seeking behavior, and engagement in social and political spheres. The pervasive nature of gender inequality underscores the urgent need for comprehensive, multisectoral interventions to address structural, cultural, and economic barriers to equality.

Promoting gender equality is essential not only for individual well-being but also for collective societal prosperity. Evidence shows that societies with higher gender parity experience improved maternal and child health outcomes, lower mental health burdens, enhanced social cohesion,

greater workforce productivity, and more inclusive political representation. Gender equality contributes to safer communities by reducing rates of interpersonal violence and gender-based harm, while also enhancing economic resilience and innovation through the equitable integration of women into the labor market. Moreover, women's active involvement in governance, education, and resource management strengthens social institutions and fosters sustainable environmental practices. These findings emphasize that gender equality is not a discrete social issue but a central pillar of health, human development, and societal stability.

The life-course perspective highlights that interventions must begin early and be sustained across childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Early educational opportunities for girls, equitable caregiving responsibilities for boys, and access to reproductive healthcare are critical first steps in mitigating long-term health and social disparities. In adulthood, workplace reforms, equal pay policies, and supportive social protection systems can reduce economic inequities and stress, while fostering professional development and mental well-being. For older adults, policies ensuring pensions, property rights, and community support networks can reduce dependency, social isolation, and vulnerability to elder abuse. Similarly, challenging restrictive masculinity norms through community engagement, educational programs, and male allyship is necessary to improve men's health outcomes and promote emotional well-being.

Global progress, while significant, remains uneven. Nordic countries illustrate how comprehensive welfare systems, parental leave policies, and gender-sensitive governance can achieve near parity in multiple domains. In contrast, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East continue to face cultural, legal, and structural barriers that impede equality. These regional variations highlight the need for context-specific strategies that integrate legal reforms, education, healthcare, economic empowerment, and community mobilization. Moreover, emerging global challenges, including pandemics, climate change, and technological divides, disproportionately affect women and marginalized genders, further emphasizing the need for resilient, inclusive policies.

Ultimately, promoting gender equality is both a moral and practical imperative. Achieving SDG-5 not only strengthens human capital and societal resilience but also accelerates progress across all other Sustainable Development Goals. Gender equality enhances health outcomes, fosters economic growth, promotes political inclusivity, and strengthens social cohesion. Societies that invest in equality create environments where individuals of all genders can realize their full potential, free from discrimination and structural constraints. Moving forward, international organizations, national governments, local communities, and civil society must work collaboratively to ensure that policies, programs, and cultural norms are aligned to promote equality and well-being for all. The path to global health, sustainability, and societal prosperity is inseparable from the pursuit of gender equality, making it one of the most urgent and transformative priorities for the 21st century.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

Not required as this study is based on a review of published literature and publicly available reports.

Table 3: Life Course Impact of Gender Inequality

Life Stage	Key Inequalities	Consequences for Well-Being
Childhood	Unequal nutrition, restricted education	Stunted growth, lower cognitive outcomes
Adolescence	Early marriage, gendered expectations	Early pregnancy, mental health risk
Adulthood	Wage gap, unpaid care burden	Stress, limited economic security
Older Age	Limited pensions, isolation	Poverty, loneliness, elder abuse

Table 4: Gender Equality in relation to Specific Domains

Domain of Well-Being	Impact of Gender Equality	Evidence / Notes
Physical Health	Improved maternal health, better access to reproductive services, lower injury rates ²⁰	Gender-equal societies show lower maternal morbidity and mortality
Mental Health	Lower depression in women, lower suicide rates in men, higher life satisfaction ²²	Societies with higher equality report better population mental health outcomes
Social Well-Being	Stronger family stability, enhanced social trust and community cohesion ²²	Reduces interpersonal conflict and violence
Economic Well-Being	Expanded workforce participation, increased productivity, higher national GDP ²³	Wage equality and reduced occupational segregation strengthen economic security
Political / Civic	More inclusive policies, increased community health and social investment ²⁴	Female representation linked to stronger welfare and healthcare initiatives
Environmental	Sustainable resource management, community-focused environmental policies ²⁵	Women's participation in environmental decision-making improves sustainability outcomes

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