

Advancing Equity Through Artificial Intelligence: Insights from U.S. Youth and Women Public Policies

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Abstract: Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming more visible in public policy and public administration in the United States. Federal agencies are using or testing AI for data analysis, program operations, research, and service delivery, while state and local governments are also confronting questions about automated decision-making. This paper looks at what these developments mean for policies affecting youth and women, with examples from education, workforce development, employment, healthcare, and social services. AI can help public institutions identify needs earlier, use information more effectively, and improve access to some services. At the same time, systems built on incomplete or unequal data can reproduce existing disparities. The paper argues that the impact of AI depends less on the technology alone and more on how it is designed, used, monitored, and governed. U.S. examples show the need for practical safeguards, including transparency, bias review, human oversight, public participation, and clear ways to challenge decisions. International frameworks are used selectively to place the U.S. experience in a broader context.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Public Policy, Youth, Women, Equity, AI Governance

Introduction

AI is becoming a significant force in shaping public policy across the United States. Federal agencies are increasingly exploring and using AI tools to analyze large amounts of data, support government operations, and improve public services. A U.S. Government Accountability Office review found that 20 of 23 federal agencies reported about 1,200 current and planned AI use cases, although only about 200 were already in use at the time of the review (U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), 2023). Earlier research on federal administrative agencies also showed that AI was beginning to affect areas such as enforcement, adjudication, monitoring, and the management of public programs (Engstrom et al., 2020).

Many policymakers and technology experts see these tools as an opportunity to make government programs more efficient, data-driven, and responsive. At the same time, there are concerns that AI systems can reflect inequalities that already exist in society and, in some cases, make them worse. These concerns are particularly important for policies affecting youth and women, two groups that can face barriers in access to education, employment, healthcare, representation, and public services. As AI becomes more integrated into these policy areas, an important question arises: can these technologies help reduce existing gaps, or could they make them wider?

This paper focuses specifically on the United States and looks at how AI and algorithmic decision-making are entering public-policy systems that affect youth and women. It draws mainly on U.S. federal, state, and local policy sources and examples. International frameworks are included where they help explain broader questions of fairness, transparency, and responsible AI. The paper argues that AI is not automatically neutral. Its social impact depends largely on how it is designed, implemented, governed, and monitored.

Conceptual Framework: Equity, Algorithmic Governance, and Inclusive Policy Making

Equity is an important principle in public policy because treating everyone in the same way does not necessarily produce fair outcomes. Social equity asks public institutions to consider differences in need, access, and historical disadvantage when policies and public programs are designed and implemented (Frederickson, 2010). For youth and women, these differences may be connected to age, gender, race, disability, income, geography, or access to technology. This becomes particularly important as more public services and opportunities are supported by digital and AI-based systems.

Algorithmic governance refers to the use of data-driven or automated systems to inform public decisions, including eligibility for services, risk assessment, prioritization, and the allocation of resources (Yeung, 2018). These systems are not simply technical tools operating independently from their surroundings. They are shaped by the data used to build them, the policy goals they are expected to serve, and the institutions that decide how they are implemented. As Selbst et al. (2019) argue, questions of fairness cannot be addressed only at the technical level because algorithmic systems operate within broader social and institutional environments.

This understanding of AI as a socio-technical system is especially relevant to public policy. An algorithm may perform well from a technical perspective and still produce unequal results when it is introduced into a system where inequalities already exist. The way an AI tool is designed, the data it relies on, who has access to it, and how public officials use its recommendations can all influence the final policy outcome. Looking at AI through an equity perspective therefore requires attention not only to the technology itself, but also to the institutions and communities around it.

In the United States, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) AI Risk Management Framework provides a useful reference point for this discussion. The framework is voluntary and is intended to help organizations address risks and incorporate trustworthiness into the design, development, use, and evaluation of AI systems (NIST, 2023). Its four core functions as govern, map, measure, and manage, emphasize that AI risk management should continue throughout the lifecycle of a system rather than being treated as a one-time assessment. Other frameworks, including the OECD AI Principles and UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, provide useful international context, but this paper uses the U.S. framework as its main policy reference (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2021).

Based on these concepts, this paper examines AI in public policy through three connected questions: whether AI-supported systems produce equitable outcomes, how those systems are governed and held accountable, and whether the people affected by them have meaningful opportunities to participate in their design and evaluation. This approach is used to examine how AI may shape policies and public services affecting youth and women in the United States.

A Practical Overview of AI in U.S. Public Governance

In the United States, the role of artificial intelligence in public governance has expanded from small-scale experimentation to more institutionalized and operational deployment. Federal agencies are increasingly using machine learning and predictive analytics to handle large datasets, spot risk patterns, and aid rule-making and decision-making for their programs. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, many federal agencies are now actively using AI for various functions, including detecting fraud, administering benefits, monitoring compliance, and evaluating programs (GAO, 2021; Engstrom et al., 2020).

We can see practical uses of AI at both the federal and state levels. For instance, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), part of the Department of Health and Human Services, employs advanced analytics and AI systems to identify potential improper

payments and fraud patterns while processing Medicare claims (GAO, 2021). In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, a predictive risk modeling tool aids child welfare screening decisions, helping caseworkers focus on high-risk cases. However, this has sparked national debate about fairness and bias in social services algorithms (Eubanks, 2018; Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2019).

These systems are often launched with the expectation that they will boost efficiency, consistency, and data-driven targeting in administration. However, public policy often works within socially unequal contexts, and administrative datasets tend to reflect past disparities in access, enforcement, and outcomes. Because of this, AI systems trained on historical data might replicate or even worsen existing inequalities unless they include transparency, regular checking, and corrective measures in their design and oversight (O’Neil, 2016; Selbst et al., 2019).

This issue is particularly crucial in areas affecting youth and women, where tools for eligibility screening, risk assessment, and program targeting can affect access to essential services. In these cases, AI can either enhance fair access by better identifying needs or unintentionally shut out vulnerable groups if biases and data gaps are not properly addressed (Eubanks, 2018; Engstrom et al., 2020).

AI in Youth Public Policies

Education Policy and Predictive Analytics

AI is playing a growing role in U.S. education systems by helping identify students who might struggle academically or drop out. Schools and colleges are using analytics tools that analyze attendance records, grades, behavioral data, and demographic variables to support early intervention strategies. Discussions about these early warning systems and predicting student success are becoming common in recent studies on education data and learning analytics (Baker, 2023; OECD, 2023). When implemented with appropriate safeguards, these tools can make it easier to allocate limited resources effectively, giving crucial support to students from underserved communities. However, there are significant concerns about fairness, especially when these predictive models use historical data that mirrors existing systemic inequalities. Research has found that risk prediction tools might unfairly single out students from low-income or minority backgrounds, possibly adding to negative stereotypes and stigmatization (Selwyn, 2019; Baker & Hawn, 2022).

The challenge lies in how these systems are governed. There is often not enough transparency about how the models are built, and there are not adequate ways for students and their families to challenge decisions based on these algorithms. Without proper structures to ensure accountability, there is a risk that predictive analytics could influence students’ educational paths in ways that go against the goal of fair and equal education for all (OECD, 2023).

Workforce Development and Labor Market Matching

AI is also changing the environment in which young people enter the U.S. labor market. Automated systems can support job matching, skills assessment, recruitment, scheduling, and workforce management. These tools may help people find information and opportunities more quickly, but they also create new questions about how workers and job seekers are evaluated.

The U.S. Department of Labor has warned that employers’ use of AI and automated systems does not remove their obligations under federal labor standards. Its 2024 guidance notes that automated systems may improve efficiency and safety but can create compliance problems when they are used without responsible human oversight (U.S. Department of

Labor, 2024). For young job seekers, this matters because an automated screening or matching process may influence access to a first job, training opportunity, or career path.

Digital access is another part of the equity question. If workforce services increasingly depend on online platforms, people without reliable internet, devices, or digital skills can be placed at a disadvantage. For this reason, the use of AI in workforce development should be connected to broader efforts to improve digital access, explain automated decisions, and maintain human support for people who need it.

AI in Women-Focused Public Policies

Employment Services and Algorithmic Hiring

AI is playing an increasingly significant role in shaping employment policies and the labor market, especially in areas like recruitment screening, job recommendations, and skills profiling. Both public employment services and private companies working with government bodies are turning to algorithmic tools to sort through job applicants and suggest potential hires. However, these systems come with well-documented issues, such as gender bias. This bias often stems from training models on historical employment data that reflect long-standing occupational segregation and unequal promotion practices.

Research highlights that AI hiring systems can still lead to unfair outcomes between men and women. This can happen when the systems are built on historical data showcasing existing workplace inequalities, when they use indirect factors closely tied to gender, or when the methods for scoring and ranking candidates unintentionally favor one gender over another (Köchling et al., 2023). Studies and evaluations have revealed that even if gender is removed as an obvious factor, indirect indicators can continue to cause disparities in how candidates are scored and recommended. New York City provides a concrete U.S. example of a local government trying to address this problem. Local Law 144 regulates certain automated employment decision tools used in hiring and promotion. Covered employers and employment agencies cannot use such a tool unless it has been subject to a bias audit within the previous year, information about the audit is publicly available, and required notices are provided to candidates or employees (New York City Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (NYC DCWP), 2023).

The law is important because it moves the discussion from broad ethical principles to a specific legal requirement. At the same time, early research on implementation found limited public evidence of compliance among employers studied and raised questions about the law's scope, accessibility, and reliance on transparency (Wright et al., 2024). The New York City experience shows that requiring an audit is a useful step, but the quality of the audit, the clarity of the rules, and enforcement also matter.

Health and Social Service Allocation

AI is also becoming part of the U.S. health and human-services environment. In 2025, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released an AI strategy aimed at expanding the use of AI across internal operations, research, and public health while emphasizing responsible implementation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 2025). In healthcare, machine-learning systems can potentially help identify health risks, support clinical decisions, and target outreach more effectively.

For women, these possibilities are important in areas such as maternal health, preventive care, and access to services. But the quality of an AI system depends heavily on the data used to develop and test it. Research on machine learning and health equity has warned that unequal or unrepresentative data can produce less reliable results for groups that have historically been underserved (Rajkomar et al., 2018). This is especially important when gender and racial disparities already exist in access to care and health outcomes.

The same concern applies to social services. Automated eligibility or risk systems may help agencies process large numbers of cases, but people should still be able to understand important decisions, correct inaccurate information, and seek human review. The experience of automated public-benefit and child-welfare systems in the United States shows that efficiency should not come at the expense of due process or equal access (Eubanks, 2018).

Governance Challenges in AI-Enabled Public Policy

As AI becomes more common in U.S. public policy, one concern is that its use is developing faster than the systems created to oversee it. Federal agencies have already started incorporating AI into different areas of government, but their capacity to manage these systems is not always developing at the same pace. A review by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, for example, found that federal agencies had begun implementing government-wide AI requirements but had not yet completed several important governance and risk-management measures (GAO, 2023).

Transparency is particularly important when AI is used in decisions that directly affect people. Public agencies often rely on systems developed by private companies, which can make it difficult to understand how an automated decision or risk assessment was reached. Technical complexity and proprietary protections can further limit what agencies are able to explain to the public. This becomes especially concerning when automated systems influence access to employment, education, public benefits, or other essential services. People affected by these decisions should be able to understand when AI was used, what role it played, and how they can question a decision if something goes wrong.

The NIST AI Risk Management Framework addresses this issue by treating governance and risk management as an ongoing responsibility throughout the lifecycle of an AI system, rather than something that happens only when the technology is introduced (NIST, 2023). Access is another part of the governance discussion that can easily be overlooked. Moving public services to AI-supported or automated platforms may make government processes faster, but it can also create difficulties for people who have limited internet access, fewer digital skills, or problems with online identity verification. These barriers can be especially important for low-income communities and other groups that already experience difficulties accessing public services.

Efficiency, therefore, should not be the only measure of whether an AI-supported public service is working well. Agencies also need to consider who can actually use the system and who may be unintentionally excluded. The U.S. also does not have one uniform approach to AI oversight. Rules are developing at the federal, state, and local levels, and the level of protection can vary considerably depending on the jurisdiction and the type of decision involved. New York City's Local Law 144 provides a useful example.

The law requires certain automated employment decision tools to undergo bias audits before they are used and requires information about those audits to be made publicly available (NYC DCWP, 2023). At the federal level, much of the approach has focused more broadly on agency responsibilities, standards, and risk-management frameworks. These different approaches show that AI oversight in the United States is evolving, but it remains uneven across policy areas and jurisdictions. Finally, governance is also about who has a voice in the process. Youth and women are frequently discussed as populations that may be affected by AI, but they are not always involved in designing or evaluating the systems that influence their opportunities.

Their participation would not eliminate the technical or regulatory challenges surrounding AI, but it could help public agencies identify problems that are easy to miss from an institutional or technical perspective. This is particularly relevant in areas such as education, employment, and access to public services, where the consequences of automated decisions are experienced directly by individuals.

For this reason, effective AI governance requires more than broad commitments to fairness or responsible innovation. It also requires practical mechanisms for transparency, meaningful oversight, regular evaluation, and opportunities for affected communities to participate. As the use of AI in U.S. public policy continues to grow, these safeguards will be important in determining whether the technology improves public services without reinforcing existing inequalities.

Policy Recommendations for Equity-Centered AI Governance

To ensure that AI contributes to equitable outcomes in youth and women public policies, several governance reforms are necessary.

1. **Regular Bias and Equity Reviews:** Federal, state, and local agencies should review high-impact AI systems for unequal outcomes before deployment and at regular intervals afterward. Reviews should consider differences connected to gender, age, race, disability, and socioeconomic status. The experience of NYC Local Law 144 shows the value of formal audit requirements, while also showing that audit standards and enforcement need to be clear (NYC DCWP, 2023; Wright et al., 2024).
2. **Human Review and Clear Ways to Challenge Decisions:** People affected by important automated decisions should have a practical way to ask questions, correct inaccurate data, and request human review. This is particularly important in education, employment, healthcare, and social services, where an incorrect classification can have long-term consequences.
3. **Participation by Youth and Women:** Agencies should involve affected communities when AI systems are designed, procured, tested, and evaluated. Young people and women should not only be treated as data subjects; their experiences can help identify problems that may otherwise be missed.
4. **Minimum Transparency Standards:** Public agencies should explain the purpose of high-impact AI systems, the type of information they use, the role of the system in the final decision, known limitations, and the process for human review. Transparency should be understandable to the public rather than limited to highly technical documentation.
5. **Stronger Cross-Agency Capacity:** U.S. agencies should share expertise and develop common practices for AI risk management, procurement, testing, and monitoring. GAO's accountability work and the NIST AI Risk Management Framework provide useful foundations for building more consistent practices across government (GAO, 2023; NIST, 2023).

Conclusion

The examples discussed in this paper show that AI is already becoming part of public policy and public administration in the United States. Federal agencies are expanding their use of AI, while state and local governments are developing their own approaches to automated systems and their oversight. For youth and women, these developments are particularly relevant in areas such as education, workforce development, employment, healthcare, and social services.

AI can help public institutions identify needs earlier, process information more efficiently, and direct support where it is most needed. At the same time, these benefits should not be taken for granted. Systems that rely on historical or incomplete data can reproduce existing inequalities, while automated decisions that are difficult to understand or challenge can create new barriers for the people they are intended to serve. The question for policymakers, therefore, is not simply whether AI should be used, but under what conditions and with what safeguards.

The U.S. examples examined in this paper point to several practical priorities: regular bias reviews, transparency, human oversight, clear accountability, digital inclusion, and

opportunities for public participation. Ethical principles and national frameworks provide an important foundation, but their value ultimately depends on how they are applied in everyday government practice. This also means paying attention to the experiences of the people who interact with these systems, including youth and women, rather than considering them only as groups affected by policy.

AI governance in the United States is still developing, and many of its longer-term effects are not yet clear. Future research could examine how these systems affect different groups of young people and women over time, as well as how U.S. approaches compare with emerging practices in other countries. More evidence from the people who actually use AI-supported public services would also help connect policy discussions with their practical consequences.

As the use of AI in government continues to expand, good governance will be as important as technological capability. If transparency, accountability, participation, and fairness are considered from the beginning, AI can become a useful tool for improving public services and expanding opportunities. Without those safeguards, there is a risk that technology will simply carry existing inequalities into new systems.

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