Bridging the Gap: Addressing Challenges and Exploring Opportunities for Women in Indian Architecture

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Abstract

Gender disparity in architecture continues to be a major issue, with women encountering systemic obstacles that impede their career advancement and professional development. This study focuses on the Indian context while incorporating global perspectives, and explores the ongoing challenges women face in the field, such as workplace discrimination, unequal pay, limited access to leadership positions, and insufficient mentorship. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines surveys, interviews, and case studies to reveal how cultural and organizational norms within architectural firms reinforce gender inequalities. The findings indicate that although legal protections and institutional policies are in place, their inconsistent application perpetuates these disparities. The predominance of male role models further marginalizes women, limiting their visibility and access to mentorship. The study concludes with practical recommendations for policymakers, industry leaders, and educational institutions, highlighting their role in fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment. By tackling these barriers and promoting mentorship programs that showcase female architects, the research seeks to inspire meaningful change and contribute to the wider conversation on gender equity in architecture.

Keywords: Professional practice, Gender equity, Women in architecture, Workplace ethics, Mentorship.

1. Introduction

Architecture, much like philosophy, is a discipline rooted in the art of shaping human experience. It is a dialogue between form and function, space and society, tradition and innovation. Yet, if philosophy seeks to question the nature of existence, architecture materializes these inquiries into tangible structures that define civilizations. However, the very field that designs inclusive spaces for humanity often struggles to reflect inclusivity within its own ranks. For decades, architecture has been perceived as a male-dominated profession, its history narrated through the achievements of men—from Vitruvius to Le Corbusier—while women's contributions, though significant, have been relegated to the margins. This paradox forms the crux of our study: How can a profession that builds the future remain tethered to outdated gender hierarchies? [1]

1.1. Historical Evolution: From Shadows to Spotlight

The story of architecture, historically, has been a gendered one. Ancient treatises celebrated male architects as visionaries, while women's roles—whether as collaborators, designers, or patrons—were often obscured. In India, this narrative persisted through colonial and post-independence eras. Figures like Perin Jamshedji Mistri, India's first female architect, broke barriers in the 1940s, yet her legacy remains lesser known compared to her male contemporaries. Globally, pioneers such as Zaha Hadid and Norma Merrick Sklarek faced similar struggles, their brilliance acknowledged only after decades of systemic resistance. While the 21st century has seen incremental progress—evidenced by rising female enrollment in architecture schools—the transition from education to equitable professional practice remains fraught. According to the Council of Architecture (COA) 2023 data, women constitute approximately 35% of registered architects in India, a figure that mirrors global trends but masks deeper disparities in leadership roles, remuneration, and recognition. [2]

1.2. Global Resonance

Drawing on 2023 quantitative data from Indian architectural firms, coupled with global case studies, this research employs a mixed-methods approach. Surveys of 150 professionals, interviews with 30 female architects, and analyses of institutional policies reveal a dissonance between progressive legal mandates—such as India's Maternity Benefit Act and POSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment) guidelines—and their inconsistent implementation. For instance, while maternity leave policies exist, few firms offer flexible work models to retain women post-childbirth. Similarly, global references highlight how Scandinavian countries leverage parental leave parity to improve retention, suggesting actionable models for India. [3]

1.3. Toward an Equitable Blueprint

The urgency of this study lies not only in diagnosing inequities but in reimagining architecture as a profession that thrives on diversity. By interrogating cultural norms, amplifying female role models, and redesigning workplace frameworks, the sector can transform into a beacon of inclusion. As we bridge the gap between policy and practice, this research aspires to contribute a roadmap for architects, educators, and policymakers—one where equity is not an afterthought but the foundation of every design. [4]

2. Literature Review: Gender Disparities in Indian Architecture

The underrepresentation of women in architectural practice, despite near-parity in educational enrollment, reflects systemic barriers rooted in cultural norms, workplace dynamics, and institutional biases. This review synthesizes quantitative data from the Council of Architecture (COA, 2023) and global scholarship to analyze trends in gender equity, occupational segregation, and career attrition in India's architectural profession.

2.1. Educational Enrollment vs. Professional Retention

(COA, 2023, Figure 1) While women constitute 47.6% of registered architects in India, their retention in professional practice starkly contrasts with their academic presence. Architectural schools report 50–80% female enrollment (Grover, 2015; COA, 2023),

yet only 15–17% of women sustain careers in practice (Table 1). This attrition mirrors global patterns: RIBA (2023) notes that 25% of UK architects are women, with fewer in leadership roles. The disparity begins post-graduation, as societal expectations and workplace biases disproportionately push women toward auxiliary roles. For instance, 49.68% of women architects in India are employed in private-sector drafting and 3D visualization—tasks associated with lower pay and limited upward mobility (COA, 2023, Table 1) (Figure 1)
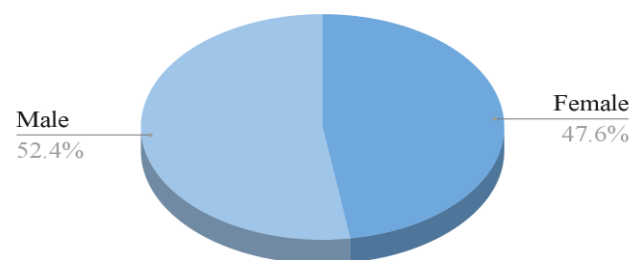

Figure 1 Ratio of Male-Female Architects (Source: Council of Architecture, 2023)

TABLE 1. PLACEMENTS OF WOMEN ARCHITECTS (AS ON 18.08.2023)		
S.No.	Practice	Percentage of Architects
1.	Employed in Private Sector	49.68%
2.	Practicing Independently	17.11%
3.	Others	16.02%
4.	Employed	14.79%
5.	Practicing as Partner	1.03%
6.	Employed in Government Sector	0.93%
7.	Teaching	0.44%
Total		33228

2.2. Occupational Segregation and Vertical Hierarchies

Quantitative data reveals vertical segregation in India's architectural workforce. Only 1.03% of women hold partnership roles in firms, compared to 35% of self-employed male architects (COA, 2023, Table 1). Similarly, women occupy 0.93% of government-sector roles and 0.44% of teaching positions (Table 1), underscoring their exclusion from influential academic and policymaking spaces. This aligns with global findings where women architects face a 20% wage gap and are often relegated to "feminized" roles like interior design (Dr. M. Lea; Stratigakos, 2016). The COA (2023) further highlights that 17.11% of women practice independently, primarily in urban centers with financial stability, indicating structural barriers to entrepreneurship for those without socioeconomic capital. [5]

TABLE 2. YEAR WISE REGISTRATION OF ARCHITECTS (SOURCE: COUNCIL OF ARCHITECTURE, 2023)			
S.No.	Year	Number of Architects	Percentage
1.	2014	3683	4.86
2.	2015	5836	7.70
3.	2016	5891	7.77
4.	2017	7284	9.61
5.	2018	9781	12.90
6.	2019	9085	11.99
7.	2020	5196	6.86
8.	2021	8367	11.04
9.	2022	13409	17.69
10.	2023	7255	9.59
Total		72797	

2.3. Barriers to Leadership and Mentorship

The scarcity of women in leadership perpetuates a cycle of limited mentorship. Only four Pritzker Prize laureates are women globally, and in India, male architects dominate competition juries, inspection panels, and institutional boards (Grover, 2015; Sarkar, 2023). COA (2023) data shows that 14.79% of women work in non-governmental roles, often in junior positions, while men monopolize site supervision and client-facing roles. Workplace cultures favoring "golf-club networking" and long-hours expectations further marginalize women, as 72% leave the profession due to familial obligations (COA, 2023; Dr. M. Lea). Flexible work policies, such as remote options during childcare, remain rare, exacerbating attrition. (Figure 2)
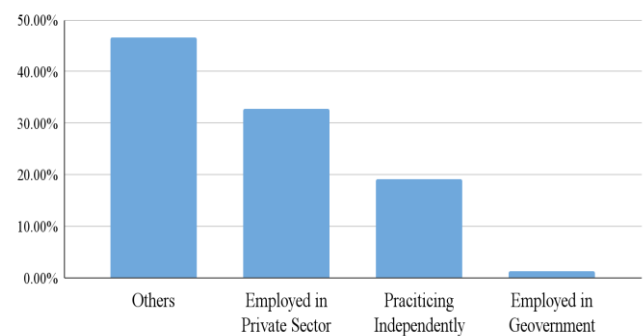

Figure 2 Placement of Architects
(Source: Council of Architecture, 2023)

2.4. Emerging Trends and Policy Gaps

Despite challenges, COA (2023) reports a 9.59% annual increase in female registrations (Table 2), signaling gradual progress. Pioneers like Brinda Somaya and Anupama Kundoo demonstrate women's capacity to lead in sustainability and urban design (Sarkar, 2023). However, policy frameworks lag: India's Maternity Benefit Act (2017) lacks enforcement in private firms, and gender-sensitive urban design remains absent from curricula (Gupta & Ashtt, 2020). Quantitative benchmarks, such as reserving leadership roles for women and tracking pay parity, are critical to bridging gaps. [6]

3. Research Design: Mapping the Path

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate gender disparities in architecture,

integrating quantitative data analysis with qualitative insights. Quantitative data from the Council of Architecture (COA) 2023 was reviewed to examine the representation and progression of women in the profession. To complement this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with few practicing architects, selected through purposive sampling to capture diverse experiences across career stages. The interviews explored themes such as workplace discrimination, mentorship opportunities, and the impact of organizational policies on career advancement. These qualitative narratives provided depth to the quantitative findings, shedding light on systemic barriers and the lived realities of women in the field. Together, these methods offered a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities for fostering gender equity in architecture. [7]

4. Voices from the Field: Architects' Narratives on Gender and Practice

Ar. Anindya Raina, an academic researcher and urban planner with four years of experience, shared her insights on the systemic challenges women face in architecture. As an assistant professor and project manager at an NGO, Ms. Raina highlighted instances of workplace discrimination, such as being overlooked by contractors who preferentially address male colleagues. She emphasized the need for women to adopt a strict demeanor to avoid misinterpretations, reflecting the gendered dynamics in professional interactions. Ms. Raina identified a lack of confidence, family responsibilities, and insufficient mentorship as key barriers to leadership roles for women. She also pointed out the scarcity of documented female role models, which limits visibility and inspiration for aspiring architects. To foster gender equity, Ms.Raina advocated for increased representation of women leaders through symposiums and talks, alongside a broader cultural shift in societal attitudes. Ar. Arzoo Kadian, an architect and academic who runs her own firm, discussed her dual roles in academia and practice. With eight years of experience, Ms. Kadian noted that while work-life balance is manageable in academia and her own firm, it becomes challenging in traditional professional settings. She observed that discrimination becomes more pronounced when transitioning from education to practice, as established architects are predominantly male. Ms. Kadian stressed the importance of a supportive family in overcoming societal expectations and family responsibilities, which she identified as significant barriers to leadership. She highlighted the need for flexible work structures to accommodate women's dual roles at home and work. Ms. Kadian also emphasized the importance of teaching gender equality from a young age and advised young women to be financially independent and confident in seizing opportunities. Ar. Rajat Verma, a professor and architect running his own firm, provided a male perspective on gender equity in architecture. With 11 years of experience, Mr. Verma acknowledged that women have equal access to leadership roles but identified family responsibilities as the primary barrier. He noted the lack of female role models in the field. Mr. Verma shared his experience mentoring women, including a current mentee in America, and emphasized the importance of quality over quantity in achieving work-life balance. His insights underscore the need for systemic support to address barriers faced by women, particularly in balancing professional and personal responsibilities. These interviews collectively reveal the persistent challenges women face in architecture, from workplace discrimination and lack of mentorship to societal expectations and family responsibilities. They also highlight the need for systemic changes, including flexible work policies, increased representation of female role models, and a cultural shift toward gender equity. By addressing these issues, the field of architecture can move closer to becoming a truly inclusive profession. [8-10]

Results

The findings of this study paint a layered narrative of aspiration and systemic inertia within India's architectural profession. While women enter architectural education in significant numbers, their journey from academia to practice is marked by a gradual erosion of presence and agency. Despite comparable representation in classrooms, their trajectories diverge sharply post-graduation, as cultural norms and institutional structures funnel them away from core creative and leadership roles.

The profession, mirroring broader societal patterns, relegates women to peripheral tasks—roles often siloed into technical support or aesthetic domains—while leadership, policymaking, and entrepreneurial spaces remain dominated by male counterparts. This vertical segregation is not merely occupational but symbolic, reflecting a tacit hierarchy that equates authority with masculinity. Interviews with practitioners reveal a recurring theme of invisibility. Women architects describe navigating workplaces where their expertise is routinely overshadowed, their voices muted in client negotiations or site supervision, and their ambitions tempered by expectations to prioritize caregiving roles. The scarcity of female mentors and role models perpetuates a cycle of isolation, leaving younger professionals without roadmaps to navigate systemic biases. Even those who establish independent practices often do so within urban, resource-privileged enclaves, underscoring how socioeconomic barriers compound gendered inequities. Yet, amid these challenges, there are flickers of transformation. A slow but steady rise in registrations signals a generational shift, with women increasingly claiming their place in the profession. Pioneers in sustainability and community-driven design challenge stereotypes, demonstrating that leadership in architecture need not conform to traditional, male-centric paradigms. However, progress remains uneven. Workplace cultures resistant to flexibility—such as rigid hours incompatible with caregiving responsibilities—continue to push women out of active practice. Policy frameworks, though nominally inclusive, lack the teeth to enforce equitable hiring or retention practices, while architectural pedagogy remains blind to the gendered dimensions of urban space. The absence of women in juries, institutional boards, and award panels further cements their exclusion from shaping the profession's future. Ultimately, the study underscores a paradox: women's intellectual and creative contributions to architecture are celebrated in theory but circumscribed in practice. Their stories reveal not just gaps in representation, but a deeper dissonance between the profession's egalitarian ideals and its exclusionary realities. Bridging this divide demands more than incremental change—it requires reimagining architecture as a field where equity is woven into its institutional fabric, from classroom curricula to boardroom policies. [11-13]

Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, the discussion of gender disparities in Indian architecture reveals complex interplays between institutional structures, cultural expectations, and professional practices that warrant deeper examination and intervention. The disconnect between educational parity and professional inequity suggests that architectural institutions must critically examine transition points where women's career trajectories begin to diverge from their male counterparts. The vertical segregation documented in our study—with women concentrated in technical support roles while leadership positions remain male-dominated—reflects not merely individual choices but systemic biases embedded within workplace cultures. As both Raina and Kadian noted in their interviews, women must navigate contradictory expectations: demonstrating assertiveness to gain professional respect while facing backlash when they deviate from gendered behavioral norms. The scarcity of female mentors emerges as a particularly significant barrier. Without visible role models demonstrating viable career paths, young women architects lack psychological anchors for their professional aspirations, a phenomenon Raina specifically highlighted when discussing the absence of documented female contributions to the profession. This invisibility perpetuates what might be termed an "imagination gap"—a limitation on how women envision their professional futures within architecture. To address these challenges, architectural institutions must implement multifaceted interventions. Regular symposiums led by and featuring female architects could provide crucial visibility and networking opportunities. As suggested by our interview participants, these forums should spotlight women's diverse contributions to the field, from sustainability innovations to community-engaged design. Additionally, professional bodies like the COA should establish mentorship programs specifically connecting established female

practitioners with emerging professionals. Workplace policies require transformation beyond nominal inclusion measures. Flexible scheduling, remote work options, and equitable parental leave policies would address the disproportionate impact of caregiving responsibilities that Verma acknowledged as primary barriers to women's advancement. Architectural firms should conduct regular gender audits tracking promotion rates, compensation equity, and leadership representation to ensure accountability for diversity commitments. Educational institutions must integrate gender perspectives into architectural pedagogy, examining how design itself reflects or challenges power hierarchies. This curricular evolution would prepare all practitioners to create more inclusive built environments while sensitizing future architects to workplace equity issues. By implementing these measures, the architectural profession can begin bridging the gap between its egalitarian ideals and exclusionary realities, creating genuine pathways for women's full participation and leadership. [14]

Conclusion

This study exposes the stark gender disparities in India's architectural profession, uncovering a troubling gap between educational success and professional equity. While women make up nearly half of architecture graduates, systemic barriers—rooted in institutional structures and cultural norms—hinder their advancement into leadership and creative roles. Through quantitative analysis and qualitative interviews, the research reveals how these barriers marginalize women's contributions and restrict their professional agency. The findings pinpoint critical areas for intervention: workplace flexibility, robust mentorship networks, and increased visibility for female architects are essential for driving change. Educational institutions, professional organizations, and architectural firms must collectively dismantle these barriers to foster inclusivity. True gender equity in architecture goes beyond mere representation—it demands a fundamental reimagining of how the profession values, recognizes, and amplifies women's voices and visions in shaping the built environment. This transformation is not just necessary; it is urgent.

The persistent gender disparities in Indian architecture demand systemic, cultural, and institutional interventions. Addressing vertical segregation necessitates fostering mentorship networks, amplifying women's visibility through symposiums, and restructuring workplace policies to accommodate caregiving responsibilities. Integrating gender perspectives into pedagogy and mandating gender audits can dismantle embedded biases while cultivating equitable professional ecosystems. Collaborative efforts among educational institutions, firms, and bodies like the COA are imperative to bridge the gap between the profession's egalitarian ideals and exclusionary realities, ensuring women's meaningful participation and leadership in shaping India's architectural future.

Acknowledgements

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