

# Gender wage gap in Asia: a systematic literature review

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Gender wage gap (GWG) issues have intensified across Asian societies, highlighting the need for a comprehensive synthesis of existing empirical research. This study aims to integrate high-quality research on the Asian GWG by mapping research trends, thematic concentrations, underexplored regions and the magnitude and determinants of wage inequality.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using a PRISMA-based systematic literature review, the authors screened 527 records from the Web of Science Core Collection and Google Scholar, yielding 67 Q1–Q2 peer-reviewed empirical studies. The sample was analysed descriptively and synthesized through a mechanism-oriented framework across macro, meso and micro levels, with attention to exogenous shocks.

**Findings** – Existing studies have concentrated largely on macro-institutional and wage-structure explanations, with less attention paid to meso- and micro-level mechanisms. The literature is geographically asymmetric, strongly concentrating on China, whereas Central, Southeast, and West Asia are largely overlooked. A key mechanism gap concerns firm-level pay governance, with scarce direct evidence on how organizations reproduce or mitigate GWG.

**Research limitations/implications** – The review is limited to English-language, Q1–Q2 peer-reviewed journal articles, which may underrepresent domestic language, non-indexed and policy-oriented studies, although these criteria improve consistency, quality control and comparability.

**Social implications** – By clarifying dominant mechanisms and geographic blind spots, the study supports policymakers, researchers and practitioners in identifying actionable gaps for reducing GWG in Asia.

**Originality/value** – This paper develops a framework that consolidates fragmented evidence into six thematic areas; proposes a multi-level mechanism model; identifies thematic research gaps, under-covered regions and firm-level processes; and outlines a structured agenda for future cross-country comparisons and mechanism testing in gender-related pay inequality research.

**Keywords** Gender wage gap, Gender inequality, Systematic literature review, Asia

**Paper type** Research paper

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## 1. Introduction

Income and wealth inequalities remain fundamental issues in contemporary social and economic development (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2024). As sustainability, social responsibility and transparent governance become increasingly embedded in business and financial systems, wage inequality is also viewed as a problem affecting economic inclusion, labour-market efficiency and organizational sustainability. Within this broader agenda, the gender wage gap (GWG) is not only a matter of social equity but also one of economic development and business governance. Previous research shows that GWG can negatively affect economic development (Talafha et al., 2025). The issue is particularly salient in Asia, where India and China alone account for over one third of the world's population, and the ten most populous Asian countries together account for nearly half (World Economic Forum, 2025). Yet GWG research has historically been more concentrated on the USA and Europe than on Asia (Bishu and Alkadry, 2017). Thus, a systematic review of Asian GWG research

Received 19 February 2026  
Revised 28 May 2026  
25 June 2026  
Accepted 26 June 2026

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is important for understanding regional wage inequality and for clarifying its relevance to Asian business studies, public policy implementation and organizational governance.

GWG refers to women's economic disadvantage relative to men in wages, income, compensation or earnings (Brienza *et al.*, 2024). The literature commonly conceptualizes GWG through two broad mechanisms. The first is horizontal segregation, whereby women are disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid sectors, occupations or job categories. The second concerns within-job differences, whereby women receive lower pay than men even when they have similar education, experience or job characteristics (Blau and Kahn, 2017). These explanations suggest that GWG may arise from both distributional inequality in labour-market structures and unequal returns embedded in organizational compensation, promotion and evaluation processes.

Asia provides a theoretically meaningful context for reviewing GWG because it combines population scale, rapid economic transformation, institutional diversity and heterogeneous gender norms. Evidence from the three most populous Asian countries illustrates this heterogeneity. In China, market transition and changes in wage structures have been associated with distributional patterns such as sticky-floor and glass-ceiling effects (Appleton *et al.*, 2014; Tang and Scott, 2017). In India, education, work experience, economic liberalization and social structures jointly shape women's wage returns, although reductions in the GWG are not always statistically significant or mechanistically consistent (Chamarbagwala, 2006; Lee and Wie, 2017; Deshpande *et al.*, 2018). Indonesia shows a sizable GWG, yet within the final reviewed sample, English-language and Q1/Q2 peer-reviewed empirical evidence on its mechanisms remains limited (Miranti *et al.*, 2022). The World Economic Forum's Wage Equality for Similar Work indicator further shows divergent perceived wage-equality trajectories across the three countries (World Economic Forum, 2025). These patterns indicate that the Asian GWG cannot be understood as a single regional phenomenon, but requires a multilevel synthesis across institutions, sectors, organizations and households.

Theoretically, the GWG should be understood as a multilevel phenomenon rather than as an outcome determined only by individual characteristics or a single institutional outcome. At the macro level, labour market segmentation and institutional perspectives explain how wage regimes, public–private divides, formal and informal employment, regulation, unions, retirement rules and industrial structures shape access to different wage tracks (Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Scott, 1995). At the meso level, organizational inequality and gendered organizational perspectives emphasize that firms and sectors are not neutral wage-distribution spaces: promotion systems, performance evaluation, job allocation, compensation structures and career tracks can translate broader institutional and social inequalities into wage outcomes (Acker, 1990). At the micro level, human capital theory explains how education, experience and skills affect wage returns, while social role theory highlights how fertility, care responsibilities, family norms and gender-role expectations shape women's labour supply and career continuity (Becker, 1964; Eagly, 1987). In combination, these perspectives justify a macro–meso–micro analytical framework for synthesizing the Asian GWG literature.

Existing reviews have provided valuable insights into GWG and related labour-market mechanisms more broadly (Bishu and Alkadry, 2017; Blau and Kahn, 2017). However, less systematic attention has been paid to how GWG mechanisms operate across Asian institutional, organizational and family contexts. Although empirical studies on Asian GWG have produced important evidence, this evidence remains fragmented across geographical contexts, disciplines, data sets and methods, including studies on labour-market structures and wage decomposition, human capital and family constraints, and sectoral or organizational processes. The problem is therefore not the absence of GWG research, but the lack of an integrative framework explaining how macro-level institutions and policies, meso-level organizational processes and micro-level household or human-capital

mechanisms jointly shape wage outcomes. Without such a framework, Asian GWG research risks remaining a collection of country-specific and method-specific findings rather than a cumulative explanation of how gendered wage inequality is produced, governed and sustained across Asian economies. This paper addresses this gap through a PRISMA-based systematic literature review (hereafter: SLR), organizing the evidence through a macro–meso–micro integrative analytical framework, with technology, digitalization and pandemic-related changes serving as cross-cutting shocks. This analytical framework extends GWG research beyond a primarily labour-economics or public-policy perspective by positioning it as a business and management issue. For Asian business studies, firms and sectors are not passive sites where macro-level inequality is merely observed; rather, they actively mediate inequality through pay-setting, promotion systems, evaluation practices, job allocation, performance-based pay and compensation governance (Acker, 1990; Elvira and Graham, 2002; Castilla and Benard, 2010; Hara, 2018). Understanding Asian GWG therefore requires attention not only to labour-market structures and family constraints but also to how organizational decisions reproduce or mitigate gendered pay differences. Accordingly, three research questions are addressed:

- RQ1.* What themes, methods and geographical patterns characterize empirical Asian GWG research?
- RQ2.* How does the literature explain GWG across macro, meso and micro-level mechanisms?
- RQ3.* Which regions, sectors and firm-level pay governance mechanisms remain underexplored?

This paper makes three main contributions to Asian business studies and GWG research. First, it develops a macro–meso–micro integrative framework that does more than classify the literature into analytical levels. The framework explains how gender wage inequality travels across levels: macro-level institutions and labour-market structures shape the conditions under which firms operate; meso-level organizational practices translate these conditions into pay-setting, promotion, evaluation and job-allocation outcomes; and micro-level human capital, family norms and care responsibilities interact with these organizational processes to shape individual wage trajectories. Second, the paper maps the final reviewed sample by topic, method and geography, identifying not only regional imbalances but also mechanism gaps in the Asian GWG literature. Third, it advances a business-oriented research agenda by placing firm-level pay governance and organizational processes at the centre of Asian GWG research. This shift is important because existing evidence remains concentrated on macro-institutional and wage-structure explanations, while direct evidence on how Asian firms reproduce, moderate or reduce gendered pay inequality remains limited.

## 2. Methodology

A systematic literature review gathers, evaluates and synthesizes prior research in a transparent and replicable way, enabling the identification of consistent findings and evidence gaps (Bishu and Alkadry, 2017; Lublóy *et al.*, 2025). We adopted a PRISMA-based SLR because PRISMA provides a structured protocol for study identification, screening and reporting, which strengthens methodological transparency and reproducibility (Liberati *et al.*, 2009; Moher *et al.*, 2010; Page *et al.*, 2021). This approach is suitable for the present study as it goes beyond mapping publication patterns to interpret substantive findings and synthesize mechanisms across the Asian GWG literature, consistent with recent review-based and bibliometric studies in business and management research (Sharma and Tiwari, 2023; Ahuja and Rani, 2025; Ibikunle *et al.*, 2025; Md Zaini *et al.*, 2026; Forlano *et al.*, 2025).

This review uses the Web of Science (WoS) as the core database because it provides structured indexing, journal-level quality control and transparent search functions. However, this choice strengthens comparability rather than exhaustiveness. Accordingly, the review may still be affected by database selection bias, even though Google Scholar was used as a supplementary source to identify additional relevant studies not indexed in WoS. The English-language criterion was adopted to ensure consistency in comparison, coding and synthesis across a highly diverse Asian GWG literature, while also reflecting the international publishing space in which this research is most visible. However, this may underrepresent locally published, non-indexed, non-English or policy-oriented studies; therefore, the identified regional and thematic gaps are interpreted as gaps within the reviewed sample rather than definitive absences in the broader literature.

## 2.1 Study selection

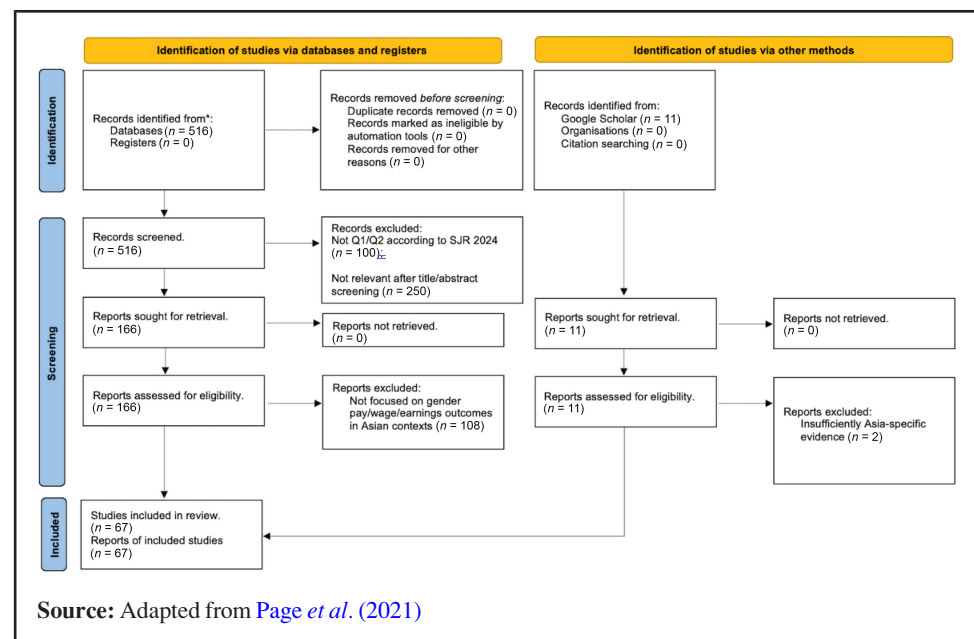
The study selection process was conducted in sequential stages. [Figure 1](#) shows the PRISMA-based study selection process.

The primary WoS search was conducted between 21 October and 17 November 2025 and covered studies published between 2005 and 2025. The 2005–2025 period was selected to capture two decades of empirical research during which Asian labour markets experienced rapid economic transformation, increasing policy attention to wage transparency and equal pay ([International Labour Organization, 2024](#); [World Economic Forum, 2025](#)).

In addition, a supplementary Google Scholar search was conducted in January 2026 to identify eligible studies not indexed in WoS. No duplicate records were removed at the PRISMA stage because the filtered WoS export did not generate duplicates, and Google Scholar records were manually checked against the WoS-based list before eligibility assessment:

- Stage 1 – Initial screening: The WoS search was limited to open-access, English-language journal articles on Asian countries and used GWG-related terms covering gender earnings, income, pay, salary, wage gaps, glass ceiling and motherhood

**Figure 1** The outcome of the PRISMA diagram



penalty. The full search terms are reported in [Appendix](#). This search returned 516 records.

- Stage 2 – Quality screening: To ensure study quality and comparability, articles not published in Q1 or Q2 journals were excluded based on the Scimago Journal Rank (SJR) 2024 classification. Journal rankings were checked manually against the 2024 Scimago Journal Rank classification by two authors. Discrepancies or borderline cases were discussed and resolved through consensus before the final quality-screening decision was recorded. After this stage, 416 records remained.
- Stage 3 – Title and abstract screening: Records were excluded if their titles or abstracts were unrelated to GWG or related wage outcomes, or if they did not focus on Asian countries or Asia-specific evidence. This stage excluded records from unrelated fields, such as medicine, biology and chemistry. After title and abstract screening, 166 records remained.
- Stage 4 – Supplementary search: In January 2026, Google Scholar was applied as a supplementary targeted search tool to identify eligible studies that are not indexed in WoS. Candidate records were screened by title and abstract and then assessed against the same inclusion and exclusion criteria used for the WoS-based sample. This process identified 11 additional records, of which 9 were retained after eligibility assessment.
- Stage 5 – Full text screening: Full-text screening was managed in Rayyan using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. First, only empirical studies explicitly examining gender wage, pay, earnings or income outcomes were included. Most included studies used quantitative methods, such as regression, decomposition, or quasi-experimental approaches, while purely theoretical papers were excluded. Second, for the purpose of this review, Asia was operationalized using the regional country classification applied in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report ([World Economic Forum, 2025](#)). Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were retained when studies provided Asia-relevant evidence under this classification. Russia and Turkey were excluded because they were not treated as Asian cases under the regional scope applied in this review, and because the included studies did not provide sufficiently Asia-specific evidence for the purposes of the synthesis. Third, studies were excluded if pay gaps were determined by factors other than gender, such as racial or ethnic differences. Studies on women's workplace status, including glass ceiling, leadership or promotion, were included only when they explicitly examined wages, earnings or income.

Rayyan was used to organize candidate studies, support eligibility assessment and track screening decisions. Where eligibility was unclear or differences in interpretation arose during the screening process, records were re-examined against the review objectives, inclusion criteria and full-text evidence, and final inclusion decisions were reached through author discussion and consensus. Screening was not conducted as a fully independent double-screening process for every record; instead, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied consistently, and unclear or borderline cases were reviewed collectively by the authors. After full-text screening, the preliminary sample consisted of 69 studies. During the subsequent coding and data-extraction stage, a final consistency check led to the exclusion of two cross-country studies because they did not provide sufficient Asia-specific evidence under the regional inclusion criterion. The final analytical sample therefore consisted of 67 studies.

## 2.2 Classification and coding logic

After final inclusion, each study was coded using a structured extraction framework that recorded bibliographic, methodological, and substantive information. The extracted fields included country or regional focus, first author and year, method, data set, article title,

journal and DOI. The substantive content was then coded in three stages. The full coding table is reported in Supplementary material.

First, each article was assigned as a primary topic, referring to the main research issue or mechanism most directly examined in the study. Second, where relevant, a secondary topic was recorded to capture an additional but less central mechanism, empirical pattern, or contextual dimension addressed in the article. Third, the study was assigned to a higher-order thematic category, reported in Supplementary material as “super-topic”, which grouped the detailed primary and secondary topics into one of the six final review themes: labour market institutions and segmentation; wage structure and unexplained gender gap; sectoral and organizational context; family, fertility norms and labour supply; human capital and education; and technology, digitalization and pandemic-related shocks.

These six higher-order thematic categories were subsequently interpreted through a broader analytical framework covering macro-, meso- and micro-level mechanisms, with exogenous shocks treated as a complementary cross-cutting dimension. Specifically, labour market institutions and segmentation and wage structure and unexplained gender gap were mainly interpreted at the macro level; sectoral and organizational context was treated primarily at the meso-level; family, fertility norms and labour supply and human capital and education were mainly interpreted at the micro level; and technology, digitalization and pandemic-related shocks were treated as an additional exogenous-shock perspective.

For studies addressing multiple mechanisms or levels, a primary-focus rule was applied. In such cases, the primary topic and the higher-order thematic category were determined according to the mechanism in which the empirical evidence and statistical analysis were most extensively developed, while secondary topic coding was used to retain important supplementary dimensions. Borderline cases were discussed by the authors before final coding decisions were made to improve consistency across the review.

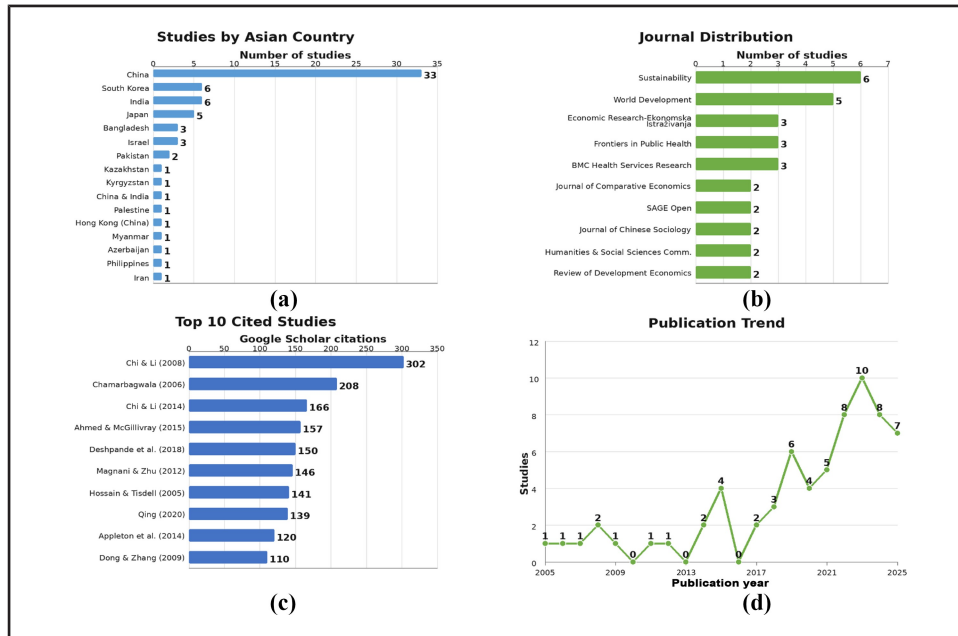
### 3. Descriptive statistics

#### 3.1 Descriptive profile of the sample

The final sample of 67 papers was analyzed from four viewpoints, as shown in [Figure 2](#): regional distribution, publication outlets, citation patterns and publication trends. China dominates the sample, contributing nearly half of the included articles (33 / 67). India and South Korea account for six articles each, Japan for five, Bangladesh and Israel for three each, and Pakistan for two. Azerbaijan, Palestine, Kazakhstan, Myanmar, the Philippines, Kyrgyzstan, Iran and Hong Kong (China) are each represented by one article. One China–India comparative study was coded separately because [Lee and Wie \(2017\)](#) examined both countries jointly.

Although geographically broad, the sample remains sharply uneven, with Central, Southeast and West Asian countries substantially underrepresented. Indonesia, the third most populous country in Asia, is absent from the final reviewed sample. China’s dominance may reflect its demographic and economic scale, central role in global trade and long-run market transition, which reshaped wage-setting institutions and coincided with rising income and wage dispersion ([International Labour Organization, 2024](#); [Knight, 2014](#)).

Regarding publication outlets, Sustainability is the most frequent journal, with six articles, followed by World Development with five. *BMC Health Services Research*, *Frontiers in Public Health* and *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja* published three articles each, while *Review of Development Economics*, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *Journal of Comparative Economics*, *Journal of Chinese Sociology* and SAGE Open published two each.

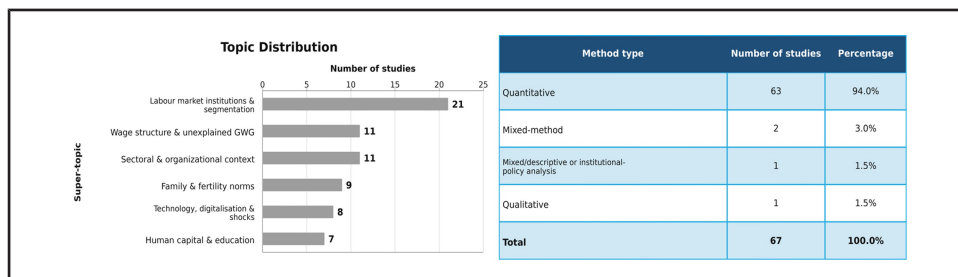
**Figure 2** Descriptive analysis

Citation statistics were based on Google Scholar data retrieved on 31 January 2026. [Chi and Li \(2008\)](#) is the most cited article, with 302 citations, examining sticky-floor and glass-ceiling effects in urban China between 1987 and 2004. [Chamarbagwala \(2006\)](#) follows with 208 citations, analysing how economic liberalization affected GWG in India. The remaining top-cited articles received 110–166 citations, indicating sustained influence among studies published between 2005 and 2018.

Publication trends show an upward pattern from 2005 to 2025. Publications were limited until the mid-2010s, rose modestly between 2014 and 2018, and accelerated from 2019 onward. The trend peaked in 2023 and remained high thereafter, with 7–10 studies per year between 2022 and 2025. This increase may partly reflect growing global attention to wage transparency, including the EU Directive on equal pay and pay transparency ([European Union, 2023](#)), and continued concern over large gender pay gaps in Japan, South Korea and Israel ([OECD, 2021](#)).

### 3.2 Thematic and methodological composition

[Figure 3](#) presents the thematic and methodological composition of the final sample. The reviewed literature is strongly dominated by quantitative empirical designs: 63 of the 67

**Figure 3** Thematic and methodological composition

studies use quantitative methods, while mixed-method, qualitative and descriptive-institutional approaches remain rare. Regression, decomposition, quantile and distributional methods are the most common approaches, indicating that Asian GWG research has been shaped primarily by econometric wage-gap estimation.

Thematically, the literature is concentrated around macro-level explanations, especially labour-market institutions, segmentation, wage structure and unexplained GWG. Meso-level studies on sectoral and organizational context and micro-level studies on family, fertility, labour supply, human capital and education are comparatively less developed. This suggests that existing research locates where wage inequality appears more clearly than it explains how inequality is reproduced through organizational processes and individual career trajectories. Technology, digitalization and pandemic-related studies provide a cross-cutting perspective rather than a separate analytical level. Overall, this composition justifies the mechanism-oriented synthesis in the next section.

## 4. Findings

This section synthesizes the final sample of 67 studies into six themes using the macro-meso-micro framework. Rather than summarizing individual articles, it identifies recurring mechanisms, contextual variations, contradictions and remaining gaps in Asian GWG research. The first two themes capture macro-level institutions and labour-market segmentation, the third theme focuses on meso-level organizational processes, and the fourth and fifth micro-level themes are family-role and human-capital mechanisms. Technology, digitalization and pandemic-related change are treated as a theme around cross-cutting shocks, instead of a fourth level.

### 4.1 *Macro-level mechanisms: labour market institutions and segmentation*

This theme encompasses 21 studies and shows that Asian GWG is initially shaped and allocated through labour-market segmentation, sectoral entry, formal and informal employment, public-private divisions, institutional rules and macroeconomic reforms. The core mechanism is not merely individual ability differences between two genders, but the allocation of women and men into wage tracks with different pay rules, protection levels, mobility opportunities and bargaining power at a macro scale.

Sectoral ownership and firm-size segmentation shape women's access to high-return positions. Chinese cases show that public-private divides, ownership structures and sectoral wage rules affect both the size and direction of GWG ([Dong and Zhang, 2009](#); [Li et al., 2024](#); [Li et al., 2025](#)). Japanese evidence suggests that SME structures, long-term employment systems and corporate organization concentrate women in lower-return or less secure positions ([Rebrey, 2020](#)). Bangladesh provides a counter-pattern: reverse hourly GWG suggests that segmentation does not always widen wage gaps. Where women are concentrated in better-regulated sectors with clearer minimum-wage protection, institutional protection may narrow or even reverse the hourly gap ([Rahman and Al-Hasan, 2022](#)).

Institutional rules affect GWG through wage protection, welfare design and representation policies, but their effects are not linear. Chinese trade unions provide wage premiums for women in the public sector, while their role in the private sector remains limited ([Ma and Zhan, 2024](#)). Pension and retirement policies shape gendered compensation gaps as well ([Chen and Turner, 2015](#)). In Japan, Womanomics-related childcare policies may support female employment, yet tax and pension incentives can reproduce the single-earner household model ([Nagase, 2018](#)). Indian board gender quotas show that higher female representation does not automatically narrow pay inequality: if bonus, commission and compensation rules remain unchanged, a narrower representation gap may coexist with a wider compensation gap ([Marisetty and Prasad, 2022](#)).

Dual labour markets, informality and employment vulnerability expand GWG through job quality, stability and bargaining power. South Korea research shows that women are more likely to be locked into non-standard and secondary labour markets, with limited mobility and higher layoff risk during downturns (Cho and Lee, 2015; Cho *et al.*, 2025). Chinese studies on migrant workers and flexible employment indicate that spatial constraints, low-skilled work and weak protection restrict women's access to high-paying urban labour markets and high-return flexible jobs (Fu *et al.*, 2023; Yang *et al.*, 2023). Employment selectivity also affects GWG estimation: observing only employed women may underestimate the actual gap because low-paid women are more likely to exit the labour market (Chi and Li, 2014). Two Central Asian cases in the final sample similarly show that high labour participation does not imply high-quality employment; Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan highlight how public-sector low wages, informality and re-employment barriers weaken women's wage returns (Nyussupova *et al.*, 2023; Karymshakov *et al.*, 2023).

Macro segmentation also enters wage tracks through organizational sorting and implicit evaluation criteria. Evidence from the South Korean public sector shows that wage growth may remain gender-stratified even in regulated organizational environments (Yang and Jeong, 2020). Chinese findings further demonstrate that implicit evaluation criteria, such as appearance penalties, can amplify women's income losses during career advancement (Li *et al.*, 2021a). These findings connect macro segmentation with meso-level organizational mechanisms: labour-market structures shape opportunity entry, while organizational evaluation processes influence whether women can progress along high-pay tracks.

Macroeconomic reforms and institutional frictions further reshape wage tracks. Indian economic liberalization changed relative wages through trade, service outsourcing and skill-demand shifts, suggesting that macro reform affects GWG through sectoral and skill channels (Chamarbagwala, 2006). In China, the hukou and talent-allocation frictions suggest that institutional frictions can widen wage gaps and reduce economic efficiency (Li and Peng, 2022). The Pakistani study frames GWG as a structural constraint on economic prosperity because wage inequality affects women's labour participation, human-capital investment and long-term growth (Javed *et al.*, 2022).

Overall, this theme supports labour-market segmentation and institutional perspectives: GWG is a macro-level outcome shaped by institutional rules, employment segmentation, wage tracks and employment selectivity. However, macro-level studies in the final sample identify where inequality is located across institutions, sectors and employment types more clearly than how these structures enter firm-level pay governance, promotion and evaluation rules.

#### ***4.2 Macro-level mechanisms: wage structure and unexplained gender wage gap***

This theme comprises 11 studies using decomposition, quantile-regression and wage-distribution approaches. Its core insight is that GWG is not only an average wage difference, but a distributional phenomenon: gaps may concentrate at the bottom, middle or top of the wage distribution and appear through sticky-floor, glass-ceiling or unequal-return mechanisms.

Wage-structure studies suggest that women and men with similar observable characteristics may receive different returns across wage positions. Studies on urban China associate market transition, ownership change, occupational sorting and sectoral stratification with changes in both overall wage inequality and the distribution of GWG (Appleton *et al.*, 2014; Ng, 2007). Several studies identify stronger gaps at the lower end, suggesting larger return penalties or employment-selection problems among low-paid women (Chi and Li, 2008; Magnani and Zhu, 2012). The Hong Kong case further suggests that lower- and upper-tail gaps can coexist, with the lower-tail gap more related to the

unexplained component and the upper-tail gap more connected to occupational stratification (Ge *et al.*, 2011).

Wage structures also shift with institutional transition. Around China's labour-law implementation, GWG first widened and then narrowed, suggesting that legal enforcement, labour supply and wage-structure adjustment jointly shape the gap (Zhao *et al.*, 2019). Urban Chinese study demonstrates that the gap does not only reflect departmental entry but also unequal pay for comparable work within departments (Wang and Cai, 2008). However, studies on university graduates suggest that initial wage gaps should not be read automatically as direct wage discrimination, as part of the gap may arise from field-of-study differences, pre-market skills, prior experience or occupational sorting before labour-market entry (He *et al.*, 2020).

Cross-national and single-country evidence further shows contextual variation in where GWG appears in the distribution. Japanese studies situate the gap mainly within internal wage structures, career tracks and promotion barriers rather than between firms (Hara, 2018). Indian studies on regular salaried workers find GWG across the distribution, stronger at the bottom sectors; with the unexplained component intensifying over time (Deshpande *et al.*, 2018). A China–India comparison suggests widening urban GWG in China but narrowing GWG in India, while both cases remain shaped by wage structures, skill prices and unobserved characteristics (Lee and Wie, 2017).

The unexplained component may reflect discrimination, but may also capture omitted variables, measurement limits, employment selection, unobserved productivity differences or model specification. In conclusion, this theme strengthens the macro wage-structure explanation of GWG, elaborating decomposition and quantile methods can locate where unequal returns appear, but usually cannot show how those returns are produced inside firms through job allocation, evaluation, promotion rules and pay governance. This provides a bridge to the meso-level organizational mechanisms discussed next.

#### ***4.3 Meso-level mechanisms: sectoral and organizational context***

This theme comprises 11 studies, demonstrating that organizations are not passive sites where GWG appears, but active settings where wage gaps are produced, maintained or reduced through career tracks, promotion systems, performance pay, job allocation, informal networks and evaluation criteria.

Health-care and professional-service evidence shows how internal hierarchies translate gender differences into wage outcomes. In China, women psychiatrists face disadvantages at senior professional ranks, indicating a glass-ceiling pattern (Han *et al.*, 2022). Longitudinal study on general practitioners suggests that pay structures may amplify gender differences over time (Tang *et al.*, 2024), while evidence from psychiatric nursing shows that even in female-dominated occupations, night-shift allocation and routine task division allow men to earn higher subsidies (Gu *et al.*, 2024). The Iranian case on general practitioners similarly shows income stratification within the same high-skilled occupation by work intensity, practice location and employment type (Bayati *et al.*, 2019). A Pakistani study further shows that barriers to healthcare leadership exclude women from higher wage tracks (Khan *et al.*, 2025).

Organizational context also shapes whether representation reduces GWG. Korean aviation evidence shows that occupational segregation and demand-side wage-setting continue to structure gender pay differences (Zmire *et al.*, 2025). A firm-level Korean study suggests that female managers do not automatically reduce inequality: their effect depends on workgroup gender composition and organizational context, narrowing gaps in some male-dominated settings while being offset by institutionalized bias in others (Fuller and Kim, 2024). A case from Korean surgeons further shows cumulative disadvantages across

promotion, evaluation and professional integration, indicating that organizational inequality accumulates over the career life cycle (Choi *et al.*, 2021).

Informal relations and pay systems themselves also operate as organizational GWG mechanisms. Israeli accounting firms reveal that employee–manager ties and informal networks shape wage growth, with women under female supervisors sometimes experiencing faster wage progression (Tobol *et al.*, 2019). Israeli kibbutz wage reform further shows that shifts from uniform allowances to market-based or job-evaluation pay may redefine “work value” and convert traditional gender divisions into pay differences (Mandel *et al.*, 2024). Philippine seaweed farming research similarly reflects that the gendered labour division in value chains confines women to low-paid, labour-intensive tasks while men dominate higher-paid and higher-authority roles (Mengo *et al.*, 2023).

This theme supports organizational inequality and gendered organizations perspectives, articulating that GWG is not only external to firms but also institutionalized inside organizations. Although the sample is smaller than the macro theme, it is central to the business and management contribution of this study. The final sample still provides limited direct evidence on firm-level pay governance, performance evaluation, bonus allocation, promotion rules, job assignment and organizational decision-making, offering a clearer firm-level pay governance agenda for future Asian business studies.

#### ***4.4 Micro-level mechanisms: family, fertility norms and labour supply***

This theme comprises nine studies, drawing on social role theory to show that family, fertility and care responsibilities are not merely personal choices, but wage mechanisms operating through labour supply, career continuity and sectoral sorting. From this sample, it is noted that women’s wage disadvantage stems less from ability deficits than from care responsibilities, gender-role expectations and institutional incentives that repeatedly interrupt employment trajectories.

Motherhood penalties reduce wage growth through career interruptions, working-time adjustments and continuity losses. Evidence on Chinese rural–urban migrant women shows that children substantially weaken women’s economic opportunities, especially among less educated women (Zhao and Hannum, 2019). A longitudinal Chinese study also shows expanding motherhood penalties alongside declining fatherhood premiums, suggesting that family-related wage effects accumulate over the life course (Xu, 2023). The study on Israel further suggests that childbirth widens GWG even among highly skilled women by interrupting careers and shifting women into more flexible but lower-paid sectors (Gafni and Siniver, 2015).

Family norms and gender-role expectations shape women’s labour-market entry, retention and exit rather than simply reflecting “voluntary choice”. Traditional family roles depress women’s earnings while leaving men’s earnings largely unaffected in China (Qing, 2020). The “good mother” norms, childcare constraints and tax/welfare incentives sustain the single-earner household model and weaken women’s continuous employment (Pennoni *et al.*, 2019). Similar pressures among Japanese physicians show that high-skilled occupations do not fully offset the wage effects of care norms (Nishida *et al.*, 2024). In India, the discouraged-worker mechanism shows that married women’s pessimistic expectations about wages and opportunities can push them out of the labour market (Tayal and Paul, 2021).

Family and social norms also affect wages through occupational choice and sectoral sorting. The Indian caste structures and patriarchal norms restrict women’s employment options, pushing them into socially accepted but lower-paid occupations such as teaching, nursing or low-skilled services, thereby reinforcing GWG (Mahajan and Ramaswami, 2017; Mukherjee and Sarkhel, 2025). Thus, family mechanisms shape not only whether women participate in labour activities but also which sectors, jobs and wage tracks they enter.

This theme supports a micro-level interpretation of GWG, while showing that micro mechanisms are not isolated. Family, fertility and care norms interact with macro institutions and meso organizational structures through career interruption, labour-market exit, sectoral sorting and delayed promotion. In this sample, the links between family mechanisms and firm-level promotion, performance evaluation, flexible work and career tracks remain underexplored.

#### ***4.5 Micro-level mechanisms: human capital and education***

This theme comprises seven studies, which qualifies the linear explanation of human capital theory. Education, experience and training affect wages, but they do not automatically translate into equal pay because women and men often receive different returns. The key issue is not whether women possess education and skills, but whether similar human capital is equally converted into wage returns by institutions, sectors and organizations.

Educational expansion may reduce the GWG, but conditionally. In Bangladesh, rising female education did not eliminate wage disadvantage or occupational segregation, showing that education alone is insufficient ([Hossain and Tisdell, 2005](#)). A later study finds that women's educational returns helped reduce GWG, suggesting equalizing effects under specific institutional and labour-market conditions ([Ahmed and McGillivray, 2015](#)). Myanmar provides sharper evidence: where formal training is scarce, women who access skills training may receive higher returns than men, implying that the issue may lie less in training returns than in scarce and unequal training access ([Hansen et al., 2023](#)).

Similar education does not necessarily generate similar wage returns. In Azerbaijan, women receive significantly lower educational returns than men, especially at higher education levels ([Ismayilov et al., 2022](#)). The Palestinian study similarly shows that higher education expansion did not produce expected wage equality because sectoral segmentation, limited job creation and broader political-economic constraints weakened its equalizing role ([Morar and Awawda, 2024](#)).

Experience, tenure and early career allocation also accumulate human-capital differences over the life course. Chinese evidence shows that gendered returns to work experience and tenure widen GWG, especially when women cannot accumulate continuous experience because of family or career interruptions ([Qu et al., 2019](#)). Initial wage gaps among university graduates may also reflect pre-market ability differences and occupational composition, or pre-market sorting, rather than only post-entry wage discrimination ([Li et al., 2021b](#)).

Education and skills are necessary but insufficient for reducing GWG. The key question is whether labour markets and organizations reward similar human capital equally. This theme supports a micro-level explanation, while showing that micro-level resources are filtered through macro institutions, sectoral segmentation and meso organizational rules. Direct evidence on how firms evaluate, allocate and reward similar skills remains limited in the final sample.

#### ***4.6 Cross-cutting shocks: technology, digitalization and pandemic-related change***

This theme contains eight articles. This is not a fourth level beyond the macro–meso–micro framework, but serves as a cross-cutting shock perspective. Technological change, digitalization and pandemic-related disruption reshape macro labour-market structures, meso organizational pay arrangements and micro work choices simultaneously.

The evidence shows that digitalization and external shocks can both widen and narrow GWG. COVID-19 increased women's income losses, suggesting that crises can amplify existing labour-market inequalities ([Dui, 2022](#)). In the gig economy, digitalization widened female workers' wage disadvantage, as women's wage growth lagged behind men's within

platform work (Han *et al.*, 2024). Manufacturing robotisation may also widen gaps through unequal skill–pay linkages, with men gaining more in perceived pay fairness and wage growth (Zhang *et al.*, 2025).

Yet some digital channels may reduce GWG. Digital finance and digital inclusive finance can improve women's access to non-agricultural and paid work, especially among migrant and rural women, thereby narrowing wage gaps under certain conditions (Yang *et al.*, 2022; Guo *et al.*, 2021; Li and Chen, 2025; Lu *et al.*, 2023). However, digitalization is not inherently equalizing, as flexible employment may still involve lower-tail wage penalties, income polarization and unequal working-hour structures (Lu *et al.*, 2023; Zhang *et al.*, 2023).

Overall, technology and shocks may widen or narrow GWG depending on platform rules, digital access, skill demand, pay systems and working-time arrangements. The main gap is the China-heavy evidence base, leaving comparable shock-related mechanisms in other Asian economies underexplored.

## 5. Discussion and implications

### 5.1 *Regional concentration and contextual variation in Asian gender wage gap research*

The review reveals a pronounced regional imbalance in the Asian GWG literature. The final sample is concentrated in China, India, South Korea and Japan, while evidence from Southeast Asia, Central Asia and West Asia remains comparatively limited. These patterns should be read as gaps within the final reviewed sample, not as definitive absences in the broader Asian GWG scholarship, given the review's English-language, open-access, Q1/Q2 journal and database-coverage criteria.

East Asia provides the largest and most diverse evidence base. China dominates the sample and covers labour-market segmentation, wage structures, human-capital returns, digitalization and pandemic-related shocks. This dominance may partly reflect China's demographic scale, long-run market transition and position in global production, which have made wage-setting and wage dispersion highly visible research issues (Knight, 2014; International Labour Organization, 2024). South Korean studies focus more on non-standard employment, sectoral segmentation and organizational mechanisms, while Japanese studies emphasize long-term employment systems, internal wage structures and the effects of family and motherhood norms on women's career continuity. Hong Kong adds evidence on wage distribution and return mechanisms.

South Asian evidence, mainly from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, is more concentrated around institutional structures, educational returns, family norms and development outcomes. Indian studies show how liberalization, caste, family norms and wage structures jointly shape women's wage trajectories. Bangladesh illustrates how education, occupational segregation and minimum-wage protection may have different effects under different institutional conditions. Pakistani evidence connects GWG to women's labour participation, human-capital investment and long-term development. However, direct evidence on firm-level pay rules, performance evaluation, promotion mechanisms and bonus systems remains limited.

Southeast Asia is particularly underrepresented in the final sample, with only limited evidence from Myanmar and the Philippines. This restricts comparison across the region's diverse labour regimes, industrial structures and informal economies. Indonesia's absence is especially notable because it is the third most populous country in Asia and existing regional evidence suggests that its GWG remains sizable (Miranti *et al.*, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2025).

Central Asia is similarly thinly covered, with evidence only from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These studies suggest that low public-sector pay, informality, re-employment barriers and

labour-market segmentation may weaken women's wage returns, but the region's institutional transitions, public-sector structures and informal labour markets remain underexplored. West Asian evidence is also limited in volume but more diverse in mechanism: Azerbaijan and Palestine highlight unequal educational returns; Israel contributes evidence on motherhood penalties, organizational networks and pay-system reform; and Iran adds research on income stratification within the medical sector.

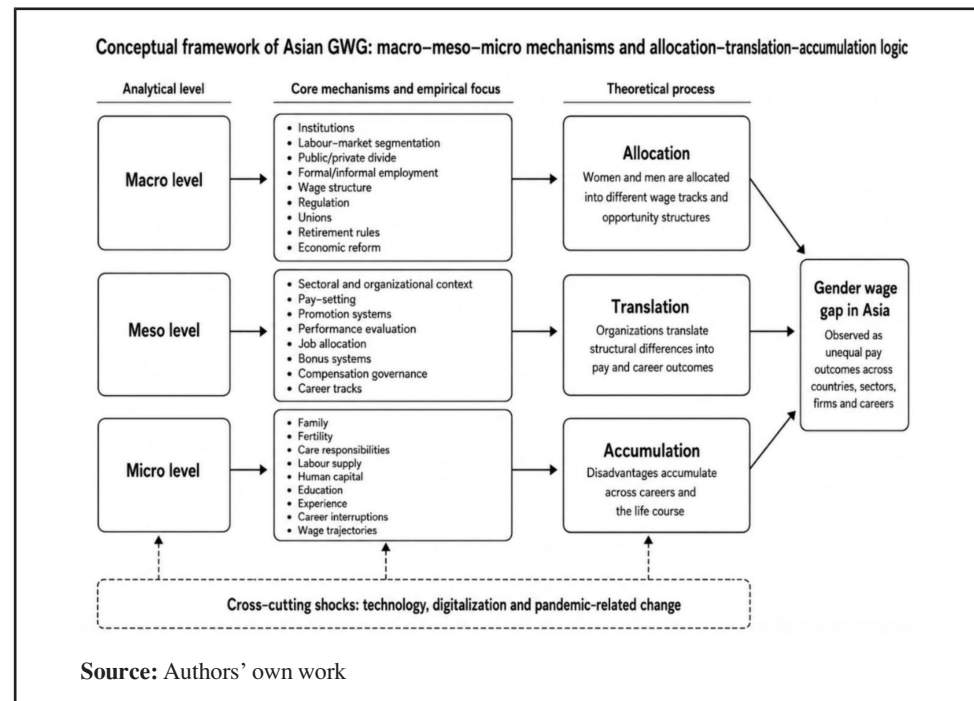
Regional imbalance is therefore not only a descriptive pattern but also a theoretical constraint. The concentration of China and East Asian evidence may make macro institutions, wage structures and digital shocks more visible, while the limited coverage of Southeast Asia, Central Asia, West Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries limits understanding of how different institutional and organizational contexts shape GWG.

## 5.2 Theoretical implications

The main theoretical contribution of this review is to reframe Asian GWG research from separate single-level explanations toward a cross-level mechanism. Existing studies often emphasize individual skills, family constraints, organizational processes or macro institutions separately. The synthesis shows that these mechanisms are connected: macro institutions and labour-market segmentation shape entry into wage tracks; meso organizations convert these structural differences into pay, promotion, evaluation and job-allocation outcomes; and micro-level family responsibilities, unequal human-capital returns and career interruptions accumulate wage disadvantages over the life course. Building on this synthesis, the review refines the macro–meso–micro framework into a more specific explanatory logic: macro structures allocate, meso organizations translate and micro mechanisms accumulate. [Figure 4](#) summarizes this logic.

At the macro level, the core mechanism is allocation. Institutional structures are not merely the background of the GWG; they allocate women and men into different wage tracks through public–private divides, formal and informal employment, sectoral entry,

**Figure 4** Conceptual framework of Asian GWG



employment protection, unions, retirement rules and macroeconomic reforms (Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Scott, 1995). The GWG therefore depends not only on whether women possess education and skills, but also on whether they can enter institutional positions where these skills are rewarded. In this sense, labour-market segmentation and institutional perspectives explain not only labour-market differences but also how wage opportunities are institutionally distributed.

At the meso level, the core mechanism is translation. Organizations are not neutral wage-distribution spaces; they translate macro segmentation, occupational stratification and social evaluation standards into concrete pay outcomes. Firms and sectors shape whether similar skills and comparable jobs receive comparable rewards through pay-setting, promotion systems, performance evaluation, job allocation, bonus rules, career tracks and workplace ties (Acker, 1990). This strengthens organizational inequality and gendered organizations perspectives and sharpens the contribution to Asian business studies: GWG is not only a labour-economics or public-policy issue, but also a problem of firm-level pay governance and organizational design.

At the micro level, the core mechanism is accumulation. Education, experience and training matter, but they produce pay equality only when institutions, sectors and organizations reward similar human capital equally (Becker, 1964). Family, fertility and care responsibilities are also not isolated private constraints; they affect wage trajectories through labour supply, career continuity, sectoral sorting and delayed promotion (Eagly, 1987). Micro-level disadvantages therefore accumulate over the career life course, as early education, job entry, career interruption, promotion delay and unequal returns compound into long-term wage disadvantage.

Technology, digitalization and pandemic-related change further show that this framework is dynamic. They are not a fourth level beyond macro, meso and micro, but cross-cutting shocks that can reshape allocation, translation and accumulation simultaneously. Digital platforms, for example, may expand women's access to paid work, but may also create new wage disadvantages through platform rules, working-time structures, income volatility and lower-tail wage penalties. The framework also helps explain inconsistencies in the reviewed evidence: education may reduce GWG where returns are more equal, but have limited effects under unequal returns or strong sectoral segmentation; female representation may improve outcomes in some settings, but be offset where evaluation, bonus and promotion rules remain biased; and digitalization may either widen or narrow GWG depending on how work and pay are governed. Thus, variation in Asian GWG is not simply a matter of national difference, but reflects how allocation, translation and accumulation combine under different institutional and organizational conditions.

### ***5.3 Practical and policy implications***

The main practical implication of this review is that reducing the GWG in Asian firms requires attention to the organizational mechanisms through which wage differences are produced. Improving women's education, skills or representation remains important, but these measures are unlikely to be sufficient if pay-setting, promotion and evaluation systems continue to reward comparable work unevenly. Pay-gap diagnosis should therefore move beyond average wage comparisons and examine how job grades, pay ranges, promotion criteria, bonuses, shift allocation, task assignment and career tracks shape women's access to higher-return positions. This is particularly important in stratified sectors and professional occupations, where women may be present in the workforce but concentrated in lower-paid roles, slower promotion paths or tasks with fewer wage premiums. Firms therefore need transparent pay structures, explicit promotion pathways and regular internal pay audits to assess whether comparable qualifications, experience and responsibilities receive comparable rewards (Acker, 1990).

For policymakers, macro-level reforms need to be linked more directly to firm-level implementation. Minimum wages, employment protection, childcare provision, tax and welfare rules, union coverage and retirement systems can improve women's access to protected wage tracks, but their effects may be weakened if internal pay and promotion systems remain opaque ([International Labour Organization, 2024](#); [OECD, 2021](#)). Pay transparency and equal-pay policies should therefore not stop at average gap disclosure; they should also encourage firms to examine how pay ranges, bonuses, promotion rates, flexible work and career-track outcomes generate wage differences ([European Union, 2023](#)). Digital and flexible work require similar attention, since platform rules, working-time structures, income volatility and lower-tail wage penalties may create new forms of inequality. Overall, Asian GWG governance should shift from measuring wage gaps to governing the institutional, organizational and household-level mechanisms that produce and sustain the gaps.

## 6. Conclusion

This study conducted a PRISMA-based systematic literature review of 67 English-language Q1–Q2 journal articles on the gender wage gap in Asia, identified through the Web of Science Core Collection and supplemented by Google Scholar. It develops a macro–meso–micro integrative framework showing that the Asian gender wage gap cannot be explained by any single level alone. Rather, it emerges through the interaction of macro-level institutional structures, meso-level organizational systems and micro-level family, career and human-capital mechanisms.

Macro-level institutions and labour-market structures allocate women and men into different wage opportunities and employment tracks; meso-level firms and organizations translate these structural differences into pay, promotion and career outcomes; and micro-level family responsibilities, career interruptions and unequal human-capital returns allow disadvantages to accumulate across careers and the life course. This logic is further refined into an allocation–translation–accumulation framework, in which macro structures allocate, meso organizations translate and micro mechanisms accumulate.

The framework deepens the theoretical understanding of the Asian gender pay gap by explaining how wage inequality travels across institutional, organizational and individual levels. It also advances a business- and management-oriented research agenda by directing future studies toward firm-level pay governance, including corporate pay audits, promotion rules, performance evaluation, job allocation, bonus systems and policy implementation. Finally, the review highlights the uneven regional coverage of Asian gender wage gap research. Future studies should extend beyond the current concentration on China, India, South Korea and Japan, and develop more evidence from Southeast Asia, Central Asia, West Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries to assess whether the mechanisms identified in this review travel across different Asian institutional and business contexts.

### 6.1 Limitations and future research directions

Although this review adopts a PRISMA-based SLR to strengthen transparency and replicability, it has several limitations ([Moher et al., 2010](#)). First, the sample is restricted to English-language, open-access Q1/Q2 journal articles, which may under-represent local Asian-language research, policy reports, non-open-access studies and work not fully covered by mainstream databases. Second, using WoS as the core database improves indexing quality and screening consistency, but may still introduce database selection bias. The supplementary Google Scholar search improved coverage but cannot fully remove this limitation. Third, the review covers 2005–2025, so earlier institutional and historical evidence is not part of the main conclusions. Accordingly, the regional and thematic gaps identified in

this review should be understood as gaps within the final sample rather than definitive absences in Asian GWG scholarship.

Future research can advance this agenda in four directions. More cross-national and cross-institutional studies are needed, especially on Southeast Asia, Central Asia, West Asia and Gulf Cooperation Council countries, to examine how labour-market segmentation, wage structures, family norms and organizational pay governance jointly shape GWG across institutional contexts. Employer–employee linked data, administrative wage records and longitudinal designs would help trace women’s wage trajectories around hiring, promotion, bonus allocation, career interruption and labour-market re-entry. Firm- and organization-level studies should directly examine how pay-setting, promotion rules, performance evaluation, bonus allocation, task assignment and career-track design produce or reduce GWG. Future research should also integrate family norms, organizational systems and technological change, particularly by examining how digital platforms, flexible work and post-pandemic work arrangements reshape women’s wage returns and career continuity.

## Generative AI disclosure

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used OpenAI’s ChatGPT (GPT-5) to assist with text drafting and language refinement. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed, verified and edited the content to ensure accuracy and clarity, and take full responsibility for the integrity and originality of the final manuscript.

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## Further reading

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## Appendix. Search terms

The primary database search was conducted in the Web of Science Core Collection. The search keywords were designed to capture studies related to gender-based wage, pay, income, earnings, salary and career-penalty outcomes.

**Table A1** Web of science core collection keywords

|                             |                          |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| "gender earning difference" | "gender salary gap"      |
| "gender earning gap"        | "gender wage difference" |
| "gender income"             | "gender wage disparity"  |
| "gender income different"   | "glass ceiling"          |
| "gender pay differential"   | "men and women pay"      |
| "gender pay gap"            | "motherhood penalty"     |
| "gender pay inequality"     | "wage gap"               |
| "gender pay segregation"    | "women salary"           |

A supplementary Google Scholar search was conducted using comparable keyword combinations to identify eligible studies not captured by the Web of Science search. The following keyword combinations were used:

**Table A2** Google Scholar supplementary search keywords

|                            |                                |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| "gender wage gap Asia"     | "gender wage inequality Asia"  |
| "gender pay gap Asia"      | "gender pay inequality Asia"   |
| "gender earnings gap Asia" | "glass ceiling Asia wage"      |
| "gender income gap Asia"   | "motherhood penalty Asia wage" |

**Table A3** Screening and eligibility criteria

| <i>Screening dimension</i> | <i>Inclusion criteria</i>                                                                                                                                                           | <i>Exclusion criteria</i>                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Topic                      | The primary research focus was the empirical investigation, measurement or decomposition of the gender wage/pay/earnings/income gap between women and men                           | Studies that addressed gender inequality without a wage-, pay-, earnings-, income-, salary- or compensation-related outcome were excluded |
| Geography                  | The empirical analysis and data were situated in One or more Asian countries or regions under the regional scope used in this review                                                | Non-Asian studies and cross-country studies without sufficient Asia-specific evidence were excluded                                       |
| Study type                 | The publication presented original empirical research, including quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods research                                                                | Purely theoretical, conceptual, editorial or commentary papers were excluded                                                              |
| Publication type           | The article was a peer-reviewed journal article available via open access                                                                                                           | Books, book chapters, dissertations, working papers, conference papers, reports and non-open-access publications were excluded            |
| Language                   | The article was published in English                                                                                                                                                | Non-English publications were excluded                                                                                                    |
| Journal quality            | The article was published in a Q1 or Q2 journal according to the SJR 2024 classification                                                                                            | Articles published in Q3/Q4 journals, unranked journals or outlets without SJR classification were excluded                               |
| Related workplace themes   | Studies on glass ceiling, leadership, promotion or motherhood penalty were included only when they explicitly examined wage, pay, earnings, income, salary or compensation outcomes | Studies on glass ceiling, leadership, promotion or motherhood penalty without wage-related outcomes were excluded                         |
| Gap basis                  | The pay gap or wage-related gap was examined in relation to gender                                                                                                                  | Studies focusing only on race, ethnicity, migration status or other non-gender categories were excluded                                   |

### Supplementary data

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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