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Race, Gender and Identity: An Interdisciplinary Research Review of Social Classification, Embodiment, Power and Inequality

Vishal Bangar

Abstract: ***Race, gender and identity are among the most consequential categories through which societies organise belonging, opportunity, status and power. They are not interchangeable concepts: race and caste are historically specific systems of classification and hierarchy; sex refers to a set of biological traits; gender encompasses social norms, roles, identities and institutional arrangements; and identity refers to the ways people understand themselves and are recognised by others. Yet these categories interact in everyday life. A person's experience of work, education, violence, health care, citizenship or political participation may be shaped simultaneously by gender, caste, race, class, religion, disability, sexuality, age, language and place.***

This paper develops an interdisciplinary, evidence-based account of these relationships. It synthesises classic works in the supplied reading list—including Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, bell hooks, Gerda Lerner, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, B.R. Ambedkar, Uma Chakravarti, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Amartya Sen and Nivedita Menon—with contemporary scientific guidance and official statistics. The evidence reviewed includes the World Economic Forum's 2026 Global Gender Gap Report; the United Nations' 2026 Sustainable Development Goal indicators; the World Health Organization's 2023 violence-prevalence estimates, published in 2026; India's Periodic Labour Force Survey 2025; the Time Use Survey 2024; and the latest All India Survey on Higher Education data released in 2026.

The central argument is that social categories can be socially constructed and still have material consequences. Modern biological anthropology does not support the treatment of conventional racial labels as discrete natural divisions of humankind. Human genetic variation is continuous, overlapping and historically shaped by migration and gene flow. However, racism can alter life chances and health through discrimination, stress, exposure, wealth, housing and access to care. Likewise, sex-related biology matters in particular clinical and reproductive contexts, but it cannot be used as a substitute for measuring gender identity, social treatment or institutional inequality. Intersectionality provides a framework for analysing how systems of power combine rather than simply adding separate disadvantages. The paper concludes that rigorous research requires conceptually precise measurement, disaggregated data, causal humility, attention to lived experience and policies that change institutions as well as attitudes.

I. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Race, gender and identity are often discussed as if they were fixed characteristics that individuals simply possess. A more careful account asks how categories are created, how they become attached to bodies and biographies, how institutions use them, and how people accept, negotiate or resist them. This approach does not deny the reality of embodiment or personal identity. Instead, it distinguishes biological traits from the meanings assigned to those traits and from the consequences of social classification.

The classic question posed by Simone de Beauvoir—how a person becomes socially positioned as a woman—opened a major line of inquiry into the difference between biological embodiment and social destiny (Beauvoir, 1949/2011). Gerda Lerner traced the historical construction of patriarchy; Kate Millett examined sexual politics as a structure of power; bell hooks challenged feminist accounts that treated women as a homogeneous group; and Judith Butler examined how repeated norms and practices produce recognisable gender categories (Lerner, 1986; Millett, 1970; hooks, 1981, 1984; Butler, 1990). These contributions are not identical, but together they show why gender cannot be understood only through biology or individual choice.

Race scholarship follows a parallel but distinct path. W.E.B. Du Bois described the experience of seeing oneself through the eyes of a society that devalues one's group; Frantz Fanon examined the psychological consequences of colonial racism; and Edward Said analysed how imperial knowledge systems represented the East as an object to be governed and interpreted (Du Bois, 1903; Fanon, 1952/2008; Said, 1978). In India, B.R. Ambedkar's critique of caste exposed a system of graded inequality reproduced through social separation, endogamy and inherited status.

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Dalit autobiographies and feminist scholarship further demonstrate that caste is lived through the body, occupation, space, language, gender and everyday interaction (Ambedkar, 1936/2014; Pawar, 2008; Rege, 2006; Valmiki, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is not to declare one theory universally correct. It is to compare theoretical traditions, evaluate empirical evidence, and identify what can and cannot be concluded from current data. The paper addresses five questions:

1) How should race, ethnicity, caste, sex, gender, sexuality and identity be defined without confusing them?
2) What does current biological and social sciences say about human variation, gender and the effects of discrimination?
3) How do social institutions reproduce or reduce unequal outcomes?
4) How do race, caste, gender, class and other identities intersect in different national and historical settings?
5) What do the latest available global and Indian statistics show, and what are their limitations?

II. SCOPE, METHOD AND EVIDENCE STANDARDS

A. *Type of Review*

This is an interdisciplinary narrative research review, not a preregistered systematic review or a new primary-data study. It integrates foundational books and essays from the supplied list with consensus scientific reports, official statistical releases, international monitoring datasets and selected peer-reviewed empirical studies. The reading list contains different genres: theoretical monographs, political philosophy, historical analysis, memoirs, legal scholarship, social-science research and fiction. They are valuable in different ways. A memoir can illuminate lived experience and institutional texture; a peer-reviewed field experiment can estimate a narrowly defined causal effect; a theory book can supply concepts for interpreting patterns. These forms of evidence should not be treated as interchangeable.

B. *Evidence hierarchy and recency*

For contemporary quantitative claims, priority is given to primary statistical agencies and international organisations: the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), Ministry of Education, United Nations Statistics Division, World Health Organization, World Economic Forum and ILGA World. For scientific claims about human biological variation and data measurement, the paper relies on the American Association of Biological Anthropologists and National Academies consensus reports. Peer-reviewed experimental research is used to illustrate particular mechanisms, while its sample, date and setting are stated. The evidence cut-off is 13 November 2026; the latest available data are not necessarily observations from 2026, because surveys and administrative releases often lag.

C. *Limitations of the approach*

The review is selective and English-language sources are overrepresented. Many global datasets do not use comparable race, ethnicity or caste categories, and many countries do not collect repeated data on discrimination. Some indicators compare women and men only, which leaves non-binary and transgender people undercounted. Official classifications may also reflect legal and political decisions rather than a universal taxonomy. The paper therefore avoids presenting one index or one study as a complete picture of social equality.

III. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS: CATEGORIES, IDENTITY AND POWER

A. *Social categories are made, institutionalised and consequential*

A social construction is not an illusion. It is a category or shared meaning produced through history, institutions, interactions and repeated practices. Berger and Luckmann's account of the social construction of reality explains how human arrangements become normalised and appear objective over time (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Goffman's work on everyday interaction shows how people manage impressions and how social expectations shape what counts as a credible or acceptable self (Goffman, 1959). These frameworks help explain why identity can feel deeply personal while also being formed in relation to institutions and other people.

Social categories become especially powerful when they influence access to resources: schooling, land, housing, employment, political office, healthcare, safety and legal protection. The key analytical move is to separate a label from the social process attached to it. For instance, a surname may communicate perceived caste in some contexts; skin colour may trigger racialised treatment in others; a person's voice, clothing or documents may lead others to infer gender or sexuality. The resulting treatment is a social event, not a biological property of the individual.

B. Identity is plural, relational and context-dependent

Identity includes personal self-understanding, group affiliation, social recognition and externally imposed classification. A person may identify through language, region, profession, religion, gender, caste, nationality, family, political commitments, disability or interests. These affiliations can coexist; none necessarily captures the whole person. Amartya Sen warns against the political and intellectual danger of reducing individuals to a single identity, because that simplification can encourage hostility and conceal shared interests across groups (Sen, 2006). Benedict Anderson's account of nations as imagined communities similarly shows how collective belonging can be real and consequential without depending on face-to-face acquaintance among all members (Anderson, 1983).

Identity is also relational. People may become more aware of a category when it is questioned, stigmatised or made administratively important. Recognition can affirm dignity, but state recognition can also freeze complex identities into narrow boxes. This tension is central to debates about multiculturalism, minority rights and identity politics (Taylor, 1992; Kymlicka, 1995; Fukuyama, 2018).

C. Prejudice, discrimination and structural inequality

Prejudice refers to attitudes or beliefs about a group; discrimination refers to differential treatment; structural or institutional inequality concerns the rules, practices and accumulated distributions that systematically advantage some groups over others. These levels interact but are not identical. A person may hold a stereotype without acting on it; a neutral-looking rule may produce unequal outcomes even without explicit animus; and a discriminatory outcome may emerge from a combination of historical disadvantage, networks, resource gaps and discretionary decisions. Sound analysis therefore asks what mechanism is being measured, rather than treating all unequal outcomes as proof of the same cause.

IV. RACE, ETHNICITY AND THE SCIENCE OF HUMAN VARIATION

A. Race as a historical classification system

The modern Western concept of race developed through colonial expansion, slavery, imperial administration, legal classification and purported scientific hierarchies. Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks examines how colonial power can make the racialised person experience the self through a hostile social gaze; Du Bois's concept of double consciousness captures the strain of living with both one's own self-understanding and the distorted view imposed by a racist society (Du Bois, 1903; Fanon, 1952/2008). Said's Orientalism extends the analysis from bodily classification to knowledge: institutions can construct whole regions and populations as irrational, backward or in need of control (Said, 1978).

Race is not defined identically in every country. US census categories, Latin American colour classifications, European migration categories and South Asian caste, tribe, ethnicity and language classifications have different histories. A global research paper should therefore not assume that a US black/white framework can simply be transferred to India, Africa, Europe or East Asia. Ethnicity may refer to shared language, ancestry, history or cultural practice; nationality is a legal-political relationship; ancestry concerns genealogical descent; and race usually refers to socially consequential classifications often built around perceived physical difference. The boundaries can overlap, but they are not synonyms.

B. What genetics and biological anthropology do—and do not—show

Modern population genetics can estimate genetic similarity, ancestry and population history. It does not support treating conventional racial labels as discrete, internally uniform biological types. The American Association of Biological Anthropologists states that human biological variation does not align with socially recognised racial groups; traits and genetic variants are distributed through overlapping patterns shaped by migration, gene flow, local adaptation and history (AABA, 2019). The National Academies' 2023 consensus report similarly advises researchers not to use race as a proxy for genetic variation and recommends selecting population descriptors that fit the actual research question (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2023).

This is not a claim that all populations are genetically identical or that ancestry is irrelevant. Genetic variants can vary in frequency across geographic ancestries because of evolutionary history, founder effects, migration and natural selection. The scientific problem is using broad social race labels as if they were precise genetic variables. If a study concerns a variant associated with a disease, it should measure the relevant variant, ancestry, environment or family history directly where feasible. Race may still be collected in health-equity research because it can reveal how racialisation and racism shape exposure, access and treatment—but that is a social analysis, not an inference that race itself is a biological essence (NASEM, 2023).

C. Race is socially real and can have biological consequences

The fact that race is not a reliable biological taxonomy does not make racism imaginary. Exposure to discriminatory treatment, chronic stress, environmental hazards, unequal housing, occupational risk, unequal healthcare and wealth deprivation can influence physical and mental health. The AABA explicitly notes that racism affects biology, health and well-being even though race does not accurately represent human biological diversity (AABA, 2019). The WHO's social-determinants framework likewise identifies structural discrimination, economic inequality and access to social protection as major drivers of health inequity (WHO, 2025).

This distinction is essential in biomedical research. If a racial group has a higher incidence of a condition, the explanation may involve a specific genetic variant, environmental exposure, unequal diagnosis, healthcare access, chronic stress or a combination. Treating the category itself as the cause can conceal the mechanism and reinforce stereotypes. Researchers should specify whether they are studying ancestry, self-identified race, perceived race, experiences of racism, neighbourhood conditions or a clinical variable.

D. Colonialism, representation and cultural identity

Race is also produced through representation. Colonial narratives often presented colonised populations as childlike, irrational or incapable of self-government; such representations could justify extraction and domination. Bhabha's concept of hybridity helps explain why colonial identities are neither pure nor fixed: cultural meanings are negotiated at boundaries and are often internally contradictory (Bhabha, 1994). Contemporary debates about immigration, national identity, language and belonging continue to reproduce or contest inherited hierarchies. The analytical task is to identify who defines the category, whose knowledge is treated as authoritative and whose interests are served by the classification.

V. GENDER, SEX AND THE ORGANISATION OF SOCIAL LIFE

A. Distinguishing sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexuality

Sex refers to biological traits such as chromosomes, gonads, hormones, reproductive anatomy and secondary sex characteristics. These traits are related but do not always align in a single, uncomplicated pattern; intersex variations illustrate why a simple assumption that every biological trait fits one of two uniform packages is inadequate. Gender includes social roles, norms, expectations, expression, identity and social position. Gender identity concerns a person's own understanding of their gender. Gender expression concerns how gender is communicated or read through clothing, behaviour, voice or presentation. Sexual orientation concerns patterns of attraction and/or identity and is distinct from gender identity.

The National Academies' 2022 consensus report stresses that sex, gender identity and sexual orientation are conceptually distinct and that researchers should not conflate sex as a biological variable with gender as a social and personal construct (NASEM, 2022). The WHO describes gender as socially constructed characteristics and notes that gender norms vary across societies and change over time; it also distinguishes gender from sex and gender identity (WHO, n.d.). The correct variable depends on the question: a clinical study of hormone metabolism may need specific physiological measures; a survey of workplace harassment needs information about gender and treatment; a study of discrimination against transgender people needs a measure of gender identity and relevant social exposure.

B. Patriarchy as a system, not a claim about every individual man

Patriarchy describes a pattern of institutionalised power in which men, or culturally dominant forms of masculinity, hold disproportionate authority and control over resources. Lerner's historical account traces the development of patriarchal institutions, while Millett analyses how intimate relations and cultural norms can operate as political relations (Lerner, 1986; Millett, 1970). Feminist analysis is strongest when it examines specific mechanisms—inheritance, property rights, division of labour, violence, education, law and leadership—rather than using 'patriarchy' as a catch-all explanation for every social problem.

Patriarchal structures do not benefit every man equally, and men are also divided by class, caste, race, disability, sexuality and age. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity explains how one culturally elevated model of manhood can legitimise gender hierarchy while subordinating other masculinities (Connell, 1995).

Bell hooks adds that patriarchy can harm men by restricting emotional expression and defining care, vulnerability and tenderness as weaknesses (hooks, 2004). This approach allows analysis of unequal power without treating all men as identical or all women as powerless.

C. Gender As Repeated Practice And Institutional Norm

Butler's theory of gender performativity argues that gender is constituted through repeated acts and norms that make particular identities appear natural and stable; it is not simply a theatrical performance consciously chosen each morning (Butler, 1990). Gender norms are reinforced by family expectations, school rules, media, religious institutions, labour markets, legal documents and everyday sanctions. A person who departs from a norm may face ridicule, exclusion or violence. Ahmed's account of feminist practice shows how institutions can resist change even when they formally endorse equality, because established procedures and comfort zones reproduce the status quo (Ahmed, 2017).

A social account of gender does not mean biology is irrelevant. Reproductive physiology, pregnancy, menstruation, menopause, hormones and sex-linked health risks can matter in specific contexts. But biological difference does not, by itself, determine social roles, intellectual capacities, leadership ability or the appropriate distribution of care. Strong research distinguishes measured biology from assumptions about what people of a sex or gender should do.

D. Work, care and the gendered economy

The labour market is not separate from the household. Hochschild and Machung's 'second shift' describes how paid employment may be followed by a disproportionate load of domestic work. The concept of the gendered division of labour connects household time to women's earnings, career progression, leisure, political participation and health (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). The unpaid work may be indispensable to society while remaining undercounted in GDP and invisible in conventional employment statistics.

The economic analysis must distinguish labour-force participation, employment, unemployment, hours worked, earnings, occupational segregation, job security and unpaid work. A higher participation rate does not automatically mean good-quality employment or equal pay. Similarly, a pay gap is not a single causal estimate: it can reflect occupation, hours, seniority, parenthood, discrimination, sector, education, bargaining power and other factors. The purpose of decomposition is not to imply that every remaining difference is discrimination or that every explained difference is fair; it is to identify mechanisms and policy levers.

E. Misogyny, objectification and gendered violence

Kate Manne distinguishes misogyny from simple personal dislike: misogyny can function as a social enforcement mechanism that polices women who are perceived to violate patriarchal expectations (Manne, 2017). Naomi Wolf's work on beauty norms and feminist accounts of sexual politics examine how standards of appearance, respectability and sexual conduct can regulate women's autonomy (Wolf, 1990; Millett, 1970). These analyses should be read critically and in historical context; they are frameworks, not substitutes for current prevalence data or causal evidence.

Gender-based violence is both a rights issue and a public-health issue. It affects bodily autonomy, mental health, employment, education, family life and public participation. Reliable measurement requires confidential, carefully designed surveys because stigma, fear and safety concerns can suppress disclosure. Administrative complaints alone therefore cannot be treated as a complete measure of prevalence.

VI. IDENTITY, BELONGING AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

A. The social self

Goffman's dramaturgical approach describes social interaction as a process in which people present themselves before audiences and manage information about who they are (Goffman, 1959). This does not imply that identity is fake; it shows that social recognition depends partly on context, role and interpretation. The same person may present differently at home, at work, in a religious community or online. Institutional forms can make this complexity difficult to express by demanding a single box or fixed label.

B. Recognition, rights and the risk of fixed categories

Recognition can counter stigma and support access to rights. Taylor argues that misrecognition can inflict harm because identities develop dialogically and are shaped by how others respond (Taylor, 1992). Kymlicka's work on multicultural citizenship considers how minority rights can protect cultural membership while remaining compatible with individual rights (Kymlicka, 1995). However, recognition policies can also harden boundaries if they assume that every member of a group shares the same views or interests. A sound approach protects people from discrimination without treating group membership as destiny.

C. *Sexuality and gender diversity*

Foucault's History of Sexuality examines how modern institutions classify, discuss and regulate sexuality rather than treating sexual identities as timeless labels (Foucault, 1976/1978). Later scholarship on transgender and gender-diverse lives emphasises the difference between identity, expression, bodily characteristics and sexual orientation (Bornstein, 1994; Serano, 2007; Faye, 2021). The research implication is clear: one question cannot reliably measure all these dimensions. Survey design should be respectful, context-specific, confidential and inclusive of people whose identity is not captured by a forced binary. Law is one part of the social environment, but legal permission does not guarantee social safety. ILGA World's 2026 update reports that 65 UN member states criminalise consensual same-sex sexual acts; it also tracks legal recognition, expression restrictions and other rights. Such counts describe legal frameworks, not the whole experience of LGBTQI people in any country (ILGA World, 2026).

VII. INTERSECTIONALITY: WHY SINGLE-AXIS ANALYSIS FAILS

A. *The concept*

Kimberlé Crenshaw developed intersectionality to show how legal and political frameworks can fail people whose experiences fall at the intersection of categories such as race and gender. In the case of Black women, a framework that treats race discrimination as if it primarily affects men and sex discrimination as if it primarily affects white women can make Black women's specific experiences invisible (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Patricia Hill Collins developed a broader account of interlocking systems of power and knowledge in Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990).

Intersectionality is not simply a list of identities or a claim that disadvantages mechanically add up. It asks how institutions and power relations are organised, and how their effects vary for people situated at particular intersections. A Dalit woman, for example, may experience caste and gender not as two separate events but through an integrated structure affecting labour, safety, mobility, respectability, access to public space and credibility. This is why Dalit feminist scholarship has challenged accounts of 'women's experience' that ignore caste, and accounts of caste oppression that ignore gender (Chakravarti, 2003; Rege, 2006).

B. *Global South and postcolonial critiques*

Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques the tendency to describe women in the Global South as a single, passive group awaiting rescue by Western feminism (Mohanty, 2003). Saba Mahmood's study of women's religious practices challenges the assumption that agency always appears as resistance to tradition or as liberal individual choice (Mahmood, 2005). Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí questions the universalisation of Western gender categories through a study of Yoruba social organisation (Oyěwùmí, 1997). These arguments do not mean that gender inequality is absent in non-Western settings. They mean that categories must be studied in historical and cultural context rather than imposed as universal templates.

C. *Caste and gender in India*

Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste identifies caste as a system of graded inequality and argues that social reform must confront the religious, customary and institutional foundations of hierarchy (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Uma Chakravarti's concept of 'Brahmanical patriarchy' analyses how caste reproduction and control over women's sexuality can be linked, particularly through endogamy and regulation of marriage (Chakravarti, 2003). Dalit women's testimonios and autobiographies—such as Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life, Bama's Karukku and Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke—provide situated accounts of labour, humiliation, education, religion, resistance and community (Bama, 2000; Kamble, 2008; Pawar, 2008). These works are not merely illustrative anecdotes; they are forms of situated knowledge that reveal what aggregate categories may hide.

The analogy between caste and race can be useful when comparing inherited hierarchy, stigma, endogamy, exclusion and social ranking. But it has limits. Caste has its own South Asian histories, religious and regional formations, occupational associations, legal categories and internal hierarchies. Race varies across national contexts and has been shaped by different histories of colonisation, slavery and migration. Comparative analysis should identify both similarities and differences rather than declare them identical.

VIII. INSTITUTIONS AND MECHANISMS THAT REPRODUCE INEQUALITY

A. *Family, care and inheritance*

Families can distribute care, property, mobility and educational resources unequally. Norms about who should cook, care for children, accompany elders, inherit land or move for work affect lifetime opportunities. Gender analysis should examine not only household attitudes but also the availability of childcare, eldercare, safe transport, paid leave, social security and enforceable property rights. Agarwal's work on land and property highlights how command over productive assets influences bargaining power and economic security (Agarwal, 1994).

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B. *Education and knowledge production*

Access to schooling and higher education is a major route to capability, but enrolment is not the same as equal participation or outcome. Quality, safety, discrimination, language, digital access, disability accommodation, social networks and field of study matter. The knowledge produced by universities and policy institutions can itself reproduce hierarchy when some groups are treated as universal knowers and others as objects of study. Black feminist thought, Dalit testimonios and postcolonial scholarship therefore ask whose experience is represented in textbooks, datasets, research questions and expert panels (Collins, 1990; Rege, 2006; Said, 1978).

C. *Employment and markets*

Discrimination may occur at recruitment, pay-setting, task allocation, promotion, retention and customer interaction. Field experiments can isolate a specific stage by sending equivalent applications with randomly varied names or signals. Such designs are powerful but local: they measure responses to a particular cue, for particular jobs, at a particular time. They do not automatically generalise to every sector or explain all group-level income differences.

D. *Law, state and political representation*

Formal legal equality is necessary but not sufficient. Laws may prohibit discrimination while enforcement, affordability of justice, bureaucratic discretion or social pressure limit practical access. Political representation matters because it affects agenda-setting, oversight and the visibility of groups' experiences, but representation alone does not guarantee policy outcomes. A useful analysis distinguishes descriptive representation (who occupies office), substantive representation (what interests or policies are advanced) and symbolic recognition (whose presence is seen as legitimate).

E. *Media, technology and algorithmic systems*

Media and digital systems influence who is visible, credible, employable and safe. Historical data can encode past exclusion; a predictive system trained on those data may reproduce the pattern even if it never explicitly uses race or gender. Proxies such as postcode, school, name, language, browsing behaviour or employment history can carry information about social status. Auditing therefore requires testing outcomes across relevant groups, documenting model purpose, evaluating error rates, protecting privacy and creating routes for appeal. The absence of an explicit protected attribute does not prove the absence of discriminatory effects.

IX. CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL EVIDENCE: DATA CURRENT TO NOVEMBER 2026

The following indicators are presented as a snapshot, not as a single scorecard. They come from different datasets, use different populations and measure different concepts. The WEF index compares gender parity between women and men across four dimensions; UN SDG indicators track specific development outcomes; WHO estimates violence prevalence; and ILGA monitors legal provisions affecting sexual and gender minorities.

Indicator	Latest reported finding	Interpretation / caution
Global gender parity	WEF 2026: 69.2% of the measured gap closed across 145 economies. At the historical pace for the 97-economy constant cohort, parity is estimated 120 years away.	An index of selected parity indicators, not a forecast with certainty and not a measure of every gendered experience.
Gender subdimensions	WEF 2026: 96.9% health and survival; 96.2% educational attainment; 61.7% economic participation; 22.1% political empowerment.	High average education parity can coexist with major inequalities in job quality, earnings, care and political power.
Women in national parliaments	UN SDG 2026: women held 27.4% of seats in lower or single parliamentary chambers as of 1 January 2026.	Global average conceals very large differences between countries and within legislatures.
Women in management	UN SDG 2026: women held 30.5% of managerial positions globally in 2025.	Managerial representation does not reveal seniority, pay, sector or decision-making authority.
Violence against women	WHO 2023 estimates, published 2026: nearly 1 in 3 women aged 15+ experienced physical and/or sexual intimate-partner or non-partner violence in their lifetime.	Survey estimates face under-reporting; lifetime prevalence is not the same as annual incidence.
Reported discrimination	UN SDG 2026 Goal 10: nearly 1 in 5 people reported discrimination in the previous 12 months; race, colour, ethnicity and socioeconomic status were common grounds.	Data coverage and category measurement remain incomplete across countries.
LGBTQI legal environment	ILGA World update, June 2026: 65 UN member states criminalised consensual same-sex sexual acts.	Legal status does not by itself measure social stigma, violence or access to healthcare.

Sources: World Economic Forum (2026); United Nations Statistics Division (2026a, 2026b); WHO (2026); ILGA World (2026).

A. *Interpreting the global gender-gap index*

The WEF's 2026 report estimates that 69.2% of the measured global gender gap has been closed across 145 economies. The four dimensions show why one headline score can mislead: educational attainment and health measures are much closer to parity than economic participation and political empowerment. The report's '120 years' estimate is an extrapolation from the historical pace for a constant group of 97 economies; it is not a prediction that can account for major political, economic or technological shocks (World Economic Forum, 2026).

This distinction matters for interpretation. Near-parity in enrolment may indicate that access to education has improved, while disparities remain in subject choice, completion, learning outcomes, safety, employment transitions and leadership. Likewise, a political parity score does not directly indicate the influence held by elected women, their diversity or the extent to which institutions respond to them. Disaggregated analysis is therefore essential.

B. *Violence and discrimination*

WHO's updated prevalence estimates draw on population-based surveys conducted between 2000 and 2023 across 168 countries and areas. They indicate that nearly one in three women aged 15 and older has experienced physical and/or sexual intimate-partner violence or non-partner sexual violence during her lifetime (WHO, 2026). This is a major public-health and human-rights concern. The estimate should be interpreted with the survey's definitions and limitations in mind; it does not include every form of coercion, harassment or psychological abuse, and under-reporting can affect estimates.

The UN's 2026 Goal 10 report says nearly one in five people globally report experiencing discrimination in the previous 12 months, with race, colour, ethnicity and socioeconomic status among the common reported grounds. It also warns that important data gaps remain, with fewer than half of countries providing some key disaggregations in the underlying monitoring system (United Nations Statistics Division, 2026b). The figure is a self-reported measure, not a count of all discriminatory acts. It nonetheless demonstrates that discrimination is neither rare nor confined to one country or identity group.

X. INDIA: GENDER, CASTE AND IDENTITY IN CONTEXT

India requires a context-specific framework. Gender intersects with caste, tribe, class, religion, region, language, disability, sexuality and rural or urban location. Caste is not a race category; it is a historically specific system of social stratification, endogamy and inherited status. At the same time, research on race and racism can provide comparative tools for examining stigma, exclusion, hierarchy and institutional discrimination when the comparison is made carefully.

A. *Labour-force participation and unpaid work*

MoSPI's Periodic Labour Force Survey annual report for 2025 reports a rural female labour-force participation rate of 45.9% for people aged 15 and above, compared with 80.5% for rural men, using usual status (principal plus subsidiary status). The official release notes that urban participation rates were broadly stable relative to 2024. The same release estimates that, on average, 20.0 crore women aged 15 and above were employed during January–December 2025, compared with 41.6 crore men (MoSPI, 2026a). These numbers describe participation and employment under the survey's definitions; they do not by themselves measure pay equity, job quality, worker autonomy or unpaid household production.

The Time Use Survey 2024 makes unpaid work more visible. Among people aged six and above who performed the relevant activity, women spent an average of 289 minutes a day on unpaid domestic services, compared with 88 minutes for men; for unpaid caregiving, the corresponding averages were 137 minutes and 75 minutes. The survey also reports that 81.5% of females and 27.1% of males participated in unpaid domestic services on the reference day (MoSPI, 2025). These are per-participant averages, not the average time for every woman or man in the population. The distinction matters because participation rates and time per participant answer different questions.

The combination of PLFS and time-use data illustrates why 'women's work' cannot be reduced to paid employment. Women's large share of unpaid domestic and care work constrains time, mobility and availability for paid work. The data do not prove that care responsibilities are the only reason for lower participation; local labour demand, safety, transport, education, social norms, wages, family structure and measurement of unpaid family work also matter. The policy implication is to value and redistribute care, not merely to encourage women to enter paid work without changing the conditions that structure their time.

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B. Education and caste

The Ministry of Education's 2026 release of AISHE data for 2023–24 reports a national higher-education gross enrolment ratio of 30.0 and a female GER of 31.2. It reports GERs of 27.8 for Scheduled Caste students and 22.8 for Scheduled Tribe students, up from 18.9 and 13.5 respectively in 2014–15 (Ministry of Education, 2026). The figures indicate substantial expansion in participation, while also showing that group-level gaps persist. GER is a ratio based on population projections for the relevant age group; it is not a direct measure of learning, completion, campus climate, faculty representation or equal treatment.

Education can widen opportunity, but credentials do not automatically erase discrimination. The work of Ambedkar, Pawar, Valmiki, Bama, Kamble and Rege demonstrates how social status can shape the experience of schooling, language, authority, humiliation and belonging. Research should therefore examine enrolment alongside retention, field of study, institutional climate, scholarships, mentoring, employment transitions and the treatment of students and faculty.

C. Caste data and the 2027 Census

As of 13 November 2026, India's Census 2027 has been notified and the Government has stated that caste will be enumerated in the second phase, Population Enumeration. The Ministry of Home Affairs said that the questions for the second phase, including caste, would be notified before that phase begins (MHA, 2026). This is important for future research, but it must not be mistaken for completed national caste data. At the evidence cut-off of this paper, newly collected national Census 2027 caste results are not yet available. Researchers should be transparent about using older census data, administrative categories, survey samples or local studies instead.

D. Caste discrimination and labour-market evidence

Indian field experiments show why the evidence must be read carefully. Banerjee, Bertrand, Datta and Mullainathan (2009) sent 3,160 fictitious resumes to 371 job openings in Delhi-area software and call-centre markets. They found no evidence of a callback penalty for non-upper-caste applicants in software jobs, but did find significant differences between upper-caste and OBC applicants—and to a lesser extent SC applicants—in call-centre jobs. The authors stressed sector-specific differences and the possible role of signals associated with language or social background. The study is valuable because identities were randomly assigned to otherwise comparable applications, but it reflects particular sectors, vacancies and labour-market conditions at the time of the experiment.

A different field experiment by Suanna Oh (2023) in rural India found that workers were less willing to accept job offers linked to tasks associated with castes other than their own, even when decisions were private and financial incentives were present. This shows that identity can shape behaviour and preferences as well as the treatment people receive from employers. It does not imply that workers naturally prefer caste hierarchy; the choices were made in a social environment where caste meanings and occupational associations already existed. Taken together, these studies support a multidimensional account: caste can operate through employer decisions, occupational norms, social identity, networks and the perceived status of tasks.

E. Gender representation and national comparison

The WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2026 places India 131st among 145 economies, with 64.5% of the measured gender gap closed. It reports a 41.2% parity score in economic participation and opportunity, 96.6% in educational attainment, 95.6% in health and survival and 24.5% in political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2026). The report's indicators suggest that educational parity is much closer than equality in economic and political power.

A separate parliamentary dataset from the Inter-Parliamentary Union gives the share of women MPs in India's lower chamber as 13.84% on its current country page (IPU, n.d.; accessed 13 November 2026). These two sources use different metrics and should not be directly substituted for one another.

India's constitutional framework includes equality guarantees and affirmative-action measures, while social outcomes remain shaped by implementation, institutions and local power relations. The Women’s Reservation framework is a major constitutional policy development, but its practical effect must be assessed through implementation, timing, representation and the quality of participation rather than by assuming that a legal provision automatically changes social relations. The same principle applies to reservations, anti-discrimination protections and welfare programmes: measure who benefits, who is excluded and what barriers persist.

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XI. SCIENTIFIC AND METHODOLOGICAL CAUTIONS

A. *Do not confuse correlation with causation*

A statistical gap between groups does not by itself identify its cause. It may reflect direct discrimination, historical disadvantage, differences in exposure, geography, wealth, educational access, networks, policy design, measurement error or interactions among these factors. Causal studies need a defensible design: randomised experiments where ethical and feasible, quasi-experimental methods, longitudinal data, matched comparisons or transparent statistical models. Even then, conclusions should stay within the population and setting studied.

B. *Measure the construct, not a convenient proxy*

If the question concerns genetic ancestry, measure ancestry or genetic similarity using appropriate methods rather than assume that a racial label is a genetic measure. If the question concerns workplace gender discrimination, measure gender identity or perceived gender as relevant, and measure the workplace treatment itself. If the question concerns caste, state whether the measure is self-identified caste, an administrative category, surname-based perception, community affiliation or exposure to caste discrimination. The National Academies recommends clarity about why population descriptors are being used and whether a more precise variable is available (NASEM, 2023).

C. *Avoid essentialism and false equivalence*

Essentialism treats group membership as if it determines fixed characteristics. It can appear in biological determinism ('a race is naturally suited to a role'), cultural determinism ('all members of a community think alike') or gender stereotypes ('women are naturally caregivers'). A careful account recognises individual variation and historical change. It also avoids false equivalence: the fact that more than one group can experience prejudice does not mean the history, institutional power or consequences are necessarily symmetrical. Claims must be evaluated in context, with evidence, not through rhetorical balancing.

D. *Distinguish equality, equity and capability*

Formal equality means applying the same rule; substantive equality asks whether people can actually access rights and opportunities; equity considers whether different starting conditions require different forms of support; and capability concerns the real freedom people have to pursue valued lives. Sen's capability-oriented approach broadens the analysis beyond income or formal rights to the opportunities people can genuinely use (Sen, 2006). A policy can be formally neutral yet inaccessible to people who lack safe transport, time, documentation, assistive technology, money or social permission.

E. *Protect privacy and avoid harmful data collection*

Collecting information on caste, race, sex, gender identity or sexuality can reveal inequality, but it can also create risks of outing, stigma, profiling or misuse. Researchers should collect only what is necessary, explain why it is needed, permit safe self-description where possible, protect identifiable records, use small-cell suppression when needed and avoid publishing data that expose vulnerable individuals or communities. Good measurement is not simply more measurement; it is valid, proportionate and safe measurement.

XII. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RESEARCH AGENDA

The evidence suggests that progress requires coordinated changes across law, material resources, organisational practices and social norms. No single intervention can dismantle every form of inequality. The following agenda is designed as a set of evidence-informed priorities rather than a one-size-fits-all prescription.

1) Improve measurement: collect comparable, ethically designed and disaggregated data on sex, gender, caste, ethnicity, disability, age and socioeconomic position where relevant. Explain definitions and missingness, and publish methods.
2) Redistribute care: expand affordable childcare, eldercare, disability support, paid parental leave, social protection and safe public infrastructure. Recognise unpaid work in economic and policy analysis.
3) Enforce anti-discrimination protections: strengthen accessible complaint systems, independent oversight, transparent recruitment and promotion criteria, reasonable accommodation and remedies for retaliation.
4) Improve the quality of work: monitor pay, contract security, working hours, harassment, occupational segregation and career progression rather than relying on labour-force participation alone.

5) Invest in education beyond enrolment: track retention, learning, field selection, campus safety, accessibility, mentoring and transitions to employment, with attention to caste and gender intersections.
6) Address violence and bodily autonomy: use survivor-centred services, reliable health systems, prevention programmes, confidential reporting and sustained financing for support organisations.
7) Promote representation and voice: strengthen fair access to leadership, public consultation and decision-making, while examining whether representation changes institutional priorities and outcomes.
8) Audit algorithmic systems: test whether names, postcodes, education histories or other proxies create disparate outcomes; document model limitations and provide human review and appeal.
9) Support plural identities: protect freedom of conscience, expression, association and self-identification while avoiding policies that assume any group is internally uniform.
10) Build intersectional research capacity: develop methods that examine institutions and structural exposure over the life course, rather than relying only on single-axis categories or simple additive models.

A. A focused research agenda for India

For India, a particularly valuable next step is to connect Census 2027 caste enumeration with high-quality household surveys, education records, labour data, health surveys and time-use data, while carefully managing privacy and definitional consistency. Such integration should not assume that every dataset can or should collect the same category. Researchers should investigate how caste, gender, region, class and religion affect access to land, higher education, professional employment, urban housing, digital services, health care and political influence. Oversampling of small or marginalised populations may be necessary for meaningful analysis, but it should be designed with community participation and strong protections against re-identification.

Longitudinal research is especially important. A cross-sectional gap can show where differences exist; a longitudinal design can help identify when they emerge and how transitions—school completion, marriage, childbirth, migration, job entry, promotion, illness or retirement—change opportunities. Mixed-method research can pair statistical patterns with interviews and ethnography to reveal mechanisms that an administrative dataset cannot capture.

XIII. CONCLUSION

Race, gender and identity are neither merely biological facts nor purely private choices. They are formed through interactions among embodiment, history, culture, law, institutions, social recognition and individual agency. The most scientifically defensible position is not to deny biology, nor to turn social categories into biological destiny. It is to specify which biological, social or institutional process is being studied and to measure it directly wherever possible.

The literature surveyed here shows that inequality is reproduced through multiple pathways: representation, everyday interaction, labour markets, unpaid care, violence, property, education, public policy, cultural narratives and data systems. Intersectionality explains why these pathways can combine in ways that single-category analysis misses. India's experience also demonstrates the need for historical specificity: caste and gender interact in distinctive ways, and comparisons with racial systems should be analytical rather than simplistic.

The latest data offer evidence of both progress and unfinished work. Educational gaps have narrowed in many settings, but economic and political power remain uneven; women continue to perform disproportionate unpaid care; violence remains widespread; and discrimination is still reported by large shares of the global population. In India, higher-education participation has expanded and female labour-force participation has improved over time, yet major differences remain in paid work, care responsibilities, political representation and caste-linked opportunity. These indicators should be read as invitations to investigate mechanisms, not as final explanations.

A rigorous approach to race, gender and identity therefore has four commitments: conceptual precision, empirical transparency, historical context and equal human dignity. It recognises that categories can be socially constructed and materially consequential; that people are more than any single category; and that fair institutions require more than formal promises. They require evidence, accountability, redistribution of opportunity and the freedom of individuals to define and live their identities without coercion or discrimination.

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Appendix A. How various refrences informs the analysis

Field	Representative works from the supplied list	Contribution to this paper
Feminist history and theory	The Second Sex; The Feminine Mystique; The Creation of Patriarchy; Sexual Politics; Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center; Living a Feminist Life	Gender as historical, institutional and political organisation; critiques of universal accounts of womanhood.
Gender, embodiment and sexuality	Gender Trouble; Undoing Gender; The History of Sexuality; Gender Outlaw; Whipping Girl; The Transgender Issue	Distinctions among sex, identity, expression, sexuality and social norms.
Masculinity, work and care	Masculinities; The Will to Change; The Second Shift; Invisible Women	Masculinity, emotional norms, unpaid labour, data gaps and occupational inequality.
Race and colonialism	The Souls of Black Folk; Black Skin, White Masks; The Wretched of the Earth; Orientalism; The Fire Next Time; Women, Race & Class	Racialisation, colonial power, representation, double consciousness and structural inequality.
Caste and Dalit perspectives	Annihilation of Caste; Gendering Caste; Joothan; Karukku; The Prisons We Broke; The Weave of My Life; Writing Caste/Writing Gender	Caste hierarchy, endogamy, lived experience, caste-gender relations and situated knowledge.
Identity and social theory	The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life; The Social Construction of Reality; Identity and Violence; Imagined Communities; The Politics of Recognition	Identity as relational, plural and institutionally recognised.
Intersectionality and postcolonial feminism	Black Feminist Thought; Mapping the Margins; Sister Outsider; This Bridge Called My Back; Feminism Without Borders; The Invention of Women	Interlocking systems of power and the limits of one-size-fits-all categories.

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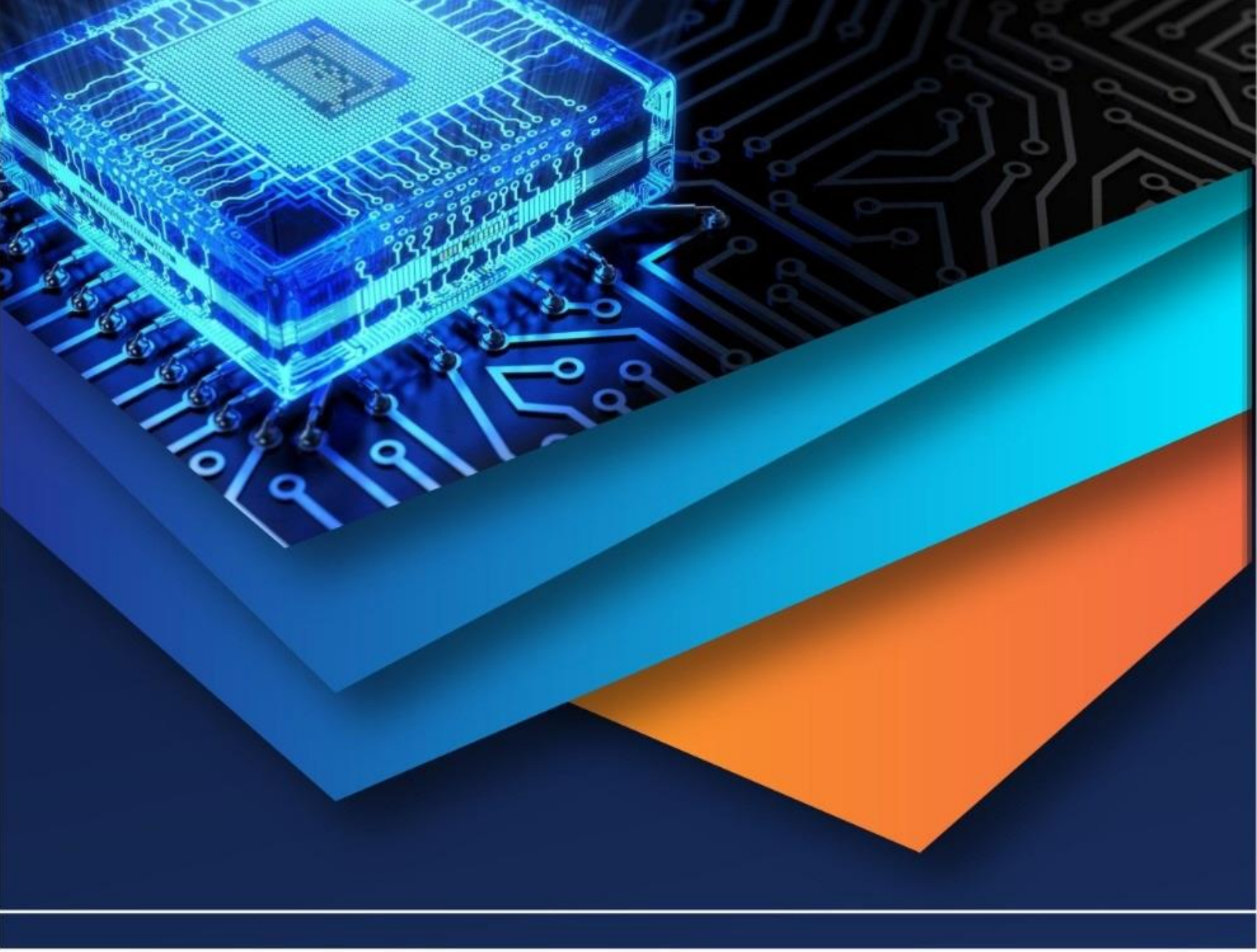
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