

Guest editorial: Rethinking and revisiting the current state of gender equality in the workplace: moving upward, moving forward

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Introduction

Gender equality in the workplace is a critical issue that has gained increasing attention in recent years (Eweje and Nagano, 2021; Hing *et al.*, 2023; Jogulu and Franken, 2023). Recognised by the United Nations as a fundamental human right, gender equality is essential for realising full human capital and achieving sustainable development. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG5), which aims to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", highlights the vital role of gender empowerment in building a peaceful and sustainable world (Eweje and Nagano, 2021; Kobayashi, 2021). Accordingly, this special issue adopts the view that gender equality is "best advanced by a combination of legal compliance, the business case and social regulation" (Grosser and Moon, 2005, pp. 327-328). It recognises the need for collaboration with governments, NGOs and supranational organisations (Eweje and Nagano, 2021; Kobayashi, 2021; Kobayashi and Eweje, 2021; Sajjad and Eweje, 2021) to enable women and men to participate equally in and contribute to economic activities.

After more than four decades of research and feminist advocacy, gender equality although has been recognised as one of the highest determinants of human, societal and economic development, it remains a complex issue to resolve (Flood *et al.*, 2021; Goetz and Jenkins, 2018; Sen, 2019). Gender bias and discrimination in the workplace continue to persist globally reinforcing and sustaining inequalities between men and women (Amis *et al.*, 2020; Grzelec, 2024; Van Laer *et al.*, 2021). One reason for this persistence is the widespread perception of organisations as gender neutral entities with career structures, work practices and job design assumed to serve business needs independently of gender norms (Acker, 1990). However, organisational research challenges this notion. Acker (1990), for example, argues that the organisational structures often benefit masculine working cultures where career advancement is shaped around the ideal of the "ideal worker", who prioritises work above all else.

In addition, the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) backlash stemming predominantly from some countries and regions has also threatened much of the progress made globally on gender equality (Ng *et al.*, 2025), sending a clear message to the diversity scholars to step up and step forward (Prasad and Śliwa, 2024; Sitzmann *et al.*, 2024). Even though sustainability principles have been integrated into business and government with less progress towards gender equality (Eweje and Nagano, 2021), further stripping women of

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their ability to fully contribute to organisations (Eden and Wagstaff, 2021) calls for wider investigation.

This special issue aims to advance our understanding of why gender inequality persists and to critically examine current trends in gender equality across the fields of business and management, human resources, accounting and finance. In this special issue, we highlight how women continue to face discrimination, disempowerment and exclusion, particularly in relation to employment and career progression (Bako and Syed, 2018; Eweje and Nagano, 2021; Gupta *et al.*, 2024; Jogulu and Franken, 2023; Sharafizad *et al.*, 2024a, b). We also report on the complex interplay between societal expectations, social justice dynamics and authority dominated social structures that shape the reality women face at work. This special issue also draws on diverse methodologies and theoretical perspectives to advance organisational policies that support individual agency, while avoiding the categorisation of women in ways that undermine their equality (Hoobler *et al.*, 2018; Hosoda and Nagano, 2024).

Overview of the contents

The articles in this special issue showcase a range of scholarly efforts to examine the current state of gender equality through systematic literature reviews, Acker's gendered organisations perspective, intersectionality, management control systems (MCS) and corporate governance theory. The special issue highlights women's progress by presenting evidence on firm performance at the board and management levels, discussing examples of workplace practices, leadership styles and disclosure and reporting a more nuanced perspective of the individual experiences.

The first paper by Stefanos Karakolias and Nikolaos Polyzos, "Should women continue to be less preferred for managerial positions? Evidence from Greece based on public hospitals' financial performance", is an evidence piece from Greece contributing to the debate on whether women should continue to be under-represented in the higher management positions in organisations. In a quantitative analysis of all Greek public hospitals operating in 2022, financial performance was assessed using financial ratios, and female representation was evaluated based on the gender of the CEO and CFO, with descriptive statistics, t-tests, and correlation analysis being performed. The results indicate that female CEOs outperformed male counterparts in liquidity and accounts payable turnover, while female CFOs excelled in inventory turnover. However, hospitals with male CFOs exhibited higher profitability, though this appeared to be potentially influenced by self-manipulation through state subsidies and cash accounting techniques. This indicates women prioritize financial aspects aligning with public entities' social roles.

The second paper, "Boardroom dynamics in Indian private banks: how nonexecutive and women directors affect financial performance", by Alok Pandey and Pooja Chaturvedi Sharma examines how boardroom dynamics, specifically the presence of non-executive and women directors, impact the financial performance of private banks in India. Using 10 years of data from 21 Indian private banks, the study finds that board size, gender diversity and nonexecutive directors significantly influence financial performance. Additionally, the presence of women directors enhances decision-making, underscoring the role of governance structures in driving sustainable financial success. The study advances corporate governance theory by highlighting the critical role of nonexecutive and women directors in enhancing firm value. Further, it reinforces the importance of strengthening governance practices in private banks, benefiting a broad segment of the population and contributing to overall economic growth. By validating agency and critical mass theories, the study confirms that diverse board compositions lead to improved financial outcomes.

The third paper, "Is board gender diversity considered a signal of IPO quality? Evidence from Indonesia", by Diana Riyana Harjayanti, Suherman Suherman and Gatot Nazir Ahmad investigates the impact of board gender diversity on initial public offering (IPO) underpricing in Indonesia, as well as the moderating effect of CEO ownership on the relationship between female executives and IPO underpricing. Using a sample of 384 IPO firms listed on the Indonesia stock exchange, the study finds that board gender diversity helps reduce underpricing by increasing investor interest and providing positive signals. Moreover, CEO ownership reinforces this relationship. These findings offer valuable insights, particularly for establishing standard governance mechanisms in emerging countries such as Indonesia. Further, integrating gender diversity into governance structures can enhance the social status of women, thereby strengthening their roles in society as well.

The fourth paper, "Fair compensation for women in leadership: impact on firm performance", by Elise K.Y. Looi, Sharon G.M. Koh and Grace H.Y. Lee examines how gender equality in boardrooms, managerial positions and executive roles influences firm financial performance. Specifically, it explores the moderating effect of fair remuneration on this relationship, using data from 279 publicly listed companies in Malaysia. The study finds that a higher proportion of women in leadership positions significantly enhances firm performance. Moreover, the findings confirm that fair remuneration moderates the link between gender diversity and firm performance, though it introduces unintended effects that slightly diminish the overall benefits of increased female representation. This underscores the importance of strategically integrating gender diversity initiatives with compensation policies to ensure they work together effectively for optimal outcomes.

The fifth paper, "Exploring the intersection of management control systems and gender equality: an integrative literature review", by Masahiro Hosoda and Hitomi Toyosaki presents a systematic review of how MCS contribute to gender equality and how female managers use these systems. The paper examines the relationship between gender equality and both formal and informal MCS, as well as the influence of internal and external organisational factors. Additionally, it explores how managerial gender affects the use of MCS. The study highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach to designing MCS that integrates these various perspectives to effectively promote gender equality. By offering new insights into the intersection of gender and MCS research, this study paves the way for future research in this evolving field.

The sixth paper by Francesca Nepoti, Ylenia Curzi and Filippo Ferrarini, "Are developmental performance management systems inclusive? An intersectional analysis for age and gender", argues that employee's developmental performance management systems on occupational wellbeing that is regarded as a practice of inclusion for women in the workplace is flawed. Their analysis discloses the need for an intersectional perspective and acknowledges the limitations of the developmental performance management system as a systematic approach towards occupational wellbeing for employees with diverse intersectional identities. The authors also dismiss the possible inclusive outcome of competency-based employee performance systems.

The seventh paper, "Assessing gender theme in European financial institutions: an analysis through a new interval-based composite indicator", by Alberto Manzari, Carlo Drago, Loris Di Nallo and Salvatore Principale investigates gender diversity in sustainability reports gathered from 68 financial firms listed on the EuroStoxx 600 Banks Index and EuroStoxx 600 Insurance Index between 2019 and 2020. Based on a qualitative-quantitative research method, they reveal that Spain, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Ireland and Norway exhibit the best practices in gender diversity disclosure within the banking and insurance sectors. They also highlight the role of sustainability reporting as a strategic tool for fostering gender inclusion and corporate governance transparency.

The eighth paper, “Workplace practices and work-life balance in Europe: the role of gender and home and family care”, by Pedro Ferreira, Sofia Gomes and João M. Lopes explores how workplace practices influence work-life balance when family time is available and how these effects differ between men and women. Using a quantitative, longitudinal analysis of a large data set comprising 71,758 workers from 36 European countries, the study reveals persistent gender imbalances in home and family care responsibilities, even amid growing efforts to promote DEI. The findings highlight significant gender differences in how home and family care impacts work-life balance, emphasizing that workplace practices extending family care time should be viewed not only as family-friendly initiatives but as gender-inclusive policies. This research offers valuable insights for organisations seeking to foster not just family-friendly work environments, but, more importantly, gender-equitable workplace practices.

The ninth paper, “Gender differences in leadership styles: insights from Basque country enterprises”, by Fernando Díez, Antonia Moreno Cano, Josu Solabarrieta and Elene Igoa-Iraola identifies characteristics and barriers faced by women in leadership roles using a sample from Spain. They reported that while women excelled in a number of leadership qualities, they face significant challenges advancing to higher level management roles. With minimal differences between women and men’s ability to carry out leadership, the authors propose that organisational interventions targeted to women will promote gender diversity and equality in leadership positions.

The tenth paper, “Assessing the state of gender equality for skilled migrant women: intersectionality challenges”, by Uma Jogulu, Melissa Parris and Juliana Mutum assesses the state of gender equality for skilled migrant women using an intersectionality framework to show the influence of gender and cultural backgrounds to provide a holistic view of the factors impeding gender equality for highly skilled migrant women in Australia. Their mixed method study adds to the importance of examining unique experiences of women from the intersection of gender, cultural background and career aspirations.

The eleventh paper, “Pioneers, critical observers, and hesitant: a taxonomy of identities of female directors on supervisory boards”, by Irma Rybnikova, Thomas Steger and Ingo Winkler also examines the experiences of female directors on the supervisory boards of large publicly listed German companies, focusing on their minority status. Based on 15 qualitative interviews, the study identifies three distinct identity positions that female directors adopt when reflecting on their roles: “pioneer,” “critical observer” and “hesitant.” This research contributes to gender-focused corporate governance studies and tokenism theory by extending the discussion beyond numerical representation, highlighting identity as a crucial factor in understanding majority-minority dynamics within supervisory boards.

Conclusion

This special issue presents current evidence and research that contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality and seeks to inform future developments in the field. The papers collectively report the influence of contextual factors, intersectional challenges in shaping gender equality experiences for employees. More significantly, we hope that this special issue serves as a timely invitation for diversity scholars to engage more deeply and proactively, particularly in the light of the ongoing DEI backlash emerging from parts of the Global North.

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