# Drivers of Disparity: The Subject of Gender Inequality in the ICT Industry: An Extended Literature Review.

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## ABSTRACT

Although the information and communication technology (ICT) sector is key in stimulating innovation and economic growth, gender inequality is still a complex and systemic issue in the industry. This research endeavors to understand the structural, cultural, and institutional mechanisms underlining the gender inequality in the ICT industry that have led to the long-term marginalization of women as well. Based on narrative literature review, the articles are recent and influential work reviewed for the period 2015-2025 taken from the major databases Scopus, Web of Science, IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library, and Google Scholar. The results indicate that gender differences in the ICT sector are the result of several intersecting reasons such as the under-representation of women and girls in STEM education, unconscious male biases in recruiting and promoting female employees, work–life balance challenges and motherhood penalties, the majority-male organizational environment, intersectional discrimination, and restricted access to entrepreneurial funding. The paper illustrates that these have all compounded each other and the cycle of inequality in relation to ICT is self-perpetuating. The authors propose that ameliorating gender inequality will demand comprehensive and multi-staged strategies, including educational reform, systemic organizational policies that welcome all employees, bias-informed hiring practices, work-life balance policies, and structured support to support women entrepreneurs. It advocates long-term, context-specific, and intersectional interventions that could drive a more equitable, innovative, and inclusive ICT sector.

## INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector has been an overwhelming pattern of the 21st century as it is thought to definitely drive the emergence of innovation, the growing economy to new heights and the general transformation of the social, political and cultural map that exists on a global scale (Heeks, 2017). But it is this new liberating industry that creates a cruel paradox: while it is progressive (at least in one respect) it is still plagued by a gender inequity that resonates in the minds of both men and women. Meanwhile, on the other hand, women still remain a persistent and statistically underrepresented group in its diverse areas: in the technical area (software, cybersecurity, data science) and strategic leadership, venture capital-funded entrepreneurial ventures, and in the decision-making practices (Ashcraft & Blithe, 2009; Marcus, 2021). It's not just a blunder in statistics, it's also a genuine obstacle to leveraging the ICT sector as a whole in creative and innovative ways and in terms of the role it can play to create sustained prosperity. Due to its ongoing underutilization and occasionally non-utilization of a large part of the worldwide talent pool, the industry is apparently limiting that from generating alternative viewpoints to provide solutions with a proper basis to several applications and cope with the complex and changing circumstances of the emerging world (Ayyala et al., 2025). In addition, the phenomenon of gender inequality reproduction occurring within the ICT sector not only reproduces, but contributes to and exacerbates existing societal inequalities, resulting in widening pay gaps, diminished economic potential for women, and the fear of not leveraging women's valuable experience to cultivate the technology of the future (Marcus, 2021). In making aware of this intricate web of perpetrators that build, spread and sustain gender inequality within the ICT landscape, this literature review provided a detailed systematic exploration. This review will synthesize a significant body of academic literature related to the composition of the workforce (quantitative studies, qualitative studies of people on the ground, and so on), thus attempting to make visible a more nuanced and detailed characterization of the systemic nature of those issues. The ultimate

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aim will be to establish the main areas which the evidence-based interventions can be strategically applied to for sustainable gender equality in line with the transformative potential of the ICT-industry to a greater population good. An overview of the review will be explained in the subsequent paper and a summary of the findings, in terms of themes on the key drivers, implications of the findings with their interrelation, void areas of current research and opportunities for future research along with conclusion will be proposed.

## METHODS OF THE REVIEW

The research of this paper utilizes a narrative literature review methodology, in an attempt to provide a wide-ranging, critical, thematic overview of the current literature in the areas of the motivation driving the gender inequality in the information communication technology field. The adopted methodology was considered appropriate for the exploration of a complex social phenomenon and for the capacity to integrate different research designs and theoretical perspectives to form an overall picture of the phenomenon under examination (Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Jesson et al., 2011). This review will introduce the various aspects that contribute to the continuance of gender inequities, describe them, and analyze them in order to set a foundation for further research and interventions. The search strategy included the systematic search of large academic databases namely Scopus, Web of Science, IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library and Google Scholar. The search terms and keywords were chosen selectively, with terms such as gender inequality, gender gap, women in tech, ICT workforce, STEM education, unconscious bias, discrimination, work-life balance, organizational culture, leadership, intersectionality and entrepreneurship applied independently and in varied combinations of Boolean. The years of review focused mostly on the literatures between 2015 and 2025 with the earliest and most influential literature cited, and where relevant, literature was examined as background or theoretical reference for purposes of the review. Such time-bound approach will ensure that the current developments in the present trends of ICT context and in academic debate are represented. Inclusion criteria were comprehensive to ensure that priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings and credible academic journals that engaged with the causes of gender inequality in the ICT sector. To compare differences and similarities between countries, the articles relied on a variety of geographical settings. The criteria of exclusion were opinion, non-academic reports without rigorous methodology (though articles that presented critical statistical information about authoritative sources), and studies without a specific interest in the ICT industry or their educational pipeline. Titles and abstracts were first curated and reviewed on relevance and articles were read in full text for potentially eligible literature. Data extraction was performed in the development of key themes, common theories, methods, major findings, limitations or gaps identified from each selected study. Extracted material was synthesized using thematic analysis. This entailed categorizing evidence and recommendations into high-level categories and grouping them by broad themes as those that define various causes of gender inequality. Within each theme, each study was compared and contrasted to assess common points of agreement, points of disagreement and the underlying mechanisms. The synthesis process engaged critical evaluation that helped verify the evidence strength, assessed the methodological rigor, and exposed implicit bias or limitations of the literature available. This narrative style allowed for the exploration of interrelatedness of these drivers, leading to synthesis of insight that is less a list of study findings. These findings will then be presented in a thematic fashion, followed by a general discussion, where some research gaps will be highlighted, and conclusion.

### Findings (Thematic Literature Review)

The literature reveals a complex interrelation of factors that result in gender inequality in the ICT space, which can be broadly categorized into: the pipeline issue in STEM education, discrimination in hiring and promotions, work-life balance challenges, corporate culture and leadership, intersectionality, and the difference in financing firms for entrepreneurship. The Pipeline Problem and the under-representation of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education. One of the most prevalent major drivers of gender imbalance within ICT research is the prolonged under-representation of women in STEM education, particularly at higher levels of education (Levine, 1995; Mahantesha & Agarwal, 2025). This imbalance is not an isolated occurrence but the inevitable extension of a multi-faceted cascade of interdependent social prejudices, inbuilt gender roles, and systemic hindrances that coalesce to delay the movement to and the subsequent progress in the STEM realm of females and young women (Bowles & Klein, 2024). Indirect and explicit messages that

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reinforce the stereotype of STEM disciplines as boys' pursuits as of childhood, which culminate in perceived lack of interest or insufficiency (Nassar et al., 2021), are very common. Societal messages may lead in stereotype threat when exposed to stereotypical negatives that girls are either not capable in STEM, girls may develop anxiety and thus risk undermining self-efficacy and performance over difficult tasks or tests (Laville, 2024). Also, and particularly troublingly, when they are not, there are fewer visible female mentors whom young women can turn to for inspiration in the field, which can make the field a discouraging space to meet and inspire, as there are not many female role models and mentors they could turn to, which means women will not see a way through or be likely isolated in a male-oriented setting (Spoon et al., 2023). This is exacerbated by inequality in the education system per se. Unintentional biases could motivate teachers and counselors to under encourage girls into higher-level STEM, or the way to score and assess subjects can also have a micro scale gendered side (Kapitsa, 2008) With all these factors contributing to the gradual exit of women from the STEM pipeline, there is a far smaller number of qualified women in ICT workplace than their male counterparts (Chhimwal, n.d.). To be the most effective in counter measuring this widespread challenge, multifaceted interventions are needed starting from promoting STEM education for girls from early life, taking active measures against gender stereotypes in educational resources and curricula, providing mentorship opportunities for successfully achieving women in the field, reorganizing school practices to be systematically free of bias and forming a learning environment that is inclusive and open to all genders (Ayyala et al., 2025).

**Unconscious Hiring and Promotions, Biased.**

Despite the successful passage of the STEM education pipeline, females obtain the skills and qualifications to work in the ICT industry, they tend to confront significant entry and promotion challenges in the industry due to implicit bias and structural discrimination built into the hiring and promotion procedures (Ashcraft & Blithe, 2009; Marcus, 2021). The biases are not intentional but have a stealthy and systemic influence, leading to women being discriminated against in organizations that espouse their diversity and inclusion criteria openly (Buvinić & Furst-Nichols, 2016). For example, resume audit studies and experimental designs demonstrate a repeated inclination of the hiring managers to prioritize males in technical job positions even for candidates who have all the same qualifications and experience (Bowles & Klein, 2024). This favoritism could be, for example, subtle to the extent of marking higher inherent potentials, leaders who are considered more suitable for roles based on very subjective considerations, or more overt to the extent in which a specific position is allocated to a particular applicant (Marcus, 2021). Discrimination in recruitment can also permeate performance appraisal as well as career advancement, and even promotion pathways. Unconscious bias of women towards their abilities and contribution can result in them getting less constructive feedback, less challenging or less visible work may be assigned, and the female individuals can be systematically filtered out of leadership positions (Buvinić & Furst-Nichols, 2016). Such hidden forms of prejudice, in this regard are a significant factor behind the glass ceiling effect, in which women are in particular having trouble in achieving high leadership positions in the ICT industry, irrespective of qualifications and performance (Heeks, 2017). To address these biases and promote equal opportunities, organizations must implement systematic hiring that will reduce the subjective nature with which people are hired, all managers and employees will undergo bias training, and the promotion criteria, including promotion outcomes and performance evaluations, will be transparent (Schmid & Elliot, 2023).

**Motherhood Penalty and Work-Life Balance Problems.**

The high demands, long hours, and rigidity of the work process become a great challenge for women, particularly those who have caregiving duties (Ayyala et al., 2025), in the ICT industry and greatly influence many aspects of the existing working culture. This work atmosphere is infamously difficult to balance with family commitments, which is part of the work expectation of twenty-four hours a day availability, the unending rate of technological change, and the demand to comply with extremely high standards of deadlines. Women are, of course, already in an overwhelming situation in terms of childcare, eldercare, household chores, etc., which puts them at a greater than average disadvantage in attempting to balance the rigorous demands of an ICT career (Boinet et al., 2024). The imbalance contributes to the motherhood penalty, which is the finding that after childbearing, women earn lower wages or do not have promotion at all; in fact, they receive fewer job invitations (Boinet et al., 2024). This punishment can be explicitly enforced as employers can punish mothers due to an assumption that they are less committed to their jobs or do not want to work excessive hours (Torres et al., 2024).

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It is more implicitly expressed where they don't even consider mothers in challenging projects or high-profile work based on their potential availability or readiness to travel. These issues are compounded by the lack of adequate access to childcare, as it is extremely difficult to have a career and support such family and realize that taking care of a child also constitutes a significant part of the job (Nassar et al., 2021). To achieve a more balanced and sustainable workplace environment, ICT companies should actively encourage the proportion of labor and life-scope in the work-to-life balance approach by adopting flexible work-hours, such as work-at-home or compressed working-weeks, offer overly generous parental leaves (for both parents), develop on-site or subsidized childcare services, and establish and create a positive cultural environment that genuinely honors and accommodates personal dimensions of workers (Mahajan & Guleria, 2023).

**Organizational Culture and Leadership: The Implication of Male-dominated Environment**.

The leadership behavior and prevailing organizational culture play a pervasive and primarily detrimental role on gender relations in the ICT sector. Chronic lack of female role models and mentors, along with the predominant male culture, tends to create an alienating and even hostile experience that significantly obstructs women's career development and makes them feel like they do not belong at all (Awodogan, 2023). These dynamics can manifest in many ways, including insufficient recognition of the role played by women, the prevalence of bro culture or exclusionary social conduct, and overall reluctance to address the problem of gender bias and discrimination (Pasque & Nicholson, 2023). Small but significant instances of discrimination referred to as microaggressions can have quite a negative impact on women's self-esteem, such as feeling less valuable, having feelings of alienation, and feeling isolated at work (Perera & Saha, 2024). Women encounter barriers to access informal social networks, which are important in gaining information as well as mentorship and for boosting their voice in decision-making (Marcus, 2021). The companies that are going to develop truly inclusive organizational cultures are going to have to actively take many steps. This will include actively promoting diversity in senior positions, offering effective mentoring programs where girls are linked with senior managers, intensive training programs on inclusive leadership with bystander intervention, and a well-defined method of reporting and effectively responding to discrimination and harassment when it occurs (Bowles & Klein, 2024). It is essential to critically appraise existing cultural norms and practices that maintain gender inequality; thus, we have to challenge them in order that all employees feel that they are respected, valued and empowered enough to achieve success (Perera & Saha, 2024).

**The Intersectionality Role: It is essential to consider the different aspects of Inequality.**

Gender inequality in the ICT sector can hardly be an isolated problem, although, to some extent, this issue is cross-sectional and it intersects with other forms of systemic oppression, namely race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and socioeconomic status. This is called intersectionality, where people with multiple of the marginalized identities will experience different forms of subjugation and disadvantage that cannot be adequately understood in terms of tackling each category of subordination independently (Spoon et al., 2023). For instance, women of color working in the ICT industry often find themselves in a mixed gender and racial bias bind and they are simultaneously subjected to sexism and racism on their professional journeys (Perera & Saha, 2024). They can be stigmatized, are subjected to microaggressions because of their race or ethnicity, and have a lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities (Bowles & Klein, 2024), due to the underrepresentation of their gender/ethnicity in leadership roles. In the same way, for the LGBTQ+ community of women in the ICT sector, there can be a lot of discrimination and marginalization associated to their sexuality or their gender, which creates serious problems for the workplace that does not always accept gender expression diversity (Drave, 2023). Employers need to apply an intersectional diversity and inclusion approach to enable them to manage these complex interactions that are gender specific. This involves understanding the unique difficulties confronted by individuals with multiple marginalized identities, as well as actively creating ways to help them feel represented and empowered in the ICT sector (Spoon et al., 2023).

**Gaps in Funding and Entrepreneurship.**

Gender inequality is not a phenomenon that simply concerns the traditional labor market, but influences the involvement and productivity of women in the ICT sector entrepreneurship. While the trend of new technology startups and new businesses are expanding among women entrepreneurs, female businesspeople have substantial

obstacles to accessing vital resources such as cash and financial means, nurturing and networking which in turn affect their ability to grow business and to compete with male-led enterprises (Mahantesha & Agarwal, 2025). There are several reasons behind this persistent shortfall of capital. The main obstacle that can be identified is the unconscious bias of investors, who may perceive female-led start-ups as less innovative, less scalable or less growth-oriented than male-led businesses (Awodogan, 2023; Laville, 2024). Furthermore, female entrepreneurs often face the challenge of accessing informal networks and mentorship, which is indispensable for gaining insights, making new contacts, and negotiating in the maze of start-ups (Awodogan, 2023). The traditional network functions and investor circles are usually male-dominated, which alienates women (Mahajan & Guleria, 2023). Also, women entrepreneurs have also often been known for confronting deeply rooted expectations and stereotypes of society that can be taken advantage of to chip away at the credibility and the access of the entrepreneur and funding and other basic needs. It is urgent to overcome these systemic barriers with the help of specific measures. They will consist of introducing funding models that offer special funding initiatives to female entrepreneurs, providing targeted programs which mentor prospective female founders for successful women who are in the industry, delivering training programs focused on addressing the specific issues facing women companies that manage the very specific problems, and actively working towards a more equal funding climate by proactively increasing women's share in venture capital to counter existing bias and increase funding opportunities in favor of men (Awodogan, 2023).

## DISCUSSION

The literature review on the content has undeniably demonstrated that gender inequality in the ICT sector is a multifaceted, complex and systemic, multidimensional, due to a multifactorial interaction among structural, cultural and personal factors. At the upstream level, we have been facing one of the most serious upstream problems, the pipeline problem in STEM education, which limits the female talents that can enter the field (Bowles & Klein, 2024; Levine, 1995). The consequence of this first discrepancy is compounded further by downstream issues such as unconscious bias in promotion and hiring, usually unmitigated and, in a systematic way, discourages women (Ashcraft & Blithe, 2009). The phenomenon of the motherhood penalty and challenges with work-life balance are other ways in which societal expectations about caregiving roles unevenly impact women's careers in a high-competitive field (Boinet et al., 2024). Also, the organization and leadership style characterized as primarily of male origin can cultivate a climate, if not all but in some cases a culture that is hostile towards it including microaggression, absence of sponsorship and difficulty in accessing informal channels which are easily accessible (Pasque & Nicholson, 2023). These cultural factors often reinforce and amplify the pre-existing prejudices. The fundamental concept of intersectionality also reinforces those experiences of gender inequality are not linear; the women of multiple marginalized demographics, such as women of color and women of LGBTQ+, are more likely to face compound discrimination and consequently, the challenges to their ICT sector (Perera & Saha, 2024; Spoon et al., 2023). Finally, the insufficient financial and entrepreneurial resources of women-run ICT ventures show the extent to which systemic inequities are extended beyond traditional jobs and impact not only economic empowerment but also innovation (Laville, 2024; Mahantesha & Agarwal, 2025). The common thread behind this synthesis is that all these drivers are interrelated. The lack of women in STEM reflects by the number of women working in this field leading to the replication of male dominated cultures into hiring pool, which further makes the work-life balance policies ineffectual and exacerbates the difficulties of the intersectional groups. It has long become evident in the literature that it is a vicious cycle where each driver reinforces the others in such a way that a system is already established that is not easy to change. Individual studies usually concern with a single- or two-point aspects while the sum of the evidence shows a need for an intervention holistically and systemically as opposed to being individualist (Schmid & Elliot, 2023). It would seem that concentrating on a certain driver and ignoring others can be said to be unlikely to bring about sustainable gender equality in the ICT industry. As such, the wide spread nature of these issues calls for drastic cultural changes and changes not only institutional changes to change policy, but also the organization of both of those, to record appreciable advances.

### Gaps & Future Research

While there is considerable literature on the gender inequality challenge in the ICT field, there are some noteworthy gaps in the literature that suggest strong grounds for research to follow, helping to make the science

more robust and helping to guide more effective interventions. One big gap relates to longitudinal studies of such interventions. Even though many studies propose and weigh in on the various solutions, there is a relative scarcity of research of this size with strong and durable work from long-term periods in monitoring the efficacy and sustainability of diversity and inclusion initiatives (Schmid & Elliot, 2023). Future research can go beyond a quick result appraisal and examine what kind of intervention provides real and lasting cultural change and improved representation. Something to be explored even more is the nuanced impact of different organizational cultures on non-western cultures. Most of the literature to this day is based on North American and European perspectives (Heeks, 2017). Additionally, there should be a more detailed literature that examines specific cultural practices, social norms, and national policies in different locales (e.g., Africa, Asia, Latin America) in particular for the way that gender inequality in ICT is developed, and how effective interventions might be context based (Marcus, 2021). Equally, gender intersectionality with other marginalized identities deserves a greater depth. Even though some people acknowledge the concept, there is limited qualitative and quantitative research exploring the unique life experiences, challenges, and resilience strategies of for example disabled women in tech, or Indigenous women in IT leadership (Mahantesha & Agarwal, 2025). Intersectional frameworks should be used exclusively, in future studies to recognize these unique experiences and incorporate them into the design of tailored support. Moreover, the significance of the gender equality role played by men as both allies and champions within ICT is not yet understood. While the accounts of women are well-documented, very few studies examine how and why male coworkers and leaders take the role of “inclusion ambassadors”, not to mention their effectiveness (Bowles & Klein, 2024). For one thing, studying the possible effective methods of male allyship should thus shed light on how to fasten the process. Finally, a dynamism of technology per se raises new research questions as well. An illustration is the cybersecurity and AI fields, which are emerging sectors bearing immature but probably highly entrenched gender disparities that need further, targeted attention before they can replicate previous inequalities (Perera & Saha, 2024). Recent work on the ethical dimension of gender bias in AI development and related impact on female technologists is an important area of scholarly interest.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem of gender inequality in the ICT sector is very rooted and widespread as a result of a combination of multiple interconnected causes that may start with the initial educational experiences and end with organizational cultures where crystallized biases play a key role. The solution to this long-standing problem requires the multi-layered approach that tackles the root causes of inequality, but proactively promotes the practice of inclusion allowing women to succeed and become leading figures in the ICT arena. In order to accomplish this, the organizations should invest in the long run in encouraging STEM to girls at a young age, be prolific in breaking gender stereotypes and offer powerful mentorship programs to develop a diverse talent pool. In addition, strict steps should be implemented to eliminate any unconscious prejudices and institutional discrimination during hiring and promotions, so that everyone should have equal assessment and promotion opportunities. The introduction of flexible working structures, strong parental leaves, and strong childcare is also essential to the companies to reduce the motherhood penalty and promote a true balance between work and life. More importantly, the development of inclusive organizational cultures presupposes the adherence to a diverse range of leadership, an extensive bias training, and open communication channels to resolve the cases of harassment and discrimination. Furthermore, the intersectional lens should be used in all diversity initiatives, where the special needs of women with multiple marginalized identities are noted and addressed. Lastly, concerted efforts are needed to bridge funding gaps as well as decrease entrepreneurial barriers against women in the ICT sector so that they can be able to spearhead innovation and economic growth. It is through these strategic interventions that the ICT industry will be able to fully harness its enormous potential in terms of innovation, creativity and economic growth, eventually building a more equal and successful society of the members of the society.

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