Research Article

Gendered Dimensions of Architectural Practice in The Developing World: Exploring the Role and Representation of Women in Architecture

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Abstract

This study examines the gendered aspects of architectural practice in developing world, focusing on the roles, experiences, and representation of women in the profession. Despite an increase in the number of women enrolments into architectural education and practice worldwide, female architects in many developing countries continue to encounter systemic barriers that hinder their full participation and advancement. Using a multi-case qualitative methodology, this study examines empirical data from Nigeria, India, and Kenya—three culturally varied but equally challenged contexts in the global South. Through interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, the study explores the intersecting institutional, socio-cultural, and economic constraints that limit women's visibility, influence, and leadership opportunities within architectural practice. The findings demonstrate deeply entrenched gender biases in architecture education, exclusionary practices and discriminatory behaviour inside architectural firms, and persistent challenges related to work-life balance and domestic expectations. Furthermore, the lack of effective mentorship structures, supportive policies, and inclusive professional networks exacerbates women's marginalization in the sector. The study highlights how these factors collectively sustain male-dominated professional hierarchies and contribute to women's underrepresentation in senior and decision-making roles. In response, the article proposes a paradigm shift toward more inclusive, gender-sensitive frameworks in architectural education, professional licensing processes, and institutional policies. It emphasizes the importance of deconstructing patriarchal norms embedded in the profession and to create supportive environments that empower women architects. By documenting lived experiences, institutional critiques, and significant success stories of female practitioners, this study adds to the expanding body of scholarship advocating for transformative change in architecture. Finally, it aims to contribute to academic discourse and policy initiatives targeted at promoting gender equity and professional justice in architecture across the global South.

Keywords: Women in Architecture, Developing World, Architectural Profession, Gender Equity, Nigeria, Architectural Education and Inclusive Design.

1. Introduction

Gender asymmetry has long existed in the architectural profession, with men dominating involvement and leadership while women are relegated to the peripheries of practice. Although global discourses on gender equity have made notable strides in recent decades, the profession remains structurally and culturally skewed, particularly in the developing world. Women pursuing careers in architecture face a variety of challenges across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, ranging from established patriarchal norms and socio-cultural expectations to systemic barriers in education, licensing, and firm-level advancement. These challenges are often exacerbated by broader economic inequities, poor policy support, and limited access to mentorship and professional networks, all of which severely impede women's career advancement in architecture. In many developing countries, architecture is more than just a technical profession; it is a deeply social and cultural endeavour, linked to ideas of identity, authority, and spatial expression. Within this framework, the marginalization of women architects has implications that go beyond gender inequality in the workplace it reflects deeper societal hierachies and impacts the built environment in ways that may neglect inclusivity, equity, and diverse user needs. As a result, the presence or absence of women in architectural leadership has a tremendous impact on the types of spaces designed, the narratives embedded in urban and rural form, and the priorities

Citation: Ahmad, H. A., Abdullahi, A, J. (2026). Gendered Dimensions of Architectural Practice in The Developing World: Exploring the Role and Representation of Women in Architecture. *CME J Clin Case Rep, 3*(1), 1-8.

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reflected in the built environment. This study explores these gendered dynamics by focusing on women's roles, experiences, and strategies in architectural practice in the global South. Nigeria is selected as the key case study due to its vibrant architectural heritage, rapidly urbanizing landscape, and complex interplay between modernism and traditional gender relations. Supplementary insights from India and Kenya give comparative perspectives that help contextualize shared and divergent experiences across regions with similar socio-economic conditions and postcolonial trajectories.

The paper addresses numerous critical questions: Why are women persistently underrepresented in architectural leadership across the developing world? What structural and cultural impediments exist within educational institutions, professional licensing systems, and the organizational cultures of architectural firms? In what ways do women architects contribute uniquely to the advancement of spatial justice, gender-sensitive design, and community-responsive architectural solutions? These questions are examined through a gender lens, which places architectural practice within broader discourses of equity, development, and social transformation. Finally, the study contends that women's inclusion in architecture must be viewed as a basic issue of professional justice and cultural evolution, rather than just numerical representation. This article contributes to to the expanding field of gender and built environment studies by examining how women navigate and contest structural constraints, build alternative networks, and shape architectural practice in a diverse of innovative ways. It advocates for a reimagining of architectural education, policy frameworks, and institutional cultures in the global South in order to move the profession forward in a more inclusive and equitable manner.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Gender and Architecture: Global and Historical Perspectives
Architecture, as a professional and creative discipline, has long been shaped by patriarchal norms that influence both who designs and whose needs are prioritized in built environments From early architectural history to the modernist era, women's contributions were often invisible or devalued, while male architects dominated professional accolades and institutional recognition. In global contexts, feminist architectural theory has attempted to interrogate the gendered dimensions of space, practice, and authorship, exposing biases in spatial production and design pedagogy. Over the last two decades, significant efforts have been undertaken to integrate gender perspectives into architectural discourse, particularly in Western contexts. Gender inclusion in architecture, on the other hand, remains uneven and under-theorized in the Global South, often overshadowed by larger developmental challenges [1-4].

2.2. Women in Architecture in The Developing World
In many developing countries, women face compounded challenges in accessing architectural education and professional networks. These challenges are not just institutional, but also influenced by socio-cultural expectations around gender roles, domestic labour, and mobility. According to studies in Nigeria, while more women are enrolling in architectural programs, few advances to positions of firm leadership or public recognition. This gap reflects larger systemic concerns with professional licensing, mentorship access, and gender bias in client and firm relationships. Comparative study from India and Kenya reveals similar patterns. Indian female architects often face conservative gender norms and firm hierarchies that limit their creative freedom and opportunities. In Kenya, women in architecture face considerable barriers to site-based employment, which is often considered too physically or socially risky for women [5-7].

2.3. Structural Barriers in Education and Professional Advancement
The gender inequality in architecture is often reinforced at the level of design education. Gender-sensitive design practices are often ignored in curricula, and women architects are underrepresented in architectural history and theory courses. Gender-coded assumptions about women's availability, leadership potential, and technical ability also influence architectural internships and entry-level positions. Many developing countries' professional organizations lack gender-sensitive policies or mentorship platforms to support women achieve licensure and firm ownership . According to a 2021 study by the Nigerian Institute of Architects (NIA), women account for less than 10% of registered architects in Nigeria, despite nearly equal representation at the student level [8].

2.4. Feminist Spatial Practice and Inclusive Design
Feminist spatial practice offers a valuable framework for understanding how female architects challenge prevailing spatial paradigms. Women often bring alternative perspectives to the built environment that are more responsive to social justice concerns. In developing contexts, women-led architectures has been instrumental in advancing participatory housing, gender-sensitive public infrastructure, and child-friendly environments. These interventions highlight women's capacity to shape equitable urban futures, particularly in fast urbanizing cities in Africa and South Asia.

2.5. Gaps in Literature and Rationale for This Study
While existing literature has begun to document women's presence and contributions in architecture, few studies offer a thorough, cross-regional analysis grounded in the everyday experiences of female professionals in developing world. There remains a lack of empirical data and scholarly engagement with how women navigate institutional, cultural, and professional systems within specific national contexts like Nigeria, Kenya, and India This study aims to fill this gap by examining gendered architectural practice through structural analysis and the lived experiences of female architects. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of gender-sensitive architectural scholarship in the Global South.

3. Methodology
3.1. Research Design
This study employs a qualitative multi-case research design, suitable for exploring the varied, contextual experiences of women in architectural profession across diverse cultural settings. The goal is to identify patterns, barriers, and transformative strategies in the professional lives of women architects in developing countries, specifically Nigeria, Kenya, and India. These countries were chosen because of their growing architecture sectors, active female professional bodies, and regional relevance. The study employed a mixed-methods approach combining semi-structured interviews, institutional data review, and participatory observation. This triangulation ensures reliability while also capturing macro-level trends and micro-level experiences.

3.2. Study Locations
The research focused on three countries representing different sub-regions in the developing world

Country	City/Region Studied	Justification
Nigeria	Lagos & Abuja	Major urban centers with active architectural practice and schools of architecture
Kenya	Nairobi & Kisumu	Rapidly urbanizing cities with documented challenges for women professionals
India	Delhi & Mumbai	Diverse cultural landscape with contrast between tradition and modernity

Table 1: Study Locations and Rationale for Selection

3.3. Data Collection Instruments
3.3.1. Interviews
3.3.1.1. ParticipantDemographics
The study sample comprised of 30 female architects aged 25 to 60 from three developing countries: Nigeria, India, and Kenya. These participants were selected using purposive sampling because of their active involvement in the profession and membership in national architectural associations (NIA, COA, AAK). Table 1 and Figure 1 present a summary of the respondents' demographic characteristics. The majority were mid-career professionals aged 35-44, with a strong representation from Nigeria. The majority held a bachelor's degree in architecture, with 40% having obtained postgraduate qualification. Employment was primarily within private architectural firms, although notable representation from public and academic sectors also existed. Only 20% held leadership positions, highlighting the gender gap in higher-rankingl positions. These demographics provide background for examining the gendered barriers and opportunities faced by women in architectural practice across the three regions.

3.3.1.2. Document Analysis
This study incorporated document analysis as a qualitative data source to supplement interview results and provide institutional context. A diverse range of textual documents were reviewed, including policy frameworks from national architect registration boards such as the Nigerian Institute of Architects (NIA), the Council of Architecture India (COA), and the Architectural Association of Kenya (AAK). These texts were selected based on their relevance to professional regulation, gender inclusivityn mandates, and institutional governance structures.

Variable	Category	Number of Respondents (n = 30)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	25–34 years	10	33.3%
	35–44 years	12	40.0%
	45–60 years	8	26.7%
Country	Nigeria	12	40.0%
	India	10	33.3%
	Kenya	8	26.7%
Highest Qualification	Bachelor's Degree in Architecture	18	60.0%
	Master's Degree or Higher	12	40.0%
Professional Experience	Less than 10 years	10	33.3%
	10–20 years	12	40.0%
	Over 20 years	8	26.7%
Employment Setting	Private Architectural Firms	18	60.0%
	Government/Public Sector	7	23.3%
	Academia/Research Institutions	5	16.7%

Leadership Position	Currently in leadership (Partner/ Director)	6	20.0%
	Mid-level/Team lead	10	33.3%
	Entry-level or Junior Architect	14	46.7%

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic coding was conducted using NVivo 12 software to systematically analyze interview transcripts. Responses were organized into six core themes: access to education, workplace discrimination, leadership roles, gender-inclusive design, work-life balance, and institutional support. This coding framework enabled the identification of recurring trends and deeper insights into the gendered experiences of female architects. Emergent themes were then analyzed comparatively across the three countries to extract both convergences and divergences [9].

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines provided by the Nigerian Research Ethics Committee and institutional partners in Kenya and India. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and data was anonymized during transcription.

3.6. Limitations

• Accessibility to certain older or retired female architects was limited due to relocation or retirement.

• Language barriers and socio-cultural norms affected interview depth in some regions.
• Quantitative correlation (e.g., salaries, project leads) was not pursued due to lack of standard public data across regions.
• Despite these limitations, the study offers rich, triangulated insight into the lived realities of women in architecture within three critical developing world contexts.

4. Results and Analysis

This section presents the empirical study's findings, organized around key themes that emerged from interviews, document analysis, and observations. A cross-country comparative perspective is used to identify common issues and context-specific experiences among female architects in Nigeria, Kenya, and India [10].

4.1. Gender Representation in Architecture

Across all three countries, institutional data revealed a high enrollment rate of women in architectural schools, but a significant drop-off post-graduation, particularly in leadership and firm ownership.

Country	% Women in Architecture Schools	% Women Registered Architects	% Women in Leadership Roles
Nigeria	48%	18%	6%
Kenya	45%	22%	7%
India	43%	19%	5%

Table 3: Gender Representation in Architectural Education and Practice

Table 2: Gender participation across academic, professional, and leadership levels (2021–2023 data)

Key Observation: While nearly half of all architecture students are women, less than 10% occupy leadership roles (e.g., firm principals, university deans, or association executives), indicating systemic attrition.

4.2. Barriers to Advancement

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Perceived Barrier                  | % of Respondents Affected

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Gender Bias in Hiring and Promotion     | ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■ 70%

Lack of Mentorship                      | ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■ 65%

Work-Life Balance / Domestic Expectations | ■■■■■■■■■■■■■ 55%

Limited Access to Leadership Positions  | ■■■■■■■■■■■ 45%

Harassment or Disrespect on Site        | ■■■■■■■■ 35%
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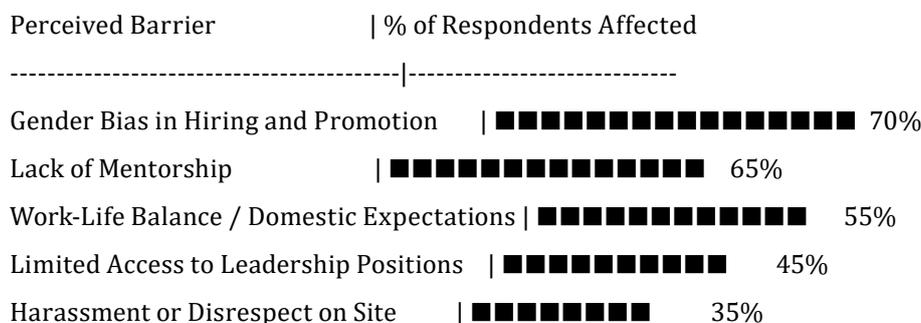
Figure 1: Reported Barriers Among Female Architects Based on Interviews

The five major themes identified (see Figure 2) were consistently echoed in the narratives of the respondents. Illustrative quotes supporting each theme are provided in Table 3. For example, one architect noted, "*I was assigned only decoration jobs, not structural work-simply because I was the only woman in the office*" (Table 3, Workplace Discrimination), reinforcing the visual theme depicted in Figure 2.
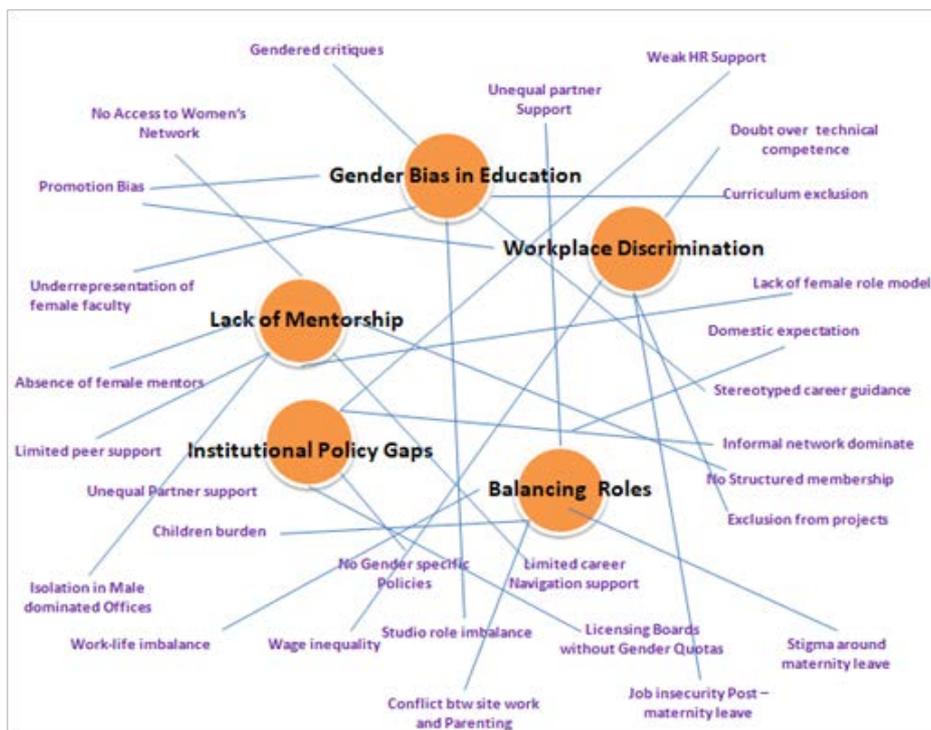

Figure 2: Thematic Map Gendered Barriers in Architecture, Showing Key Challenges Identified by Female Architects in Nigeria, India, And Kenya. These Barriers Emerged from Qualitative Interviews With 30 Female Architects and Are Categorized Under Five Primary Themes

Theme	Illustrative Quote
Gender Bias in Education	"During my studies, male students were often encouraged to take lead roles in design presentations, while female students were asked to handle supporting tasks."
Workplace Discrimination	"Despite having similar qualifications and experience, I was overlooked for a senior project because the client wanted a 'male presence' in meetings."
Lack of Mentorship	"It's difficult to find senior women in architecture firms who can mentor us. Most of the leadership positions are occupied by men."
Balancing Roles	"I constantly struggle to balance my professional life with family responsibilities, especially since architectural deadlines often require working late."
Policy and Institutional Gaps	"There are no clear policies in my firm addressing gender equality. Promotions and leadership selections are still based on old boys' networks."
Leadership Aspirations	"I aspire to lead my own firm someday, but I often feel discouraged by the lack of visible female role models in top positions."
Mentorship and Support Networks	"Participating in a women architects' forum helped me realize I wasn't alone in facing these challenges, and it provided much-needed encouragement."
Contribution to Spatial Justice	"As a female architect, I always consider the safety and comfort of women and children in the spaces I design, which is often overlooked."

Table 4: Illustrative Quotes by Theme

4.3. Thematic Analysis of Interview Data
4.3.1. Institutional Support & Mentorship
While some architecture schools (such as the University of Lagos and the University of Nairobi) have implemented mentorship programs, these initiatives are underfunded and lack rigorous evaluation metrics. Many female architects indicated they had no female mentors throughout their education or early career [11].

4.3.2. Workplace Culture
Firms were commonly referred to as "old boys' clubs." Hiring practices prioritized male graduates for field-based tasks, while women were assigned to interior, paperwork, or liaison roles, which were frequently viewed as less prestigious.

4.3.3. Career Mobility
In Nigeria and India, women reported stagnation mid-career due to pregnancy, lack of childcare support, and pressure to exit the profession. In Kenya, younger women in urban areas are increasingly resisting these patterns by creating all-female design collectives and studios.

4.4. Case Examples of Women-Centered Innovation
Despite barriers, some women architects have redefined practice by focusing on community engagement, culturally inclusive design, and social advocacy.

Architect	Country	Project Focus	Impact
Tosin Oshinowo	Nigeria	Modular housing, displaced communities	Won international acclaim for housing innovation post-Boko Haram
Kavita Singh	India	Heritage restoration, gender-inclusive spaces	Blends feminist theory with conservation
Wambui Gatabaki	Kenya	Urban sanitation for informal settlements	Improved hygiene access for 15,000+ women

Table 5: Notable Female Architects Advancing Inclusive Practice in The Global South These Professionals Challenge the Notion That Architecture Is Purely Technicalby Foregrounding Equity, Identity, And Access, They Shape A More Socially Attuned Practice.

4.5. Cross Country Comparative Insights

Theme	Nigeria	India	Kenya
Access to Architectural Education	Increasing, but cultural biases still limit female enrollment in some regions.	Relatively high enrollment, but male dominance in advanced technical courses.	Improving access, but rural areas remain challenging for female participation.
Gender Bias in Firms	Predominantly male-led firms; gender bias common in project assignments.	Traditional hierarchies persist, with women often excluded from site-based roles.	Better gender integration in younger firms, but leadership remains male-dominated.
Leadership Opportunities	Very few female principals or partners; leadership pipelines are weak.	Women face barriers progressing beyond middle management.	Growing number of female-led firms, but numbers remain low overall.
Field/Construction Access	Restricted	Restricted due to safety and social norms	Very restricted
Mentorship Availability	Very limited; professional bodies lack structured mentorship programs.	Informal mentorship exists, but not institutionally supported.	Emerging mentorship networks driven by professional associations.
Emergent Women Movements	Strong in Lagos, Abuja	Growing, especially in New Delhi	Nairobi-based women-led firms
Policy Support	National gender policies exist but are poorly implemented in architecture firms.	Some government policies encourage female leadership, but implementation is inconsistent.	More progressive professional associations promoting gender equity, though impact varies.
Balancing Professional and Domestic Roles	Significant challenge due to strong cultural expectations on women.	Urban women report better work-life balance options; rural counterparts face steep challenges.	Mixed experiences, with increasing workplace flexibility in urban centers.

Table 6: Comparative Summary of Key Findings

5. Discussion

While all three countries—Nigeria, India, and Kenya—have structural and institutional barriers to women within the architectural profession, a visible and dynamic shift is developing, particularly in urban areas. In cities like Lagos, Nairobi, and Mumbai, younger generations of female architects are no longer passively accepting patriarchal norms. Instead, they are actively challenging traditional constraints by fostering new models of engagement, professional organization, and advocacy. One of the most prominent manifestations of this resistance is the establishment of women-led design alliances and networks. These collectives offer a forum for mentorship, resource sharing, and joint project execution, opening up new paths to professional achievement outside of male-dominated firm structures. Such alliances not only empower individuals but also challenge the broader cultural narrative that architecture is a male domain.

Furthermore, women architects are becoming more interested in advocating inclusive architectural education. In Nigeria, for example, some female academics are revising design curricula to incorporate gender-sensitive approaches and inclusive spatial planning principles. Similar efforts are observed in India and Kenya, where female educators are advocating for pedagogies that address the social, psychological, and cultural needs of marginalized users, especially women and children in urban settlements. Moreover, urban female architects are becoming more vocal in public discourse on gender equity in the built environment. They raise awareness about the gendered effects of spatial exclusion through public lectures, media engagements, podcasts, and social media campaigns, as well as pushing for policies that promote equitable design. These public engagement are not restricted to elite professional circles but are increasingly connecting architecture to broader movements for gender justice, urban reform, and inclusive city-making. It is vital to stress that urban resistance is shaped by access to global networks, digital tools, and education, which are sometimes limited in rural or traditionally conservative contexts. As a result, while the growth of feminist and inclusive design practices in urban areas signals progress, it also reveals a geographic and class-based divide in the pace of change. Overall, this trend represents not just adaptation, but strategic transformation of professional practice. Women architects are reimagining architecture as a socially responsible and gender-conscious discipline in the global South, as well as negotiating space within existing structures [12-15].

5.1 Conclusion and Recommendations
5.1.1 Conclusion

This study explored the professional landscapes of women architects in Nigeria, Kenya, and India, three key developing countries. The findings demonstrate persisting gender discrepancies in architectural education, professional advancement, and leadership positions. Despite nearly equal enrollment in architecture schools, women are underrepresented in firm leadership, sidelined in construction roles, and excluded from decision-making platforms.

Barriers like as gender-biased hiring practices, limited mentorship opportunities, and cultural expectations about marriage and motherhood have a significant influence on female architects' career pathways. However, an increasing number of female professionals are resisting traditional constraints and reshaping architecture through inclusive, community-responsive, and equity-driven practices. This research underscores the need for systemic reform within institutions, firms, and educational structures to ensure a truly inclusive and equitable architectural profession in the global South.

5.2. Recommendations

To advance gender equity in architectural practice in the developing world, the following recommendations are proposed

Policy Reform

National architectural associations (e.g., NIA, COA, AAK) should adopt gender equity charters mandating equal opportunities, anti-discrimination frameworks, and maternity support policies.Architectural firms should undergo periodic gender audits to evaluate inclusivity in hiring, promotion, and leadership structures.

Mentorship and Support Networks

• Establish structured mentorship programs connecting female students and early-career architects with senior women professionals.
• Encourage peer support networks and collaborative platforms that highlight and celebrate women-led design practices.

Curriculum Inclusion

• Integrate gender studies, feminist spatial theory, and inclusive design into architecture curricula.
• Include women architects in architectural history and theory syllabi to counteract epistemic erasure.

Media and Advocacy

• Use architectural magazines, exhibitions, and conferences to showcase the contributions of women in architecture.
• Encourage the formation of women's collectives and forums to amplify voices and lobby for institutional change.

Cross-Regional Collaboration

• Promote partnerships between architectural institutions across the Global South to exchange strategies for advancing gender equity.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

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Volume - 3 Issue - 1

Citation: Ahmad, H. A., Abdullahi, A, J. (2026). Gendered Dimensions of Architectural Practice in The Developing World: Exploring the Role and Representation of Women in Architecture. *CME J Clin Case Rep, 3*(1), 1-8.

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