

THE ROLE OF GENDER EQUALITY IN IMPROVING ACCESS TO REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Nurhayati *, Andini Br Sembiring, Novia Syalsa Dila Seja T., Shafira Putri Cantika

Public Health Science, Public Health, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara

Golf Course No. 120, Central Village, Pancur Batu District, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra 20353, Indonesia

Email: nurhayati@uinsu.ac.id

Abstract

Gender inequality remains a persistent challenge in developing countries and has a direct impact on health development governance. This study aims to analyze the role of gender equality in improving access to reproductive health services, with a particular focus on women's autonomy, empowerment, and education. A literature review was conducted by searching for national and international articles published between 2021 and 2025 through Google Scholar, PubMed, ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink databases. Of the articles screened, 15 studies that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria were selected for the final analysis. The findings identified four major themes, with gender inequality as a structural barrier emerging as the most dominant issue, followed by the importance of reproductive health education, women's empowerment, and inclusive access to health services. The results indicate that women's autonomy in household decision-making and access to information significantly increase the utilization of maternal and reproductive health services. Conversely, patriarchal norms and male dominance continue to restrict women's reproductive health rights. In conclusion, gender equality is an essential prerequisite for achieving equitable and effective access to healthcare. Sustainable improvements in reproductive health outcomes cannot be attained solely through clinical services without addressing the root causes of gender-based inequality.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Reproductive Health Services, Women's Empowerment, Literature Review

Introduction

Reproductive health is defined as a state of overall well-being, physical, mental, and social, related to the reproductive system, reproductive functions, and reproductive processes. Reproductive health also encompasses a person's ability to lead a safe, satisfying, and responsible sexual and reproductive life, regardless of whether they suffer from disease or disability. Reproductive health also encompasses everyone's right to procreate. Maintaining reproductive health is crucial from adolescence through old age because it helps improve quality of life, prevent disease, and support the future health of mothers and children.¹

Gender equality is increasingly recognized and accepted worldwide. It is fundamental to human development, as outlined in the Millennium Development Goals, a set of goals agreed upon by countries worldwide to ensure gender equality and increase opportunities in various economic sectors. The UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, and it has been ratified by 180 countries. The Convention outlines women's rights, equality, freedom from discrimination, and equality before the law.²

After the Reformation, the central and regional governments have not fully addressed gender issues and inequalities in development. They also have not fully understood and acknowledged these issues. Civil servants, especially central and regional program planners, have a poor understanding of gender analysis. This is due to their misunderstanding of gender data, which encompasses gender issues and gender inequality.³ As a result, Indonesia's Human Development Index (HDI), Gender Development Index (GDI), and Gender Equality and Inequality Index (IKKG) all experienced a decline in 2023, each rising 0.62% from 73.77% the previous year. There is no evidence that gender inequality has decreased or increased. The global gender gap index for 2023 remained at 0.697. Out of 146 countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia ranked 87th. It is above Cambodia (92), Timor Leste (95), Brunei Darussalam (96), Malaysia (102), and Myanmar (123) (Forum, 2023, p. 18). Indonesia's 2022 gender inequality index (GSI) remained at 0.459, down 0.006 points from 2021.⁴

Method

The national method used was to collect previous literature to conduct a literature search for this study, including articles published in journals and internationally. This literature search discusses gender equality in improving access to reproductive health services. It covers decision-making about reproductive health, women's empowerment, access to reproductive health information, and utilization of these services. Google Scholar, PubMed, ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink were used to conduct the literature search. Article samples were selected based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles in Indonesian or English published between 2021 and 2025 must address the relationship between gender equality, women's empowerment, and access to reproductive health services. Conversely, duplicates, articles not fully available, and editorials were prohibited. To select the sample, inclusion and exclusion criteria were used. Article samples must be published between 2021 and 2025 in Indonesian or English and address the relationship between gender equality, women's empowerment, and access to reproductive health services. Replications, opinion pieces, editorials, or articles irrelevant to the research topic are not accepted.

Using keywords such as "gender equality," "gender equality," "women's empowerment," "reproductive health services," "gender equality and reproductive health," and "women's independence in reproductive health" are some examples of keywords used to conduct an article search. The search results produced a number of articles that were selected based on the relevance of the title, abstract, and content of the article to the research objectives. Fifteen articles that met these criteria were then selected for final analysis. One of the objectives of this study was to identify various ways in which gender equality affects access to reproductive health services. The results of this study were used to illustrate the relationship between gender equality and increased access to reproductive health services. Some of the main themes of this study were women's autonomy in health decision-making, access to information about reproductive health, partner and family support, women's economic empowerment, and utilization of reproductive health services.

Results

This study employed a literature review approach by analyzing 15 articles retrieved from Google Scholar, PubMed, ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink based on the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The selected articles were published between 2020 and 2025 and examined the relationship between gender equality, women's empowerment, and access to reproductive health services. The reviewed studies utilized various research designs, including quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method, secondary data analysis, systematic review, meta-analysis, literature review, and reproductive health education programs.

3.1 Table

Table 1 Characteristics and Main Findings of the Reviewed Articles (n = 15)

No	Author(s)	Year	Method	Main Findings
1.	Betrlilia, Sitepu, & Lestari	2024	Library Research	Gender inequality in reproductive decision-making increases the risk of unintended pregnancy, pregnancy complications, and limited access to reproductive health services. ⁵
2.	Situmeang, Aflaha, & Nanta	2023	Qualitative	Rural women are vulnerable to sexual and reproductive health threats due to gender inequality in food systems and development governance. ⁶
3.	Asriani, Samderubun, & Pangestu	2023	Participatory Qualitative Study	Limited knowledge of sexual and reproductive health rights among young women in Papua is influenced by cultural and geographical barriers, as well as the lack of culturally sensitive reproductive health services. ⁷
4.	Wulandari, Askrening, Anwar, Dolofu, & Nurmiaty	2024	Pretest-Posttest	Reproductive rights education improved women's knowledge of reproductive health. ⁸
5.	Winarti	2025	Literature Review	Patriarchal culture, early marriage, and male dominance are major factors contributing to women's limited access to reproductive health services. ⁹
6.	Damayanti et al.	2023	Mixed Method	Utilization of reproductive health services increases when gender equality is present in family decision-making processes. ¹⁰
7.	Pramiswari, Erviantono, & Novi	2023	Descriptive Qualitative	Public health services have implemented gender equality principles through equal access, participation, control, and benefits. ¹¹
8.	Wulandari, Farahdiansari, Swasanti, & Septian	2025	Socialization and Mentoring Program	Gender-based sexual health education improved adolescent girls' understanding of gender equality and reproductive health. ¹²
9.	Herwansyah, Oktoviani, Sari, & Senkham	2025	Descriptive Qualitative	Gender inequality continues to hinder women's access to reproductive health services due to the influence of partners, families, social norms, and patriarchal culture. ¹³
10.	Kareem et al.	2021	Secondary Data Analysis	Gender equality is associated with increased utilization of maternal and reproductive health services. ¹⁴

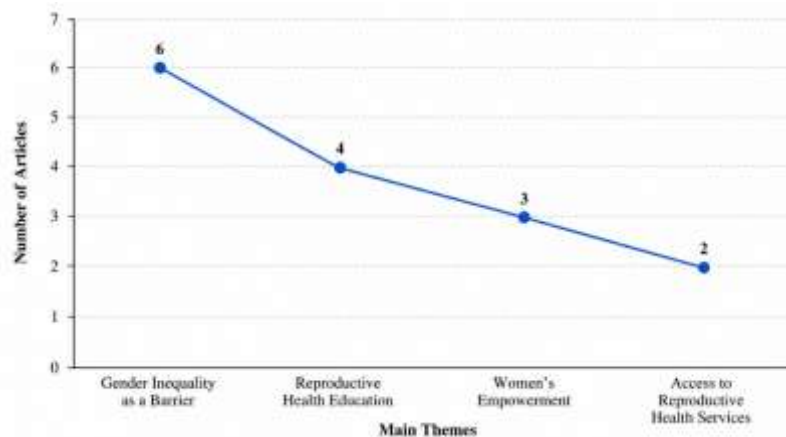
11.	Rahmadhani	2024	Descriptive Qualitative	Gender inequality restricts women's decision-making power and limits access to reproductive health services. ¹⁵
12.	Shibre et al.	2021	Meta-analysis	Women's empowerment increases antenatal care utilization and access to reproductive health services.
13.	Vizheh et al.	2021	Systematic Review	Decision-making autonomy and spousal communication influence women's access to reproductive health services. ¹⁶
14.	Listiana et al.	2025	Health Education Program	Adolescents' knowledge of reproductive health and gender issues improved after educational interventions. ¹⁷
15.	Parmawati, Nisman, Lismidiati, & Mulyani	2020	Quantitative	Gender equality-based reproductive health education significantly improved adolescents' knowledge, attitudes, and sexual self-efficacy. ¹⁸

Based on Table 1, all reviewed articles reported a relationship between gender equality and access to reproductive health services. Several studies found that women's autonomy in reproductive health decision-making was associated with improved access to reproductive health services (Betrilia et al., 2024; Damayanti et al., 2023; Vizheh et al., 2021; Rahmadhani, 2024; Herwansyah et al., 2025). The findings also indicate that access to reproductive health information and educational interventions contributes to increased knowledge and awareness of reproductive health and gender equality among women and adolescents (Asriani et al., 2023; Wulandari et al., 2024; Wulandari et al., 2025; Listiana et al., 2025; Parmawati et al., 2020). Furthermore, several studies reported that women's empowerment and gender equality were associated with greater utilization of reproductive and maternal health services (Kareem et al., 2021; Shibre et al., 2021). Several articles identified patriarchal culture, male dominance in household decision-making, social stigma, and limited access to information as persistent barriers to women's utilization of reproductive health services (Situmeang et al., 2023; Winarti, 2025; Herwansyah et al., 2025; Rahmadhani, 2024). In contrast, the implementation of gender equality principles within health services was reported to improve access, participation, control, and benefits received by communities (Pramiswari et al., 2023).

3.2 Graphics/Images

Based on Figure 1, the theme of gender inequality as a barrier was the most frequently identified theme in the reviewed articles, appearing in 6 articles. This finding indicates that gender inequality remains a major issue affecting women's reproductive health whether in terms of access to health services, decision-making, or the fulfillment of reproductive rights. Next, the theme of reproductive health education ranked second with 4 articles. This indicates that reproductive health education is one of the most widely used strategies to improve public knowledge, awareness, and behavior regarding reproductive health.

Additionally, the theme of women's empowerment was found in 3 articles. Women's empowerment is viewed as a crucial effort to enhance women's capacity to actively participate in and make decisions regarding their reproductive health. Meanwhile, the theme of access to reproductive health services was found in only 2 articles, making it the least-discussed theme. Nevertheless, access to reproductive health services remains a crucial factor in supporting the achievement of optimal reproductive health for women. Overall, the analysis results show that the issue of gender inequality still dominates the discussion in the literature, followed by educational efforts, women's empowerment, and improving access to health services.



Graph.1 Distribution of Main Themes in the Reviewed Articles

Based on the graph, it can be concluded that the issue of gender inequality remains a major concern in reproductive health research. In addition, reproductive health education and women's empowerment are also important factors that support improved, equitable, and inclusive access to reproductive health services.

Discussion

The findings of this literature review show that gender equality has a strong relationship with improved access to reproductive health services. This finding is consistent with the understanding that reproductive health is not only related to biological aspects, but also concerns rights, autonomy in decision-making, access to information, and women's bargaining position within the family and society. In the Indonesian context, barriers to access to reproductive health services are still influenced by cultural norms, gender bias, and an unequal distribution of power, so women often do not have full freedom to determine their own health needs.¹⁹

This result is also consistent with the review findings that gender inequality is the most dominant theme, indicating that gender injustice is still a major issue in reproductive health. Patriarchal dominance in family decision-making is one of the main factors that weakens women's access to reproductive health services, especially when decisions about contraception, antenatal care, and the use of health services are more often determined by partners or family members. This condition shows that limited access is not solely caused by individual factors, but is more strongly influenced by an unequal social structure.²⁰

In addition, gender equality-based reproductive health education plays an important role in improving the knowledge, attitudes, and courage of women and adolescents to make healthier and more independent decisions. Such education is an effective preventive strategy because it can broaden understanding of reproductive rights, health risks, and the importance of communication within the family regarding sexual and reproductive health. In many cases, low knowledge causes women to be unaware that the access limitations they experience are part of gender injustice, rather than merely an individual problem.²¹

Women's empowerment also emerges as an important factor supporting access to reproductive health services. Women who have economic independence, adequate knowledge, and social support tend to be more able to utilize health services optimally, including antenatal care, family planning counseling, and maternal health services. This shows that empowerment does not only increase

women's control over their bodies and health, but also expands their ability to face structural barriers originating from the family, social environment, and health service institutions.²²

On the other hand, the application of gender equality principles in health service facilities can improve access, participation, control, and the benefits of services for the community. This means that gender-responsive health services are not only about providing physical facilities, but also about ensuring that information, counseling, and decision-making are carried out fairly and without discrimination. If these principles are applied consistently, reproductive health services can become more inclusive, especially for women in rural areas, adolescent girls, and other vulnerable groups who often experience limited access.²³

Overall, this discussion confirms that gender equality is an essential prerequisite for creating fair and effective access to reproductive health care. When women have autonomy, knowledge, family support, and equal opportunities, the use of reproductive health services tends to increase and health outcomes become better. Therefore, interventions that only focus on health services without addressing the root causes of gender inequality will be less effective in producing sustainable change.²⁴

Conclusion

Gender equality plays a crucial role in creating more equitable access to reproductive health services. Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that reproductive health issues are not only influenced by the availability of health facilities but are also closely related to social and cultural conditions and power relations that influence a person's ability to make decisions about their health. When women have equal opportunities to obtain information, make choices, and participate in health decision-making, utilization of reproductive health services tends to increase.

Gender inequality remains a major factor limiting the fulfillment of women's reproductive health rights. Social norms, patriarchal culture, dominant decision-making by partners or families, and limited access to health education can hinder women from obtaining the services they need. These conditions demonstrate that improving the quality of reproductive health services requires more than just medical care; they also require changes to the structural factors that contribute to inequality. Women's empowerment is one approach that can strengthen women's ability to manage their reproductive health. Women with adequate knowledge, independence, and social support are better able to understand their rights and utilize health services appropriately. Furthermore, gender-equality-based reproductive health education can be a crucial strategy for increasing public understanding, particularly among adolescents and women, of the importance of maintaining reproductive health and fostering more balanced decision-making patterns.

Based on these findings, it is clear that gender equality is an integral component of efforts to improve reproductive health. An effective reproductive health concept requires viewing women not merely as recipients of services, but as individuals with rights, abilities, and an active role in determining their own health needs. Therefore, an approach that combines health services, education, empowerment, and changes in social norms is a more sustainable step in increasing access to reproductive health services. The implications of this study indicate that the government, health workers, families, and communities have a shared role in creating an environment that supports gender equality. Efforts to improve reproductive health services need to be directed toward services that are inclusive, free from discrimination, and able to reach groups that still experience limited access. By strengthening gender equality, improving reproductive health not only impacts individual women but also contributes to the quality of family health and overall community development.

With gender equality, women have greater opportunities to actively participate in maintaining reproductive health and improving their quality of life. Implementing gender equality principles in

reproductive health services is expected to reduce barriers to access, strengthen women's independence, and support the achievement of more equitable and sustainable health development.

References

- [1] Setiawati, D., Ulfa, L., & Kridawati, A. (2022). The influence of health education on knowledge about reproductive health. *Journal for a Healthy Society (JUKMAS)*, 6(1), 80-84.
- [2] Cameron L. Gender Equality and Development: Indonesia in a Global Context. *Bull Indones Econ Stud.* 2023;59(2):179-207.
- [3] Nurdin N. Gender Analysis in Regional Development Planning in Indonesia. *Journal of Public Administration.* 2022;18(2):145-158.
- [4] Statistics Indonesia. Gender Inequality Index 2023. Jakarta, Indonesia: Statistics Indonesia; 2023.
- [5] Betrilia NA, Sitepu S, Lestatika DP. Gender gaps in reproductive health decision-making: impact on women's welfare. *J Public Policy Law Studies.* 2024;2(1):475-479.
- [6] Situmeang WH, Aflaha FR, Nanta WR. Fulfillment of reproductive and sexual health rights in the context of fragile community food systems in rural Indonesia. *J Women.* 2023;28(1):11-23.
- [7] Asriani DD, Samderubun G, Pangestu EW. Fulfillment of reproductive and sexual health rights of young Papuan women from a gender equality perspective. *J Women.* 2023;28(1):61-72.
- [8] Wulandari, S., & Listiana, N. (2024). Rights-based and gender-equality-based adolescent reproductive health education. *Journal of Health Promotion*, 12(1), 34-42.
- [9] Karwuni K, Winarti E. Reproductive Health Risks of Asmat Women in Socio-Cultural Practices: Literature Review. *Tambusai Health Journal.* 2025;6(3)
- [10] Damayanti, A., et al. 2023. Gender Equality in Decision-Making on Health Service Utilization in Urban and Rural Areas, Indonesia., "Journal of Health Management and Policy."
- [11] Pramiswari AAAI, Erviantono T, Novi NWR. Gender equality and public health service policy. *J Peneler Pengembuhan Sains Humaniora.* 2023;7(2):172-183.
- [12] Wulandari S, Farahdiansari AP, Swasanti I, Septian E. Sexual health mentoring and education from a gender perspective for adolescent girls in Mojoagung Village. *J Mandala Pengabdian Masyarakat.* 2025;6(1):412-423.
- [13] Herwansyah H, et al. Public health students' perspectives on gender inequities in access to adolescent reproductive health in Indonesia. Published online 2025.
- [14] Kareem, A. O., & Shibre, G. (2021). Women's empowerment and its autonomy in reproductive health decision-making. *BMC Women's Health*, 21(3), 180-192.
- [15] Rahmadhani AP. Gender and health justice: the impact of gender disparities on health care access in Indonesia. Published online 2024.
- [16] Shibre G, Zegeye B, Yeboah H, Bisjawit G, Ameyaw EK, Yaya S. Women's empowerment and uptake of antenatal care services: a meta-analysis of demographic and health surveys from 33 Sub-Saharan African countries. *Arch Public Health.* 2021;79(1):87.
- [17] Vizheh M, Muhidin S, Moghadam ZB, Zareiyan A. Women's empowerment in reproductive health: a systematic review of measurement properties. *BMC Womens Health.* 2021;21(1):425.
- [18] Listiana I, Safitri FK, Fatah FA, Sari GAN, Robo RM, Lufthansa SA, et al. Counseling on adolescent-focused health services (PKPR) in addressing reproductive and gender health challenges among adolescents at the Darunnajah 8 Cidokom Islamic Boarding School. In: *Proceedings of the Semlitmas (Seminar on Research and Community Service Results).* 2025;2(1):245-253.
- [19] Parmawati I, et al. Efforts to reduce premarital sexual activity through gender equality-based reproductive health education. Published online 2020.

- [20] Chotim EE. Gender equality and women's empowerment in Indonesia: the desire and necessity of a pragmatic approach (a study of Cirebon Home Made SMEs). *Acceleration of J Ilm Nas*. 2020;2(1):70-82.
- [21] Kusuma, A. P. 2025. "Reproductive Health and Rights in Indonesia: Navigating Between Morality and Autonomy." "Contemporary Issues on Indonesian Human Rights Law and Policy," 2(1).
- [22] Wulandari, S., & Listiana, N. (2024). Rights-Based and Gender Equality-Based Adolescent Reproductive Health Education. *Journal of Health Promotion*, 12(1), 34-42.
- [23] Pramiswari, N. P. A., & Winarti, N. W. (2023). Socio-Cultural Barriers and Gender Equality in Family Planning Services. *Journal of Midwifery*, 11(2), 98-107.
- [24] Damayanti, A., et al. 2023. Gender Equality in Decision-Making on Health Service Utilization in Urban and Rural Areas, Indonesia., "Journal of Health Management and Policy".