Can Artificial Intelligence Reduce Socio-Economic Inequality in Business Opportunities?

Ananya Kale

Independent Researcher

DOI: https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1308000011

Received: 31 July 2026; Accepted: 05 August 2026; Published: 26 August 2026

ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), is increasingly shaping business productivity, entrepreneurship, access to information, and market participation. This study examines whether AI can reduce socio-economic inequality in business opportunities, with particular attention to small and medium-sized enterprises and differences in organizational readiness, digital capability, and access to resources. A qualitative research design was used, based on in-depth interviews with five experienced business professionals from forensic services, construction and real estate, business operations, and entrepreneurship. The interview data were analyzed thematically. Three central themes emerged from the interviews: barriers to AI adoption, unequal distribution of AI-related benefits, and AI as an enabler of inclusive business growth. The findings indicate that AI can reduce some traditional barriers to business entry and competitiveness by improving productivity, marketing, communication, decision-making, and access to knowledge. However, the benefits are conditional rather than automatic. Organizational readiness, AI literacy, training, digital infrastructure, financial resources, and the ability to evaluate and implement AI-generated recommendations influence whether businesses can translate access into meaningful gains. The findings are consistent with recent research showing that AI adoption is uneven across firm sizes and that the effects of generative AI vary across users and entrepreneurial capabilities. The study concludes that AI has meaningful potential to reduce socio-economic inequality in business opportunities, but only when supported by inclusive skills development, affordable access, digital infrastructure, and responsible implementation.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, generative AI, socio-economic inequality, entrepreneurship, MSMEs, digital inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Generative artificial intelligence has become an important area of study because of its growing influence on business activity, employment, education, finance, and access to information. In recent years, scholars and international organizations have increasingly examined whether AI will reduce or deepen socio-economic inequality, especially in business opportunities. This area matters because AI is not simply a technological tool; it is also a force that can reshape who gets access to markets, credit, productivity gains, and entrepreneurial growth. For businesses, especially micro, small, and medium enterprises, AI may lower entry barriers by improving efficiency, communication, and decision-making, but it may also intensify inequality if access remains concentrated among already privileged groups. (Cazzaniga et al., 2024; OECD et al., 2025)

Several recent studies suggest that AI has a dual effect on inequality. Research on generative AI indicates that it can improve productivity, democratize content creation, and support personalized learning, while also widening the digital divide and increasing misinformation risks. Other studies have found that AI may contribute to economic inequality through automation of low-skilled work and concentration of technological advantages in resource-rich countries and firms. At the same time, some evidence shows that AI can reduce inequality in specific contexts by improving credit assessment, expanding access to finance for thin-file small businesses, and helping marginalized entrepreneurs overcome language and cultural barriers. Findings from recent literature also show that gender and minority gaps in AI use remain significant, suggesting that access

alone does not guarantee equal benefit. Overall, the literature points to a complex pattern in which AI can either reduce or reinforce inequality depending on how it is adopted and by whom. (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025; Noy & Zhang, 2023; Otis et al., 2024a)

Despite these findings, limited research has examined whether generative artificial intelligence can reduce socio-economic inequality in business opportunities within the Indian MSME context, particularly in state-level or city-level settings such as Maharashtra. Most existing studies are global in scope, focused on developed economies, or centered on broad labor-market effects rather than direct business opportunity outcomes. In particular, there is a lack of empirical research that investigates how AI affects access to finance, market reach, business growth, and entrepreneurial inclusion among different socio-economic groups in developing countries. There is also limited longitudinal and field-based evidence on whether AI adoption actually narrows inequality in practice or merely reproduces existing advantages. (OECD et al., 2025; Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, 2025)

Therefore, this study aims to examine whether generative artificial intelligence can reduce socio-economic inequality in business opportunities by analyzing its impact on MSMEs, with special focus on differences across gender, income background, digital access, and enterprise type. The study will investigate key variables such as AI adoption, business performance, access to finance, market expansion, and perceived opportunity creation. It will also explore whether AI functions as an equalizing tool for marginalized entrepreneurs or whether its benefits remain concentrated among already advantaged business owners. By addressing these issues, this research seeks to contribute original empirical evidence to the ongoing debate on whether artificial intelligence can truly reduce socio-economic inequality in business opportunities. (Cazzaniga et al., 2024; Otis et al., 2024a, 2024b)

Recent evidence provides a useful basis for understanding why the relationship between AI and inequality is unlikely to be one-directional. Experimental research has shown that generative AI can improve the speed and quality of professional work, with particularly important gains among less-experienced workers (Noy & Zhang, 2023). Similarly, research using customer-support data found that generative AI increased productivity, with larger gains among novice and lower-skilled workers. Such findings suggest that AI can diffuse knowledge and capabilities that were previously concentrated among more experienced employees. At the same time, these benefits should not be interpreted as evidence that AI automatically equalizes economic opportunity.

Firm-level adoption patterns illustrate this qualification. The OECD, Boston Consulting Group, and INSEAD (2025) report that larger and more digitally capable firms tend to adopt AI more rapidly, while smaller firms face barriers involving skills, infrastructure, finance, and organizational capability. This creates a potential paradox: AI tools may be relatively inexpensive and widely available, yet the capacity to use them effectively may remain unequally distributed. In an Indian MSME context, this distinction is especially important because smaller enterprises play a significant role in employment, entrepreneurship, and regional economic development (Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, 2025).

Entrepreneurship research further demonstrates that access to AI does not necessarily produce equal outcomes. Otis et al. (2024a) found in a field experiment involving Kenyan entrepreneurs that the effect of a GPT-4-powered business assistant differed substantially according to entrepreneurs' baseline performance. Higher-performing entrepreneurs benefited, whereas lower-performing entrepreneurs experienced negative effects. This suggests that the ability to select, interpret, and implement AI-generated advice is itself an important form of entrepreneurial capability. Similarly, global evidence indicates persistent gender gaps in generative AI use, even when access to AI is made available, indicating that social and organizational factors can influence who uses AI and how intensively it is used (Otis et al., 2024b).

Against this background, the present study treats AI as a conditional rather than inherently equalizing technology. The central issue is therefore not simply whether businesses can obtain AI tools, but whether business owners and employees have the skills, infrastructure, resources, and organizational support required to convert access into productive and sustainable outcomes. This perspective informs the study's qualitative

investigation of experienced business professionals and provides the basis for examining the conditions under which AI may narrow, maintain, or widen inequality in business opportunities.

Research Question

Can artificial intelligence reduce socio-economic inequality in business opportunities?

The study specifically examines how AI adoption may influence business productivity, access to knowledge, market opportunities, competitiveness, and inclusion, while considering differences in organizational readiness, enterprise size, digital capability, and socio-economic background.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how experienced business professionals perceive the relationship between artificial intelligence and socio-economic inequality in business opportunities. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' experiences, interpretations, and explanations of AI adoption rather than to estimate a population-level causal effect.

Participants

Five experienced business professionals participated in the interviews. All participants had more than 35 years of professional experience. Their areas of expertise included forensic services and business management, construction and real estate, business operations and AI adoption, entrepreneurship and business strategy, and entrepreneurship and AI in business.

Participant	Role	Experience	Area of expertise
Expert 1	Forensic laboratory owner	35+ years	Forensic services & business management
Expert 2	Builder	35+ years	Construction & real estate
Expert 3	Business owner	35+ years	Business operations & AI adoption
Expert 4	Business owner	35+ years	Entrepreneurship & business strategy
Expert 5	Business owner	35+ years	Entrepreneurship & AI in business

Data Collection

The research plan included interviews, a survey, and a literature review/synthesis. The completed findings reported in this paper are based on five in-depth expert interviews. The original research plan proposed a survey of approximately 30–50 experts and non-experts and a literature review of approximately 30–50 papers; however, no survey dataset or separate systematic literature-review dataset was provided in the source material. Accordingly, the empirical analysis in this paper is limited to the five interviews and is interpreted as exploratory qualitative evidence.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VIII August 2026

The interview guide focused on barriers to AI adoption, equality of benefits, differences among women and minority entrepreneurs and smaller firms, the relative value of AI for established versus emerging businesses, and the future relationship between AI and business opportunity inequality.

Interview Questions

- What challenges did you face while adopting AI, such as cost, training, infrastructure, or technical support?
- Do you think all business owners can benefit equally from AI, or do some groups gain more than others? Please explain.
- Have you observed any differences in AI adoption among women entrepreneurs, minority entrepreneurs, or smaller firms?
- Do you think AI is more helpful for established businesses or for new and struggling businesses? Why?
- Looking at the future, do you believe AI will make business opportunities more equal or less equal in society? Please explain your view.

Data Analysis

The five expert interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The responses were reviewed repeatedly to identify recurring ideas, similarities, and contrasting perspectives. These patterns were organized into themes related to barriers to AI adoption, unequal access to AI-related benefits, differences among business groups, the role of AI across stages of business development, and the future implications of AI for socio-economic inequality. Thematic analysis was used to organize participants' accounts into patterns that could be compared with findings from existing research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

The thematic analysis identified five interconnected themes. The first concerned barriers to AI adoption, particularly the importance of human and organizational readiness. The second concerned unequal access to and distribution of AI-related business benefits. The third examined differences in AI adoption across business groups, including gender and firm size. The fourth focused on the contrasting ways established and emerging businesses can use AI. The fifth considered whether AI is likely to reduce or reproduce socio-economic inequality over time.

Theme 1: AI Adoption Depends More on Readiness Than Cost

Most participants agreed that employee resistance, limited AI literacy, and reluctance to change were greater barriers than financial cost. One participant explained, “The biggest challenge wasn't the cost—it was getting people comfortable with using AI” (Participant 2). Another stated, “The staff were reluctant to adopt AI because they were already trained in traditional methods” (Participant 3). These responses indicate that awareness, training, and change management are important conditions for successful AI adoption.

The finding is consistent with research showing that AI adoption depends on organizational capability as well as access to technology. The OECD et al. (2025) emphasize skills, digital capability, organizational readiness, and complementary investments as important conditions for firm-level AI adoption. The interviews similarly suggest that technological availability alone is insufficient when employees lack confidence or practical understanding.

Theme 2: AI Benefits Are Uneven Across Businesses

Participants agreed that AI can support businesses of different sizes, but outcomes depend on resources, skills, and infrastructure. One participant stated, “Every business can benefit from AI, but the journey is different for everyone” (Participant 2). Another observed, “Large, innovative firms usually adopt AI faster than smaller firms” (Participant 4). These responses suggest that structural differences continue to influence the extent to which businesses can convert AI access into competitive advantage.

This finding is consistent with OECD evidence that AI adoption remains uneven across firm sizes and that larger firms generally possess greater digital maturity and resources for adoption (OECD et al., 2025). It also reflects the entrepreneurial field experiment by Otis et al. (2024a), which found that AI assistance produced substantially different outcomes depending on entrepreneurs' baseline performance and ability to use AI advice.

Theme 3: AI Adoption Across Different Business Groups

The interviews revealed varied perspectives regarding AI adoption across different business groups. Participants generally emphasized awareness, digital literacy, organizational culture, and openness to innovation as major factors influencing adoption. Some participants observed that women entrepreneurs and small business owners can use AI creatively to overcome resource constraints, particularly in marketing, customer engagement, and business planning. At the same time, participants acknowledged that smaller firms may face greater challenges because of limited financial resources, technical support, and structured training.

These observations should be considered alongside evidence that gender gaps in generative AI use remain persistent across countries, sectors, and occupations. Otis et al. (2024b) found a substantial global gender gap in generative AI use, including evidence that the gap can remain even when access is equalized. The contrast suggests that equal access and equal use are different outcomes.

The interview findings indicate that targeted training and exposure may help reduce disparities, while the broader literature indicates that structural and social factors can continue to shape adoption.

Theme 4: AI's Role in Supporting Established and Emerging Businesses

The interview findings indicate that AI is valuable for both established and emerging businesses, although its role differs according to the stage of business development. Participants described established businesses as using AI to optimize existing operations, improve productivity, support decision-making, automate repetitive tasks, and strengthen customer relationship management. Established firms may have an advantage because they possess larger datasets, stronger financial resources, and more structured organizational systems.

Participants also emphasized that AI can be particularly transformative for new, small, and growing businesses. AI-enabled tools can support content creation, digital marketing, customer communication, market research, financial planning, and administrative tasks, potentially allowing smaller businesses to undertake activities that previously required larger teams or specialized external expertise. One participant described AI as enabling smaller businesses to “do more without needing a large team or a big budget.” Another emphasized that AI should support rather than replace human expertise.

These observations are supported by research showing that generative AI can improve productivity and help less-experienced workers perform more effectively (Brynjolfsson et al., 2025; Noy & Zhang, 2023). However, the Kenyan entrepreneurship experiment demonstrates that AI's benefits can be uneven, reinforcing the importance of users' ability to evaluate and implement AI-generated recommendations (Otis et al., 2024a).

Theme 5: AI and the Future of Socio-Economic Inequality in Business Opportunities

The interviews revealed a broadly optimistic but conditional perspective on the future impact of AI. Participants recognized AI's potential to reduce traditional barriers by making business tools more accessible and affordable, while also warning that unequal access to training, digital infrastructure, and technological awareness could prevent these benefits from reaching all businesses equally.

Participants therefore viewed AI as neither inherently equalizing nor inherently unequal. Instead, they suggested that its long-term effect will depend on how widely it is adopted, who has the capacity to use it, and what forms of institutional support are available.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VIII August 2026

This view is consistent with the IMF's assessment that AI can raise productivity while also increasing inequality when access to skills, infrastructure, and complementary resources is uneven (Cazzaniga et al., 2024).

DISCUSSION

AI Adoption and Human Readiness

The first major finding is that successful AI adoption is a human and organizational process rather than a purely financial or technological decision. Participants consistently emphasized resistance to change, limited AI literacy, and the need for practical training. This supports the OECD et al. (2025) finding that firms require complementary skills and organizational capabilities to adopt AI effectively. The implication is important for inequality: if some firms can invest in training and change management while others cannot, unequal AI capability may become an additional source of competitive inequality.

The finding also supports the broader productivity literature. Brynjolfsson et al. (2025) found that AI assistance can produce larger productivity gains among less-experienced workers, suggesting that AI may diffuse knowledge that was previously concentrated among experienced employees. Noy and Zhang (2023) similarly found substantial productivity improvements from generative AI in professional writing tasks. Together, these findings indicate that AI can be equalizing at the task level while still producing unequal outcomes at the firm or ecosystem level.

Unequal Access and Unequal Capability

The second major finding is that access to AI does not necessarily translate into equal business benefits. Larger firms may adopt AI faster because they have greater financial capacity, stronger digital infrastructure, and more specialized employees (OECD et al., 2025). Smaller firms may nevertheless gain disproportionately valuable benefits from relatively low-cost AI tools because those tools can substitute for some forms of specialized labor and external expertise. This creates a central tension: AI can simultaneously widen capability gaps and lower barriers to entry.

The findings from the Kenyan entrepreneurship experiment are particularly relevant. Otis et al. (2024a) found that the same AI intervention did not benefit all entrepreneurs equally. High-performing entrepreneurs improved their performance, while low-performing entrepreneurs experienced negative effects. The result suggests that the distributional consequences of AI depend not only on who has access, but also on who can judge, adapt, and implement AI-generated information effectively.

Gender, Inclusion, and Business Opportunity

The interviews suggest that gender should not be treated as a simple predictor of AI capability. Participants described women entrepreneurs as capable of using AI effectively when they have awareness, training, and digital resources. However, this qualitative perception does not eliminate the importance of documented gender disparities. Otis et al. (2024b) found persistent gender gaps in generative AI use across regions, occupations, and sectors. Women's World Banking (2021, 2024) similarly emphasizes that digital and algorithmic financial systems can reproduce bias unless fairness is explicitly considered.

The combined evidence indicates that inclusion requires more than equal access to software. It requires equal opportunities to develop digital confidence, relevant skills, and the ability to participate in AI-enabled markets and financial systems. In this sense, AI policy should be understood as part of a broader digital-inclusion agenda.

Established Firms, MSMEs, and Entrepreneurial Opportunity

The fourth theme highlights AI's potentially different effects across stages of business development. Established firms can use AI to deepen existing advantages through automation, analytics, and operational

optimization. Emerging firms may use AI to reduce fixed costs and gain access to capabilities that would otherwise require employees or consultants. This is particularly relevant to MSMEs, which the Indian Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (2025) identifies as important contributors to employment and socio-economic development.

However, the existence of affordable AI tools does not by itself eliminate the structural disadvantages faced by small firms. Without reliable connectivity, appropriate training, financial resources, and managerial capability, small businesses may remain less able to capture the value of AI. The equalizing potential of AI therefore depends on complementary investments around the technology.

AI as a Conditional Technology

Across all themes, the evidence supports viewing AI as a conditional technology. Its consequences are shaped by the environment in which it is introduced. Where firms have strong infrastructure, skilled employees, supportive leadership, and access to training, AI may improve productivity and expand business opportunity. Where those conditions are absent, AI may reinforce existing disparities. This interpretation is consistent with the IMF's argument that AI preparedness, digital infrastructure, human capital, and institutional policy will shape how countries and groups share the benefits of AI (Cazzaniga et al., 2024).

Therefore, the central answer to the research question is qualified. AI can reduce socio-economic inequality in business opportunities, but it does not do so automatically. Its equalizing effect is most plausible when access to technology is accompanied by access to skills, infrastructure, finance, and institutional support.

Overall Discussion

The findings suggest that artificial intelligence has meaningful but conditional potential to reduce socio-economic inequality in business opportunities. Across the five interviews, participants did not describe AI as either a universal solution or a harmful disruption. Instead, they described it as a transformative business tool whose effects depend on human readiness, organizational capacity, digital infrastructure, and strategic use.

A clear pattern across the findings is that the central barrier to AI adoption is increasingly capability rather than simple affordability. AI tools may be available at comparatively low cost, but businesses still need people who understand how to use them, evaluate their outputs, and integrate them into existing workflows. This means that investments in AI literacy and organizational learning may be as important for equality as investments in the technology itself.

At the same time, AI creates a genuine opportunity for smaller and emerging businesses. By supporting marketing, communication, planning, research, and administrative work, generative AI can allow entrepreneurs with limited resources to perform activities that previously required larger teams or external specialists. Yet the same technology can increase inequality when better-resourced firms adopt it faster or use it more effectively.

The study therefore supports an ecosystem perspective on AI and inequality. Governments, educational institutions, financial institutions, technology providers, and businesses all influence whether AI becomes broadly accessible and productive. Inclusive AI adoption requires affordable technology, digital infrastructure, practical training, responsible governance, and opportunities for entrepreneurs from different socio-economic backgrounds to build relevant capabilities.

Practical Implications

For businesses, AI adoption should be treated as a strategic capability rather than a one-time technology purchase. Business owners should invest in staff training, awareness, process redesign, and evaluation of AI outputs. For MSMEs, practical applications such as marketing, customer communication, planning, and business analysis may provide relatively accessible entry points.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue VIII August 2026

For educators and training institutions, AI literacy programmes should emphasize practical business applications rather than technical knowledge alone. For policymakers, equalizing access to AI requires investment in digital infrastructure, affordable training, and inclusive digital ecosystems.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study contributes to the emerging literature by emphasizing that inequality in AI adoption is shaped by the interaction between technology, human capability, and business context. The findings support the view that AI is an enabling technology whose social and economic effects depend on conditions of use. The study also adds nuance to the relationship between technological innovation and inequality: AI may reduce opportunity gaps in some settings while reinforcing them in others. This conditional perspective connects technological adoption with organizational and socio-economic analysis.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted of only five experts, so the findings cannot be generalized to all businesses, entrepreneurs, or regions. Second, the participants represented a limited professional and geographical context, which may have influenced the perspectives expressed. Third, the findings are based on expert perceptions rather than direct financial, productivity, or business-performance records.

Fourth, participant bias is possible because individuals with positive experiences of AI may be more likely to emphasize its benefits. Finally, although the original research plan included a survey and a broader literature review, the empirical findings presented here are based on the five interviews. Future work should therefore test these qualitative insights using larger quantitative and mixed-method samples.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should include larger and more diverse samples of entrepreneurs from different sectors, regions, and socio-economic backgrounds. Particular attention should be given to women entrepreneurs, rural business owners, micro-enterprises, and firms with low digital maturity. Mixed-method studies combining interviews with surveys and business-performance data could provide stronger evidence about whether AI changes measurable outcomes such as revenue, productivity, market reach, access to finance, and employment.

Future studies should also examine specific AI applications, including AI-supported credit assessment, marketing, customer service, financial planning, and supply-chain management. Comparative research across Indian states and between developing and developed economies could further clarify how institutional conditions shape the relationship between AI and inequality.

CONCLUSION

This study examined whether artificial intelligence can reduce socio-economic inequality in business opportunities. The qualitative findings indicate that AI has substantial potential to improve productivity, reduce some barriers to business activity, and provide smaller or resource-constrained entrepreneurs with access to capabilities that were previously more expensive. However, the findings do not support the conclusion that AI automatically creates equal opportunity.

Instead, AI appears to function as a conditional equalizer. Its ability to reduce inequality depends on whether businesses have the skills, infrastructure, financial resources, organizational readiness, and institutional support needed to use it effectively. Where these conditions are available, AI may broaden access to knowledge, markets, productivity gains, and entrepreneurial tools. Where they are absent, AI may reinforce existing advantages.

Overall, the study concludes that reducing socio-economic inequality through AI requires an inclusive ecosystem rather than technology alone. Policies and business strategies should therefore focus not only on increasing access to AI tools but also on ensuring that diverse businesses have meaningful opportunities to develop the capabilities needed to use those tools productively and responsibly.

REFERENCES

1. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
2. Brynjolfsson, E., Li, D., & Raymond, L. R. (2025). Generative AI at work. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 140(2), 889–942. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjae044
3. Cazzaniga, M., Jaumotte, F., Li, L., Melina, G., Panton, A. J., Pizzinelli, C., Rockall, E. J., & Tavares, M. M. (2024). Gen-AI: Artificial intelligence and the future of work (IMF Staff Discussion Note SDN/2024/001). International Monetary Fund. https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400262548.006
4. Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises. (2025). What's MSME. Government of India. https://www.msme.gov.in/ministry/about-us/details/Title%3DWhat%27s-MSME-IzMzITMtQWa
5. Noy, S., & Zhang, W. (2023). Experimental evidence on the productivity effects of generative artificial intelligence. Science, 381(6654), 187–192. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adh2586
6. OECD, Boston Consulting Group, & INSEAD. (2025). The adoption of artificial intelligence in firms: New evidence for policymaking. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/f9ef33c3-en
7. Otis, N. G., Clarke, R. P., Delecourt, S., Holtz, D., & Koning, R. (2024a). The uneven impact of generative AI on entrepreneurial performance. Harvard Business School Working Paper No. 24-042. https://www.hbs.edu/ris/download.aspx?name=24-042.pdf
8. Otis, N. G., Delecourt, S., Cranney, K., & Koning, R. (2024b). Global evidence on gender gaps and generative AI (Harvard Business School Working Paper No. 25-023). Harvard Business School. https://www.hbs.edu/ris/download.aspx?name=25-023.pdf
9. Women's World Banking. (2021). Algorithmic bias, financial inclusion, and gender: A primer on opening up new credit to women in emerging economies. https://www.womensworldbanking.org/insights/report-algorithmic-bias-financial-inclusion-and-gender-primer-opening-up-new-credit-to-women-in-emerging-economies/