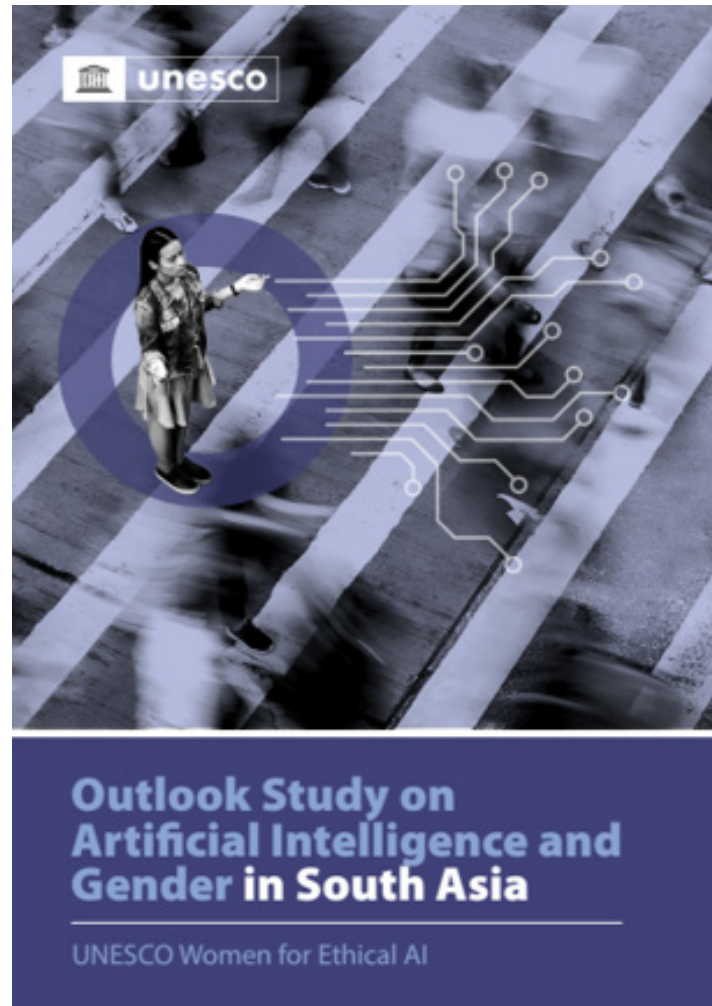


Artificial Intelligence and Gender in South Asia: A Review



UNESCO Women for Ethical AI: Outlook Study on Artificial Intelligence and Gender in South Asia. UNESCO, New Delhi, 2026, available online at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/>

Keywords:

AI Ethics, AI Governance, AI Leadership, Gender and AI, Global South, South Asia.

The report raises a well-timed question within researchers as to the impact of gender within innovation ecosystems in an emerging area such as artificial intelligence. Consequentially, it positions the participation, leadership and benefit sharing aspects of such

technologies increasingly shaping day to day life. The report is a baseline study on the intersections of gender and artificial intelligence in South Asia. Using a lifecycle approach, it examines participation by women across AI education, research and the specialised workforce to trace how gendered patterns emerge and compound across these interconnected stages, shaping pathways into AI Knowledge, production and leadership. It focuses on tertiary level Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and computing enrolments as key supply side factors of influence on the one hand and combines it with a value chain approach, comprising upstream data work to model development and downstream applications. The methodology involves use of case studies and qualitative interviews with women across the region, bringing in “lived experiences” into conversation with quantitative evidence.

The findings reveal the reproduction of gender inequality across the AI ecosystem and where outcomes are contingent upon targeted interventions. It builds upon the concept of



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“inclusive AI futures” in South Asia. A key statistic cited as a leitmotif of gender inequality is the relatively low presence of women as primary authors in South Asia, a figure currently at 26%. It begins by acknowledging the exuberant promise of this emerging technology and its transformational impact, as well as its potential for reproducing and exacerbating social inequalities built upon biased data, exclusion of diverse voices or operation without adequate safeguards. In its precursor report UNESCO Women for Ethical AI: Outlook Study on Artificial Intelligence and Gender, key insights involved women’s participation in AI, neglect of gender in AI governance, and the disproportionate risks AI systems pose to women and girls. The report does well to respond to a recognition that gender and AI dynamics vary across regions and that global trends often obscure the social, economic and institutional realities shaping AI ecosystems in the global South. It avoids a monolithic account of South Asia in the process. The lifecycle approach serves to recognise the developmental implications of participation by women across regions within South Asia to establish the emergent nature of ecosystems in countries such as Bhutan and Maldives on the one hand and developed fastest-growing digital economies with expanding research capacity, a large private sector and growing influence in AI governance debates. Certain countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka reflect varied trajectories shaped by labour migration, evolving higher education systems, an uneven pace of digital transformation, and ongoing fiscal and political pressures.

A fundamental pragmatic critique of the participative dimension articulated in the Report can be that the restructuring of supply chains underlying the production of value in the ever-changing geography needs elaboration to put the context of this “intersectional inequality of women” thesis in the right perspective, both systemically and regionally. In the Indian context, the participation of women within e-commerce applications is typically higher enabling them to get onto the entrepreneurship curve, yet little can be said of more knowledge-intensive activities in AI. Yet a social determinant of AI perspective would dictate engagement with the social exposure of women’s livelihoods, based on soft and managerial skills to any such technological transition. Also, whether this reorientation of value into its

ethical components assume reliance on a risk-based rubric embodied in European Union’s General Data Privacy Regulation or on participative dimensions that typically don’t converse well with each other, comprises a key paradox of knowledge generating activities with leadership not only varying within social groups but within regions. This structural inequality that exists in stratified societies, where cultural and social framing has typically undermined and underestimated the role of women growing in the shadows of capitalism, even with respect to the meaning of social risk and its pragmatic counterpart, acceptable risk is another dimension. However, an account of long-standing structural inequalities in education, labour markets and access to decision-making reveals through a systemic perspective that the structural inequalities pose “wicked problems” that a myopic focus on enrolment and participation at school-level, university level and higher education level are insufficient in addressing the potential of participation, much less leadership by women in core and ethical AI components. For the global South, responsible AI is about framing accessibility and agency, in terms of alternatives that the western discourses typically provide before participation and leadership can be enabled. The contextual loss of agency is lived experience for those already facing structural social inequalities more than those subject to it in varying degrees. Recognition of multiple, intersectional duality of structural inequality however should reflect in the data. The Report is unable to implement the role of caste and gender together in determining participation for instance.

Though the report utilises well-researched sources with a qualitative understanding the analysis only reflects a partial reality and cannot be compared across regions. The leaky pipeline effect mentioned in relation to the AI education pipeline is a case in point. However, it would be better to identify multiple inter-sectionalities rather than assuming a singular role for gender to provide for a richer discussion. That may be a thing for future editions considering the data limitations mentioned. All in all, AI leadership and inclusive futures for women’s participation in AI education and Labour Markets requires AI education stewardship by policy makers is the key central message of this timely report. Exactly how the terms of stewardship can navigate this paradox of participation or leadership is a thing for the future.

Reviewed by:

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