

The gender gap in gender-inclusive leadership practices: what men say they do and what women just don't see

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121

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the engagement of male executives in gender-inclusive leadership practices within the normative constraints of the gendered organisation.

Design/methodology/approach – We developed a questionnaire focused on gender-inclusive leadership practices. A total of 1,205 executives in Switzerland completed the anonymous online survey. Male managers self-rated the questionnaire, while female managers assessed their external perspectives on men's engagement in gender-inclusive leadership practices. The data is analysed using variable cluster analysis.

Findings – Findings indicate that male executives are more likely to engage in practices that facilitate work-life integration and demand fairness, but less likely to support and promote women. Furthermore, they are notably critical of measures that challenge the status quo. Women are significantly more critical in their ratings, particularly concerning men's engagement with gender equality in public.

Practical implications – Insights into male executives' engagement with gender-inclusive leadership practices offer vital information for tailored training and intervention. Moreover, a clear understanding of the discrepancy between women's and men's perspectives fosters dialogue and is crucial for developing an inclusive climate.

Social implications – As women remain underrepresented in higher organisational echelons, the findings support both the debate and further interventions for organisational transformation towards inclusion.

Originality/value – This study contributes to recent debates on inclusive leadership. By contextualising the actions and inactions of male managers in the gendered organisation, the findings reveal that male executives are engaged in stabilising the status quo.

Keywords Gender-inclusive leadership practices, Male Allies, Gendered organisation, Gender gap, Inclusion
Paper type Research article

Introduction

The inclusive work climate and the vital role of leadership are emerging topics that are gaining momentum (Shore *et al.*, 2018). Research indicates that an inclusive work climate offers several beneficial effects on organisations. It aids in reducing turnover rates (Nishii and Mayer, 2009) and conflicts (Nishii, 2012), while fostering creativity (Zhu *et al.*, 2020) and innovative work behaviour (Javed *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, it typically influences workers' well-being and psychological safety (Javed *et al.*, 2019). Studies on inclusive work climates reveal that leadership is a vital variable in nurturing an inclusive climate (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2021; Ashikali *et al.*, 2021; Nishii and Leroy, 2022; Veli Korkmaz *et al.*, 2022). Inclusive leadership involves leadership activities that promote inclusion. Regarding women, recent research demonstrates that gender-inclusive leadership has a positive impact on women's careers (Meng and Neill, 2021) and is closely associated with combating sexual harassment and

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fostering an inclusive work environment (Perry *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, gender-inclusive leadership practices are essential if an organisation seeks to attract and retain women in male-dominated fields (Moser and Bransco, 2022). In this study, we focus on the specific inclusive leadership practices relevant to the inclusion of women in the workplace.

Feeling included signifies that a person is accepted in a group without being compelled to conform, and is recognised and respected for their unique talents and characteristics (Shore *et al.*, 2011). Inclusive leadership is defined as offering individual support, ensuring justice and fairness, engaging in shared decision-making and cultivating a sense of belonging (Shore *et al.*, 2011). By fostering uniqueness, inclusive leadership encourages diverse contributions and enables individuals to fully participate (Randel *et al.*, 2018; Al-Atwi and Al-Hassani, 2021). According to Roberson and Perry's study (2021) for instance, inclusive leaders are depicted as being collaborative and approachable, minimising status differences, facilitating participation, and nurturing a sense of community. Furthermore, they say inclusive leaders need to be attentive listeners who show genuine interest in others' perspectives and acknowledge diversity, as well as respond to individual needs and working styles. However, while a growing body of studies highlights what *leaders ought to do* to become inclusive leaders, we still lack empirical evidence regarding what leaders *actually do* (Roberson and Perry, 2021).

In this study, we investigate what leaders actually do. However, this is firmly constrained by organisational norms. For instance, research on allyship indicates that managers who support marginalised groups often belong to historically privileged groups and, consequently, are part of not only the over-represented but also the dominant majority (Sawyer and Valerio, 2018). In consequence, white Allies are perceived as less engaged by people of colour compared to Allies of colour (Brown and Ostrove, 2013), and men's allyship with regard to women is likely to be perceived as counterproductive (Cortis *et al.*, 2022). Research on the gendered organisation highlights that by engaging in inclusive leadership, men are often perceived as violating the norms of hegemonic masculinity (Flood and Pease, 2005; Humbert *et al.*, 2019; Wahl, 2014). Their engagement is perceived as risky (Sang *et al.*, 2014), as male managers may not be taken seriously or may lose the support of their male colleagues, which can result in feelings of betrayal or irritation regarding their masculinity (Flood and Pease, 2005). Therefore, gendered organisational norms and practices create particular challenges for men as change agents (Tienari and Taylor, 2019). Hence, what men can do is severely constrained by these gendered organisational norms.

With this study, we aim to address the recent call to investigate what leaders actually say they do. Surveying 852 male managers in Switzerland, we scrutinise two major research questions: First, we want to know which gender-inclusive leadership practices men in executive positions report engaging in – or are willing to consider – as well as those practices they are more reluctant to embrace or outright reject. Furthermore, we investigate how practices aligned with gendered organisational norms are more positively received compared to those challenging the status quo. Secondly, we want to understand how men's engagement is perceived from the perspective of women. By contrasting men's self-ratings with the perspective of their female colleagues working for the same companies, we uncover a significant gender gap.

The findings contribute to the literature in three ways: First, they reveal a hierarchy regarding the extent to which gender-inclusive leadership practices are already adopted and accepted by men in management. Most importantly, the male managers we surveyed were more focused on preserving the status quo than challenging it. This finding highlights the importance of social norms in shaping men's engagement. Second, the significant gender gap between men's and women's perspectives demonstrates that men's self-ratings tend to overestimate their activities. Third, this overestimation is particularly relevant regarding fostering organisational change towards an inclusive climate. As diverging perspectives indicate a weak inclusion climate (Reinwald *et al.*, 2019), developing shared perspectives is regarded as essential first steps in not only fostering but also securing inclusive work environments.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we review the literature on gender-inclusive leadership practices and contextualise gender-inclusive leadership within the normative

constraints of the gendered organisation. We then introduce the Gender-Inclusive Leadership Questionnaire that we developed and explain how we conducted the survey with 1,205 male and female managers in Switzerland. Finally, we present the results and show how men and women differ in their reports on the actual implementation of gender-inclusive leadership and discuss these findings. We conclude that the significance of these insights lies in their potential to promote the organisational change necessary to leverage inclusive leadership.

Literature review

Gender-inclusive leadership practices: what needs to be done

Gender-inclusive leadership practices delineate what can and should be done. They foster a climate of inclusion and strive to make everyone feel they belong (Shore *et al.*, 2018). However, thus far, we do not know what executives in these roles are doing, or which practices are more prevalent and which are seldom implemented. By examining inclusive leadership practices, we seek to identify the actions that individual leaders can take to promote gender equality. Building upon Shore *et al.*'s framework of inclusion, inclusive leadership is characterised as "a set of positive leader behaviours that facilitate group members perceiving belongingness in the work group while maintaining their uniqueness within the group as they fully contribute to group processes and outcomes" (Randel *et al.*, 2018). To help team members feel that they belong, leaders must (1) support, (2) ensure justice and equity and (3) provide opportunities for shared decision-making (Randel, 2018, p. 193). As the emphasis on belongingness needs to be paired with a focus on valuing uniqueness, Randel *et al.* (2018) recommend concentrating on two key areas: (1) encouraging diverse contributions and (2) assisting group members in fully offering their unique talents and perspectives.

Overall, this research outlines very general activities that leaders can undertake to promote inclusion. However, when focusing on a specific identity to be included, these tasks become more targeted. With regards to women, the most comprehensive compendium on inclusive leadership practices derives from Kelan's (2015) qualitative study, which summarises four sets of practices: "celebrating and encouraging women", "calling out bias", "championing and defending gender equality initiatives", and "challenging working practices". Firstly, "celebrating and encouraging women" involves strategies that recognise women's contributions and motivate them to become more visible. An example provided by Kelan features a manager who supports a team member in taking on a leadership role by enhancing her visibility, volunteering to mentor her, actively seeking out opportunities for women to speak on panels and reassuring this woman about participating as a panellist. In recognising women, it is essential to emphasise their contributions. When others overlook a female colleague's work, the gender-inclusive leader would provide her with support.

A second important field of action involves "calling out bias" and "counteracting situations where gender biases appear in the workplace" (Kelan, 2015, p. 10). Inclusive leaders must break free from the comfort of a homogeneous in-group culture. This could entail focusing on the actual assessment criteria in evaluation situations or highlighting stereotypical perceptions of women that obstruct an objective assessment of their skills. Furthermore, a gender-inclusive leader should neither accept devaluing or sexist remarks nor tolerate women being interrupted in meetings. Additionally, gender-inclusive leaders ought to monitor their language and refrain from undermining women or failing to take them seriously. Thirdly, "championing and defending gender equality initiatives" is crucial, as gender equality requires a supportive organisational culture to develop and flourish. Managers must serve as role models and foster support and legitimacy for gender equality initiatives. They should volunteer to act as advocates, defend the implemented measures and support the project. The use of language can significantly impact gender equality in the workplace (Kelan, 2015). Avoiding male-dominated language and metaphors, such as those associated with football or the military, is vital. Lastly, Kelan (2015) suggests that "challenging working practices" is important. Certain work practices, such as working time arrangements, hinder both women

and men from balancing their personal lives and careers; one crucial way to address this issue is by implementing practices that promote a better work-life balance.

Given these findings on gender-inclusive leadership practices, our study builds on this compendium. However, knowing what can be done does not yet indicate what is being taken up in leaders' everyday practices. Therefore, this study sets out to further investigate the practices that leaders are already engaging in. Particularly, with our first research question, we seek to understand which practices they are hesitant to adopt and those they largely resist.

Contextualising gender-inclusive leadership: becoming Allies or protecting the status quo?

When it comes to leadership roles, most are held by men. Therefore, it is mainly men who need to be involved in promoting gender-inclusive leadership practices (Cortis *et al.*, 2022; Kelan and Wratil, 2021; DeVries, 2015; Hearn, 1989). Furthermore, female leaders advocating for gender equality often encounter scepticism, as they may be viewed as pursuing their own agendas (de Vries, 2015; Hekman *et al.*, 2017), as “overreacting and complaining” (Yoon *et al.*, 2023, pp. 2–3) or as lacking power (de Vries, 2015). Conversely, men in leadership positions are perceived as possessing greater legitimacy (Drury and Kaiser, 2014), are more effective in mobilising wider support, particularly among other men (Hardacre *et al.*, 2018) and are associated with positive outcomes, such as higher self-confidence and less stereotypical behaviour. In particular, heterosexual cis-men are seen as powerful supporters of gender equality, as they are in a privileged position (Sawyer and Valerio, 2018).

However, men's support is not innocent either. Research on the gendered organisation (Acker, 1990) indicates that men are practising masculinity at work (Martin, 2001; Kelan, 2018). As Kelan's (2018) extensive literature demonstrates, men may bond with other men and exclude women; they might distance themselves from women or seek to impress other men by displaying heroism. Men perceive women as “the other” and engage in routines and rituals that perpetuate women's marginalisation within the organisation. Such practices are often subtle, and managers may remain unaware of them (Kelan, 2018). When engaging with gender equality, men might also be seen as “traitors” to this homosocial culture (Flood and Pease, 2005, p. 13). For instance, men frequently find it difficult to articulate gender inequalities due to their fear of losing the comfort of the homosocial in-group. This can lead to negative outcomes and stigmatise men who act supportively (Rudman *et al.*, 2012).

Consequently, male executives often accept the gender status quo rather than challenging structural gender inequalities and confronting decision-makers (Brook *et al.*, 2021). For instance, Conzon (2023) demonstrates through a long-term ethnographic study that managers only acted in support of the programme if it did not interfere with their managerial roles. Differentiating between “feminist” actions aimed at combating gender inequality and “protective” actions that aim to shield women from violence, Radke *et al.* (2018) also showcase important differences in men's and women's engagement. While women reported stronger intentions to engage in “feminist” action, men were more hesitant about such actions and leaned towards “protective” actions aimed at safeguarding women from violence. Hence, men's activities were more concerned with keeping up the status quo than counter-acting discrimination.

Thus, gender-inclusive leadership is significantly constrained by these gendered organisational norms. Therefore, leaders' behaviour must be understood in the context of the gendered organisation and must take the taken-for-granted power dynamics into account (Kelan, 2018). With regards to gender-inclusive leadership practices, our understanding needs to extend beyond what men should do and illuminate what can be accomplished within the strong constraints of gendered organisational norms at work. We therefore hypothesise that gender-inclusive leadership practices aimed at challenging the status quo are reported less frequently compared to practices which neither counteract nor challenge the existing organisational norms.

What men say they do and women don't see

Given that gendered organisational norms have an impact on the kind of inclusive leadership practices that executives are willing to adopt – or more reluctant to engage in – it is essential not to rely solely on the perspective of the privileged group. While self-evaluations often exaggerate the activities undertaken (Beyer, 1990), there is also evidence that being a member of a privileged group has significant effects on the respective perspectives regarding discrimination at work. For example, Küskü *et al.* (2022) illustrate that individuals who experience “a sense of belonging” and those who feel “a sense of otherness” differ in their perceptions of diversity management. Out-group members tend to hold a more critical viewpoint and are “less satisfied with diversity efforts in their organisation” (Küskü *et al.*, 2022, p. 1). While leaders may advocate for the implementation of gender equality measures, staff members generally express less enthusiasm (Cortis *et al.*, 2022). There are also effects with regard to gender, as Becker and Swim (2011) have shown. For instance, men tend not to see gender-based discrimination in the workplace that is readily recognised by women. However, when they do recognise discrimination, they tend to evaluate it as less serious and pervasive, as Iyer and Ryan's (2008) study highlights. Consequently, men are also less willing to take action.

Regarding race and allyship, Brown and Ostrove (2013) indicate that white Allies and Allies of colour are perceived differently by people of colour. White Allies are seen as less active in engaging with racial issues compared to Allies of colour. Concerning gender, Warren and Schwam (2023) demonstrate that men both underestimate and overestimate their allyship behaviour. Notably, this directly impacts women, as their sense of inclusion and vitality diminishes accordingly. For instance, women experience greater inclusion and vitality when men's estimations of their own sense of justice, moral courage and civility are lower or similar to those of women. Hence, male Allies who overestimate their good motives are perceived more critically by women, and their actions do not necessarily qualify as motivated by sound intentions. Although only a few studies have thus far considered the perception of allyship from the viewpoint of the nondominant group (Brown and Ostrove, 2013), it is highly probable, based on these findings, that a significant gender gap exists concerning the differences in women's and men's perspectives on equal opportunities and feelings of inclusion in the workplace. In this study, we not only asked male leaders about their (possible and likely) activities but also consulted the female colleagues within the same companies. How do they perceive men's involvement in gender-inclusive leadership practices? What activities do they notice, and how often do they observe these? As women are members of underrepresented groups, we assume that their perspectives differ from those of men. Based on these findings, we hypothesise that men's assessment of what they do in practice is more positive than women's assessment.

Methodology

Investigating both the engagement of men in management with gender-inclusive leadership practices and their female colleagues' perspective on this engagement, we analysed data from a self-rating instrument. Drawing on Kelan's (2015) qualitative findings, we developed a questionnaire featuring 23 items that addressed the four categories of gender-inclusive leadership practices she identified. The items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale (5 = *I'm already doing it*, 4 = *I would definitely do it*, 3 = *It is likely that I would do it*, 2 = *It is unlikely ...*, 1 = *I would definitely not do it*). To gain an external perspective from female managers, we rephrased the questions (The managers in my company: 5 = *They are already doing it*, 4 = *They would definitely do it*, 3 = *It is likely that they would do it*, 2 = *It is unlikely ...*, 1 = *They would definitely not do it*).

Participants were recruited from companies involved in an action research project. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study adheres to the ethical guidelines set by the author's university ethics committee. These companies are traditional and

male-dominated, mainly from the Swiss private sector, including finance, insurance, retail, transportation and engineering. The survey was conducted over 163 days, from February 14, 2020, to July 25, 2020.

To explore the structural relationships among the 23 items, we utilised Variable Cluster Analysis (VCA) based on Principal Component Analysis (PCA) (SAS Institute Inc, 2024). VCA enables us to organise variables into non-overlapping, thematically coherent clusters. Through VCA, the first principal component within each subset of variables is extracted, ideally reflecting the characteristics of each cluster. This principal component is subsequently employed as a proxy for the underlying structure of the cluster; variables are grouped according to their strongest correlation with this component (Sanche and Lonergan, 2006). By constructing disjoint clusters, VCA reduces complexity and provides a clear and interpretable summary of the data (SAS Institute, 2024).

We applied VCA because its fundamental assumptions and output format align effectively with the descriptive and structure-oriented goals of this study: identifying a hierarchy between gender-inclusive leadership practices and differences among practices. Aiming to scrutinise the effects of gendered organisational norms on the likelihood of adopting gender-inclusive leadership practices, we identified patterns of variables with similar characteristics (Saxena *et al.*, 2017). VCA is purely descriptive and provides further insights into the quality of these practices. VCA is exploratory and does not model underlying dimensions, unlike Factor Analysis (FA). In contrast, FA aims to identify latent constructs. Moreover, since variables in FA can load on multiple factors, it is often more challenging to assign items to exclusive conceptual domains (Everitt and Dunn, 2001). VCA is a method that is well recognised in scenarios where identifying latent factors is not essential or theoretically justified. VCA provides a methodological advantage, as it allows for the summarisation of the data into a higher-level structure that enhances both clarity and simplicity in reporting and interpretation (Pasta and Suhr, 2004). The results are organised within a hierarchical framework, as we will explain in the following section. Continuous variables are reported as mean (M) and standard deviation (SD), while categorical and ordinal variables are presented as frequencies (N) and percentages (%). Data were analysed using JMP 17.2 software (SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA).

Results

Sample and sociodemographics

A total of $n = 1,827$ people opened the survey link. Of these, $n = 1,298$ took part in the survey, corresponding to a response rate of 71%. Ninety-three male participants in non-management positions were excluded; we included only male employees with personnel responsibility. However, the female sample also includes employees without personnel responsibility, as we were mainly interested in their external perspective on men in executive roles. We asked all respondents to indicate their gender identity according to three categories: *female*, *male*, and *diverse*. While we had hoped for some insights into how diversity-identifying executives perceive gender-inclusive leadership, the small sample of only three respondents did not allow for further analysis. The sample comprises 1,205 participants: 852 (71%) male, 353 (29%) female. The sociodemographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

What men in executive positions say they do

The descriptive analysis of the responses from male participants reveals that 16 out of the 23 items are marked as *very likely to engage in these practices* or *already doing so*. However, only four items have more than 50% of participants, indicating that they are currently engaging in these practices. Additionally, 10 leadership practices are used by less than 30% of the men in our sample. While men generally express relatively positive attitudes towards gender-inclusive leadership practices, they indicate that they are less frequently implementing them.

Table 1. Sample description

	Male	Female
<i>Age mean (SD)</i>	47.1 (8.8)	42.6 (8.9)
<i>Job load N (%)</i>		
80–100%	842 (98.8%)	317 (89.8%)
50–79%	8 (0.9%)	34 (9.6%)
<50%	2 (0.2%)	2 (0.6%)
<i>Number of employees in the company N (%)</i>		
<50	82 (9.6%)	43 (12.2%)
50–249	43 (5%)	42 (12%)
250–499	26 (3.1%)	20 (5.7%)
500–1,499	44 (5.2%)	41 (11.6%)
1,500–5,000	278 (32.6%)	104 (29.5%)
>5,000	379 (44.5%)	103 (29.2%)
<i>Management level N (%)</i>		
Employee	0	15 (4.3%)
Specialist (without personnel responsibility)	0	31 (8.8%)
Team leader	369 (43.3%)	136 (38.5%)
Department manager	159 (18.7%)	49 (13.9%)
Branch manager	111 (13%)	27 (7.6%)
Head of division/division/sales group	113 (13.3%)	35 (9.9%)
Operations manager/directorate manager	100 (11.7%)	39 (11.1%)
Other	0	21 (5.9%)
<i>Children in the household N (%)</i>	556 (65.3%)	132 (37.4%)

Note(s): Percentages have been rounded, therefore totals may not add up exactly to 100%

Source(s): Authors' own work

The variable cluster analysis (VCA) identified five variable clusters (see [Figure 1](#)): Variable cluster one with seven items, “Demanding fairness”; variable cluster two with three items, “Facilitating work-life integration”; variable cluster three with seven items, “Developing a culture of equality”; variable cluster four with three items, “Supporting and promoting women”; and variable cluster five with three items, “Rejecting work-life integration.” The five variable clusters primarily confirm Kelan’s four categories of gender-inclusive leadership practices, with one exception concerning work practices. The analysis differentiates between two aspects: while variable cluster three focuses on practices that facilitate work-life integration and are largely accepted, variable cluster five includes those items that are rejected by the majority of the executives.

Focusing on men’s engagement in gender-inclusive leadership practices, our analysis draws from the participants’ self-rating statement, *I’m already doing it*. Results show that variable cluster two, “Facilitating work-life integration,” reflects the cluster with the highest engagement orientation, while variable cluster three, “Developing a culture of equality,” and also number five, “Rejecting work-life integration,” contain items that reflect greater reluctance to engage. Situated between these two extremes are variable cluster one, “Demanding fairness,” and variable cluster four, “Supporting and promoting women.”

The highest engagement is with variable cluster two, “Facilitating work-life integration,” which includes the top acceptance rate in this survey: 61.9% of men say they are *making mobile work/home office possible*. This finding is expected, occurring right after the first COVID-19 lockdown in Switzerland, when remote work was mandatory. Men show a strong inclination towards practices like *Making part-time work and/or job sharing possible* (53.6%), and *Making sure that meetings end in such a way that mothers and fathers can pick up and look after their children* (40.1%).

Variable cluster one, “Demanding fairness,” similarly includes practices that are widely endorsed by men, focusing on ensuring fair treatment of women. The majority of men report

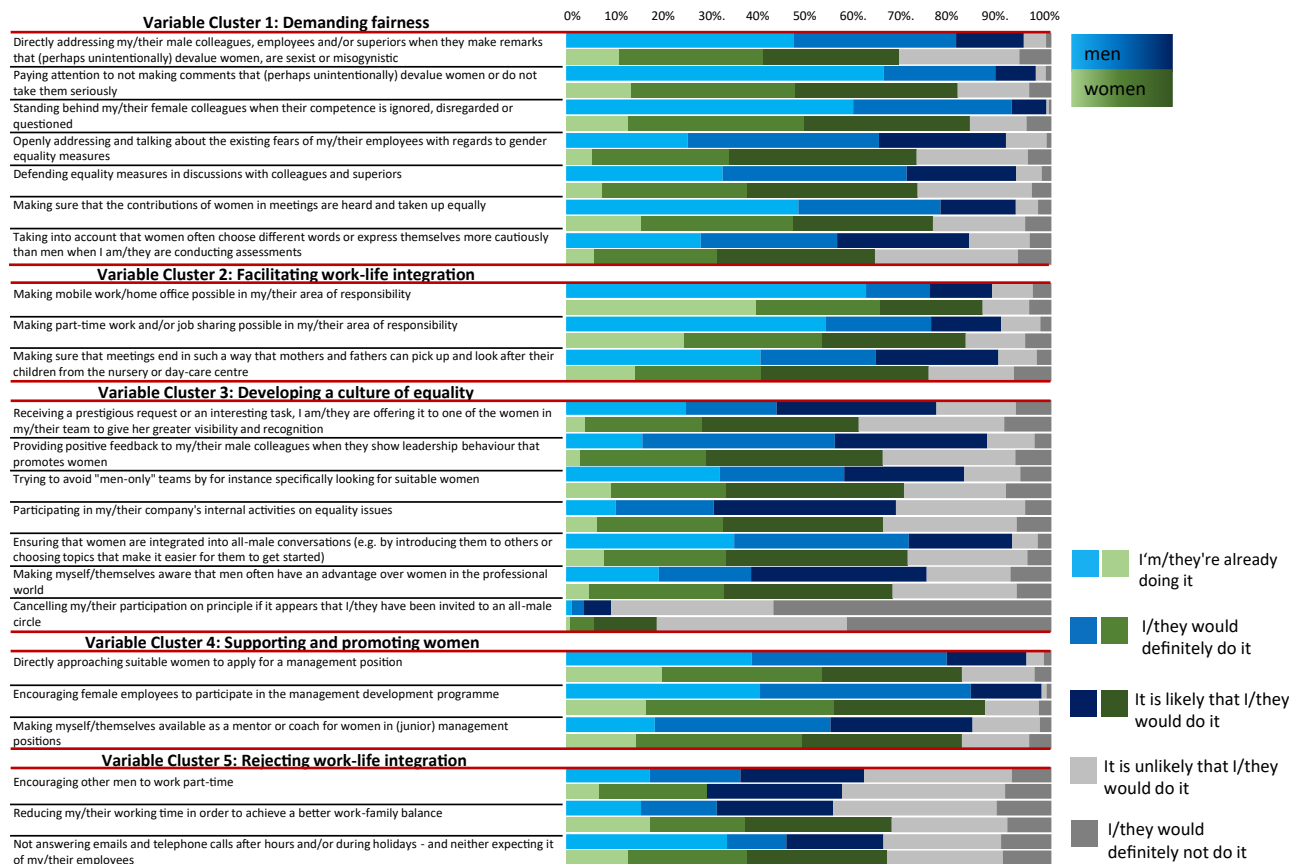


Figure 1. The five variable clusters of the gender-inclusive leadership questionnaire. Source: Authors' own work

that they *Pay attention to not making comments that devalue women or are do not take them seriously* (65.5%), and 59.1% state they would *Stand behind their female colleagues when their competence is ignored, disregarded or questioned*.

However, the data reveals that men are less willing to engage in practices that involve other men's behaviour. About half indicated that they *Make sure that the contributions of women are heard and taken up equally* (47.9%), and some would also *Directly address their male colleagues, employees and/or superiors when they make remarks that devalue women, are sexist or misogynistic* (46.8%). Yet, only 32.3% are active in *Defending equality measures in discussions with colleagues or superiors*. One-third say they would *Ensure that women are included in all-male conversations*. Least favoured practices are *Openly addressing and talking about the existing fears of their employees with regards to gender equality measures* and *Taking into account that women often choose different words or express themselves more cautiously than men when they are conducting assessments*. Overall, men find it easier to change their own behaviour than to challenge their peers, especially regarding questioning the status quo in evaluations. Nevertheless, practices in variable cluster one, "Demanding fairness" and variable cluster two, "Facilitating work-life integration" are generally accepted and likely to be implemented.

In contrast, variable cluster four, "Supporting and promoting women," contain practices that are well-received by the men surveyed. This includes three direct support activities: *Approaching suitable women for management positions*, and *Encouraging female employees to join management development programs*, both viewed positively by about 40% of the respondents. However, participation in the third practice, *Being available as a mentor for women in junior management* (18.3%), is significantly lower, likely due to a lack of mentoring programs in the participating companies. Overall, while supportive actions towards women are widely accepted in principle, they are not yet common in practice.

The least appealing practices, which received the lowest ratings and were largely rejected by participants, were found in the last two variable clusters. In variable cluster five, "Rejecting work-life integration", men are unwilling to *Reduce their working time to part-time* (15.5%) or *Encourage other men to work part-time* (17.2%). Additionally, about one-third refuse to maintain work-life boundaries. *Not answering emails and calls after hours or during holidays* is practised by 33.1% of surveyed men, but this result remains highly controversial.

Variable cluster three, "Developing a culture of equality", includes leadership practices often critiqued by men. It focuses on transforming culture and challenging male privilege. The most accepted items are to *Ensure that women are included in all-male conversations* (34.6%) and to *Avoid men-only teams by seeking suitable women* (31.7%). Although men seek female involvement, most reject the "all-male panel" initiative's suggestion to cancel meetings if no women attend (1.1%). Additionally, responses reveal ambivalence on several items: *Making themselves aware that men often have an advantage* (19.1%), *Offering prestigious tasks to women in their team* (24.8%), and *Providing positive feedback to male colleagues when they show leadership behaviour that promotes women* (15.7%) show nearly equal levels of agreement and disagreement. Even less accepted are practices requiring visible commitment, like *Participating in gender equality events* (10.2%).

Overall, the results indicate a clear hierarchy in men's willingness to engage with gender-inclusive leadership practices (see [Figure 2](#)). While men are very positive about their involvement in practices that rely on well-established measurements or programmes, such as part-time or remote-working arrangements, they are far more hesitant regarding practices that involve standing up in public or confronting the behaviour of other men. Surprisingly, however, men do demonstrate engagement when it comes to demanding fairness, even when it requires them to intervene in situations perceived as unjust.

What women (don't) see

The responses from the female executives and non-executives we surveyed offer an external perspective on men's engagement with gender-inclusive leadership. Overall, women are more

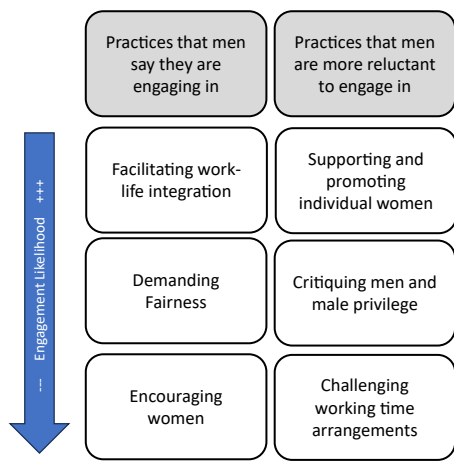


Figure 2. The hierarchy of gender-inclusive leadership practices from men’s self-ratings. Source: Authors’ own work

sceptical. They rate all gender-inclusive practices as less likely to be implemented by their male colleagues (see Figure 1). Most notably, over 50% do not regard any of these practices as essential for their male colleagues. As with male respondents, *Making remote work/home office possible* received the highest ratings, with 39.2% of women noting this practice as important to men. *Making part-time work possible* follows at 24.3%, but all other practices are ranked as low probability: *Directly approaching suitable women to apply* reaches 19.9%, *Encouraging female employees to participate in the management development programme* 16.5%, and *Reducing my working time in order to achieve a better work-family balance* 17.3%. All other practices are perceived more critically. Most of the practices in the first and third variable clusters, “Demanding fairness” and “Developing a culture of equality”, received predominantly negative ratings, suggesting women view them as very unlikely to be performed by men.

A significant gender gap appears across the ratings. The discrepancy between men’s self-ratings and women’s other-ratings ranges from sixfold (*Receiving a prestigious request or an interesting task, I am offering it to one of the women in my team to give her greater visibility and recognition*) to nearly equal (*Reducing my working time in order to achieve a better work-family balance*). The largest differences occur in the clusters “Demanding fairness” and “Developing a culture of equality”. The four leadership practices with the greatest discrepancies are:

- (1) *Directly addressing male colleagues, employees and/or superiors when they make remarks that devalue women, are sexist, or misogynistic,*
- (2) *Paying attention to refrain from making comments that devalue women or fail to take them seriously,*
- (3) *Standing behind my female colleagues when their competence is ignored, overlooked or questioned, and*
- (4) *Making sure that the contributions of women in meetings are heard and taken up equally.*

These are highly visible practices, indicating they are not practised as frequently as men believe. Additionally, women are sceptical about the effectiveness of men’s efforts to speak openly about gender equality and proactively include women in their conversations.

Investigating leadership practices with the smallest gender differences reveals two groups. The four practices with discrepancies below 5% are those in which men are perceived as highly unlikely to engage – both by the men themselves and by the women assessing them. Here, women and men largely agree that those practices are seldom undertaken by men: *Participating in their company's internal activities on equality issues*, *Cancelling their participation on principle if it seems I have been invited to an all-male circle*, *Making themselves available as a mentor or coach for women in (junior) management positions* and *Reducing their working hours to achieve a better work-family balance*.

A second group includes four practices with a gender gap of 10–20%. The first, *Directly approaching suitable women to apply for a management position*, reflects direct interaction between women and men. The other three practices concern shifts in men's behaviour: *Providing positive feedback to my male colleagues when they show leadership behaviour that promotes women*, *Making myself aware that men often have an advantage over women in the professional world* and *Encouraging other men to work part-time*. Both men and women consider engagement in these practices contentious.

Overall, women are significantly more sceptical about men's actual engagement in practices (see Figure 3). While women show cautious optimism regarding men's engagement with well-established practices of part-time work or family-friendly meeting hours, their optimism vanishes when it comes to practices that require men to intervene in interactions, speak up publicly or critically reflect on male privilege. Hence, the women's assessment firmly confirms our hypothesis that practices that challenge the status quo have a far weaker standing than those that rely on already well-established structures, programmes or policies.

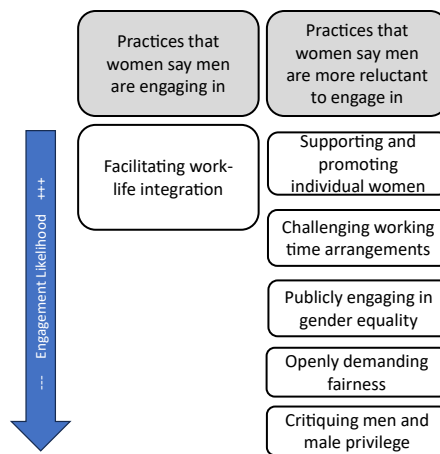


Figure 3. The hierarchy of gender-inclusive leadership practices from women's other-perspective. Source: Authors' own work

Discussion

This study addresses the research gap in inclusive leadership studies identified by Roberson and Perry (2021): we investigated what managers say they actually do. Our survey yields valuable insights into male managers' self-reported engagement in gender-inclusive leadership practices. Furthermore, we juxtaposed men's self-ratings with the perspectives of their female colleagues. The resulting gender gap is striking.

What have we learned about men's engagement? In line with the expectations informing our first research question, we found a clear hierarchy of gender-inclusive leadership practices.

While many male executives are engaging in some of them, they are reluctant in others. In summary, the analysis revealed several intriguing patterns: First, acting on a general imperative of fairness seems more attractive than demonstrating support for a specific group, particularly women. Supporting individual women may appear less appealing, as it could be viewed as contradicting meritocratic ideals, where personal achievement should be the central criterion for a managerial career.

Against this backdrop, promoting individuals is then perceived as offering an unfair advantage (Kelan and Wratil, 2021). Notably, we observe that activities directed at supporting specific women received higher engagement ratings than those that critiqued male privilege or men's actions. While approximately one-third of the men surveyed report on avoiding men-only teams and ensuring that women are integrated into all-male conversations, they are more reluctant to give feedback to their male colleagues or acknowledge their privileged position. While practices that enhance the inclusion of women appear legitimate to many men, practices that seek to change men's actions and challenge self-perception are evidently less appealing. This becomes even clearer when we also consider the negative ratings of these practices. Over 20% of men judged initiatives addressing male privilege – such as recognising men's advantage in the workplace, cancelling all-male circles and offering prestigious tasks to women – as undesirable. These findings show that when it comes to questioning male privilege and challenging the entrenched status quo, many men withdraw.

Practices for work-life integration reflect a defence strategy noted by Padavic *et al.* (2020). While it is generally accepted that women face challenges in balancing work and life, the norm of overtime remains unchallenged in most companies. The difference between variable cluster two and five lies in addressing overwork culture versus promoting work-life integration. Both clusters aim to adapt work practices to support employees with caregiving responsibilities, but only those with specific rules for parents receive broad acceptance. Reducing hours or encouraging men to do so is less favoured. Interestingly, a significant number of men choose not to participate in after-hours communication, resisting overtime expectations. About one-third of men find this practice essential, while another third find it inconceivable.

In summary, we conclude that practices aimed at challenging the status quo are adopted less frequently than those that support underrepresented groups, such as women. Hence, our findings align with what earlier research has also shown (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2021; Cortis *et al.*, 2021; Radke *et al.*, 2018): men are hesitant to engage in practices that question the status quo. In fact, preserving the status quo, while addressing issues for women or facilitating a work-life balance, allows male executives to be perceived as advocates of gender equality without necessitating significant change. Although many are motivated to become responsible leaders and engage in the fight against inequality, they are not (yet) prepared to interrogate their privilege or challenge the social norms that maintain gendered inequalities.

Yet, our findings also reveal a more nuanced picture. While men are somewhat reluctant to be publicly perceived as engaged with gender equality – for instance, by attending events – they show willingness to expose themselves through interactions that directly address unfairness, such as defending equality measures in discussions with colleagues and superiors. Acting upon an imperative of fairness appears to serve as a legitimate motivation for these participating men to actually stand up, even if this involves intervening in other men's behaviour and raising their voice in public. This pattern can be interpreted as confirming a “white knight” motive (Ruiz, 2019): practices that enable men to see themselves as helpers and protectors of women allow them to engage in heroic and chivalrous masculinity. Protective behaviour, however, has been shown to have detrimental effects on women, as it positions them as weak and dependent.

Our second research question reveals the magnitude of the gender gap. Comparing men's self-ratings with women's other-ratings indicates that women observe far less evidence of men's engagement than men report. This can partly be explained by a general tendency to overestimate one's own activities in self-ratings, especially if this casts a positive light on the actor (Yammarino and Atwater, 1997), often reflecting limited critical feedback

(Yammarino and Atwater, 1997). However, this gap also reflects in-group and out-group perspectives. As Küskü *et al.* (2022) have highlighted, those experiencing a “sense of otherness” – in this case, women – tend to be more critical of efforts to combat inequality and of privileged colleagues acting as Allies (Brown and Ostrove, 2013). Similarly, we can assume that women are more aware of inequality and therefore recognise and remember more situations that require intervention. Interestingly, our findings show that women’s ratings align more closely with men’s when evaluating gender-inclusive leadership practices men themselves tend to avoid.

Overall, these findings highlight that inclusion is perceived in significantly different ways. This underscores the importance of not only implementing general guidelines and strategies but also critically examining what is considered fair, equal and just, and what is not. Amplifying the voices of the non-dominant group and reinforcing women’s voices within the organisation is crucial for ensuring that their perspectives are heard.

Increasing awareness of workplace inequalities, alongside fostering understanding and shifting perspectives, may motivate men to speak up and become more engaged in questioning the status quo. However, it is essential to discuss gender inequality and exclusion, and to engage in developing a more collective understanding of what needs to be done to promote gender inclusion. Building on these insights, future research should explore the heterogeneity of perspectives on inclusive leadership, including queer and non-binary identities, non-privileged masculinities and other aspects of intersectionality. While we have shown the strong effects of privileged masculinities for inclusive leadership, our analysis is limited to male-dominated industries and a Swiss context. Other studies across different sectors are needed to explore possible variations in challenging – or defending – the status quo.

Ultimately, differences in perspectives among various groups within an organisation significantly influence the overall strength of the diversity climate (Reinwald *et al.*, 2019). To leverage inclusive leadership and effectively cultivate a robust diversity climate, this range in perspectives is not merely advantageous; it is essential for building an environment where all voices are valued and heard.

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