

Skilled migrant and self-initiated expatriate women: their managerial advancement in developed, mature economies

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Abstract

Purpose – Skilled migrant (SM) and self-initiated expatriate (SIE) women play a key role in meeting skill shortages in advanced economies and could expect to advance as much as counterparts (e.g. native-born) based on their credentials. Instead, they are often marginalized, working in lower-level positions. This review aims to explain the influences on SM and SIE women's managerial career advancement, factors potentially relevant to maximizing the proportion of women in management in the host country.

Design/methodology/approach – I conducted an integrated literature review, combining systematic and narrative reviewing. The systematic review yielded 64, most often qualitative empirical studies of SM (38) and SIE (26) women's managerial career advancement; the narrative review of the studies sought to identify the influences on managerial advancement, compared for the mobility types, enabling assessing a possible boundary condition.

Findings – The review revealed that skilled migration and self-initiated expatriation rarely resulted in women's managerial advancement; the women (especially SMs) advanced less than male and female counterparts. Being a woman, a migrant and/or non-white, or a mother, disadvantaged SM women's managerial advancement. Mostly gender-linked environmental barriers (e.g. discrimination) lowered SM women's managerial advancement, whereas individual-level positive facilitators (e.g. agency) enhanced SIEs'. Gender-linked theory explained SM and SIE women's managerial career advancement: three well-established theoretical lenses—intersectional identities, lack-of-fit and stereotyped gender-roles—together provided a coherent conceptual framework.

Originality/value – In an original contribution, achieved by contrasting SMs and SIEs, mobility type acted as a boundary condition on influences on SM and SIE women's managerial advancement, being more explanatory for SIEs. A tentatively proposed mediator-moderator framework explained the women's managerial career advancement, providing greater theoretical depth through simultaneously examining mechanisms (why) and context (when).

Keywords Self-initiated expatriates, Women, Skilled migrants, Managerial advancement

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Women worldwide share a common employment problem. They are much less likely to hold managerial positions than men (Equileap, 2022), on average one-third (Diaz, 2023; Eurostat, 2021a), resulting in their being deprived of key extrinsic (e.g. higher pay) and intrinsic (e.g. power) benefits (Purkayastha, 2005; Stalker and Mavin, 2011). Two little-recognized potential sources of women in management are skilled migrants (SMs) and self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). SM employees possess at least a tertiary degree (or equivalent) pre-migration, migrate legally to another country, and usually intend to stay long-term or permanently (e.g. Cerdin and Selmer, 2014). As doctors, nurses, allied health professionals or teachers, SM women provide an essential source of employees for critical industries (Kerr et al., 2017; OECD, 2021). In



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contrast, SIEs, who usually hold at least tertiary degrees, live and work temporarily and legally in another country, have secured a job before departure or on arrival, and usually intend to repatriate (e.g. [Brewster et al., 2021](#)). Notably, SIE women contribute to key service roles in business and government in communication, administration, marketing, and human resource management (HRM) ([McCoy and Masuch, 2007](#)).

To address industry shortages, host-country governments encourage SM and SIE women to migrate ([Bauloz et al., 2024](#); [Kofman, 2014](#)). However, many SM women are denied qualification-matched employment following migration, instead gaining less-skilled positions or becoming unemployed ([Cameron et al., 2019](#); [Tharenou's 2024](#) review). Women who were managers at home are invariably downgraded to non-managerial jobs, especially those from developing countries, and more than SM and SIE men ([Banerjee and Phan, 2015](#); [Gupta et al., 2014](#); [Jogulu et al., 2025](#); [Salaff and Greve, 2003](#)). Yet few studies have examined SM or SIE women's managerial advancement (e.g. see [Shaffer et al's., 2012](#), review). The present review aims to identify the factors explaining SM and SIEs' managerial career advancement by taking the novel approach of comparing these two traditionally demarcated global mobility types ([Brewster et al., 2021](#)).

A secondary, theoretical, aim which builds on the preceding, investigates whether the mobility types (SM, SIE) act as boundary conditions to explain women's managerial career advancement. Whether the two mobility types are different constructs or essentially the same one but differently labeled is a debated topic (e.g. [Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013](#); [McNulty and Brewster, 2017](#)). The different labels possibly reflect women's different origins (e.g. [Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013](#)). SMs more often come from developing countries (and thus are often non-White) and SIEs from developed countries (and thus are often White), leading to the labels of "migrant" and "expatriate" respectively ([Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013](#)). SM and SIE women have not been compared empirically to examine whether mobility type directly impacts on women's managerial advancement or moderates the relationship between influencing factors and managerial advancement; this represents an unresolved theoretical issue.

Skilled migrants and self-initiated expatriates

By considering two traditionally demarcated global mobility types ([Brewster et al., 2021](#))—SMs and SIEs—as possible sources of women managers, the present review extends the meager knowledge of skilled foreign women's managerial career advancement, contributing new knowledge to the broader literature on women in management ([Triana et al., 2021](#)). SMs and SIEs are proposed to differ (e.g. [Cerdin and Selmer, 2014](#)) and do differ ([Tharenou, 2015](#)). SMs usually seek citizenship in their host country and permanently domicile there ([McNulty and Brewster, 2017](#)), while SIEs typically retain their home-country citizenship and identity when in the host country and most often repatriate ([Al Ariss, 2010](#); [Cerdin and Selmer, 2014](#); [Despotovic et al., 2022](#); [McNulty and Brewster, 2017](#)).

Nevertheless, they display similarities. They both seek and work in similar jobs post-migration/expatriation (e.g. HR director, school principal, nurse manager) and present as qualified for management positions. SIE women and SM women complete higher degrees pre-migration, yet the evidence indicates that SM women do so more frequently than SM men and native-born skilled women (+4%; [Eurostat, 2021b](#); [OECD, 2020](#)). But SM women's qualifications and work experience are less frequently recognized than those of comparable SM men and native-born skilled women (see reviews by [Shirmohammadi et al., 2019](#); [Tharenou, 2024](#)), creating problems for their advancement into management.

Understanding the factors influencing the managerial advancement of SM and SIE women is important, both practically and theoretically. In practical terms, such information can assist HR managers to devise strategies to increase women in management in their organizations and enhance gender equality. Although women's representation in management has increased, progress has been slow in the United States [US] ([Dobbin and Kalev, 2016](#); [Krivkovich et al.,](#)

2024) and other recipient countries (Stainback *et al.*, 2024), and SM and SIE women add another potential source, whose progress could be aided by that understanding.

Theoretically, research has neglected the managerial career advancement of migrant women (cf. Kofman, 2014). Apart from intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), the theories most often applied have not been gender-linked (Farashah and Blomquist, 2022; e.g. human capital theory, Becker, 1993; career capital theory, Defillippi and Arthur, 1994), despite the relevance of gender-linked family roles to women's advancement post-migration (Bircan and Yilmaz, 2023). The application of gender-linked theories (e.g. lack-of-fit theory; Heilman *et al.*, 2024) to SM and SIE women offers potential new insights across several fields (e.g. international migration, international HRM, women in management) in understanding women's managerial advancement, providing a new contribution.

Managerial career advancement

This review examines SM and SIE women's managerial career advancement. Bowles *et al.* (2019) defined career advancement in general as "progress toward achieving career aspirations" (p.1646) over a career, while Tharenou (2001) assessed managerial career advancement as a specific type of career advancement: employees gain a managerial position and/or advance up the managerial hierarchy.

Scholars view managerial career advancement as a major indicator of foreign employees' career success (e.g. Mello *et al.*, 2023; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). Ng *et al.* (2005) theorized that career success encapsulates objective, verifiable outputs and subjective, perceived outputs (cf. Seibert *et al.*, 2024). Objective managerial career advancement refers to directly observable, vertical and measurable upward mobility (Ng *et al.*, 2005), typically promotions (in management); managerial level, rank or status; and pay (e.g. Mello *et al.*, 2023). Subjective managerial career advancement refers to the evaluation and experience of achieving personally meaningful managerial advancement outcomes (cf. Ng *et al.*, 2005), as indicated by, amongst others: career or job satisfaction, realization of personal career goals; professional and personal development/growth; and employability (Mello *et al.*, 2023).

The literature review

To the author's knowledge the scattered empirical evidence for the managerial career advancement (also termed "managerial advancement") of SM or SIE women has not been integrated. Two reviews of studies of SM women have focused specifically on findings relevant to their career outcomes, those by Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski (2025) and Guo and Al Ariss (2015). Most relevant, Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski reviewed studies of the work experiences and outcomes of SM women managers and professionals to explain their cumulative disadvantage/deskilling, but without reference to their managerial advancement.

Reviews of SIE women's careers have also been insufficient. Two considered the careers of women or by gender in comprehensive reviews of SIEs (Brewster *et al.*, 2021; Doherty, 2013). Other reviews examined the advancement of SIE women from very small numbers of studies (Andresen *et al.*, 2015; Tharenou, 2010). Brewster *et al.* (2021) called for research into SIE women's career outcomes, which the present review offers for managerial advancement, an important but neglected outcome (UN Women, 2015).

By failing to review results for the managerial career advancement of SM women and SIE women separately (as opposed to aggregated male and female samples, e.g. Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2018), important explanations for SM and SIE women's advancement in management (e.g. family, marriage) have been excluded, which this review seeks to rectify. A comparison of the influences on women's managerial advancement for the two mobility types has the potential to uncover differences in the challenges SIE and SM women encounter and the strategies they use to advance, a significant and new contribution.

The review integrates findings of studies to identify the factors influencing SM and SIE women's managerial advancement (e.g. barriers such as discrimination, facilitators such as

opportunities) and to identify neglected gender-linked theoretical explanations for managerial advancement. The review addresses three research questions (RQs) from findings from studies targeted by systematic literature reviews. The RQs: (1) first set the scene, examining how frequently SM and SIE women gain a managerial position post-migration/expatriation (RQ1); (2) then identify the influences on SM and SIE women's managerial advancement (RQ2a), examining the mobility type as a possible boundary condition (RQ2b), and (3) identify the factors that enable women to cross transition points and advance up the hierarchy (e.g. from lower manager to middle manager) to reach senior management (RQ3), where women are highly under-represented (UN Women, 2015).

Method

The review is an integrative literature review, a “synthesis review” whereby insights from several fields are combined (Krlev *et al.*, 2025) to identify factors influencing the managerial career advancement of SM and SIE women. Synthesis reviews seek to expand a field, addressing fragmentation, broadening perspectives (taking a multidisciplinary approach and raising neglected issues), and illustrating logical next steps for the field (Krlev *et al.*, 2025). The present integrative literature review is exploratory in nature.

A synthesis review uses the two reviewing styles of systematic reviewing and narrative reviewing (Krlev *et al.*, 2025), the latter a summary and analysis of existing research on a specific topic, which offers flexibility in describing and interpreting the literature and so is not transparent as is a systematic literature review (Sukhera, 2022). To date, the literature relating to SM and SIE women's managerial advancement has not been reviewed and will benefit from a holistic synthesis, leading to an initial conceptualization (Krlev *et al.*, 2025; Torraco, 2005). The review is exploratory because of: (a) the early stage of development of research on the topic (Edmondson and McManus, 2007); (b) the chiefly qualitative research designs employed (53 studies); and (c) the studies being mostly women's self-reports of their gender-linked lived experiences (Bircan and Yilmaz, 2023).

The synthesis review begins with a systematic literature review to locate relevant peer-reviewed empirical articles, followed by a narrative review, which summarizes, synthesizes, and critiques the available findings (Torraco, 2005). Since the studies are predominantly qualitative in design and scattered across many fields, they lend themselves to narrative review. The synthesis is achieved by identifying the factors common to SM and SIE women's managerial advancement to gain a preliminary understanding of the process. The preliminary factors identified will potentially stimulate further research by suggesting a conceptual framework and identifying current limitations in knowledge.

Systematic literature reviews

To maximize identification of the articles from a multidisciplinary literature (e.g. Rousseau, 2024), I conducted systematic literature reviews for the two global mobility types. The reviews employed the PRISMA guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021) to locate empirical studies to address RQs 1, 2a, 2b and 3. The search databases used were the Web of Science Core Collection (henceforth “WoS”), Scopus and EBSCO HOST, which have extensive holdings of this academic literature, limit the search to scholarly journals, and are suited to synthesizing evidence (Gusenbauer and Haddaway, 2020). Two reviewers (the author and a postdoctoral researcher) conducted the five stages outlined by Crowley-Henry *et al.* (2018; also, Osborn and Young, 2022).

Selection criteria. Before describing the process of the systematic reviews, I explain the inclusion and exclusion selection criteria potentially applied to the studies (Rousseau, 2024) to identify, screen and derive the final selected studies. Because few empirical studies of SM and SIEs' managerial advancement exist, only the closing date was restricted (31-03-2024).

The inclusion criteria specified that publications were peer-reviewed journal articles in English. They were studies of women only or of women versus men, or of other comparative studies including gender. The SM women were defined as for skilled migrants and qualified immigrants (Cerdin *et al.*, 2014) and immigrant professionals (Fang *et al.*, 2009). SIEs were identified as such (Brewster *et al.*, 2021), with a range of terms applied: self-directed, self-selected, self-selecting expatriates, self-expatriate, self-made expatriate, self-initiated foreign work experience or international worker, international work opportunities, and mobility (e.g. Cerdin and Selmer, 2014; Lugar *et al.*, 2023; McNulty and Brewster, 2017).

For the exclusion criteria, only one of duplicate articles was retained, while I excluded conceptual or other nonempirical articles, literature reviews whose studies had been covered, conference proceedings, working papers, book chapters, book reviews, editorials and dissertations. Rejected also were studies of men only; men and women combined where women's results could not be disaggregated; international students; second-generation people; children, and, for the SM review, repatriates, intending returnees, assigned expatriates and SIEs. Also excluded were refugees, asylum-seekers, low-skilled migrants, domestic migrants, studies not relevant to the topic, chief executive officers (CEOs), other executives and board members.

We applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria and executed the review of studies (Page *et al.*, 2021; Rousseau, 2024). We applied the exclusion criteria to the initial list of titles identified, then to the residual abstracts, and finally to the residual full-text articles (Rousseau, 2024).

Stages of the reviews. The systematic literature reviews began with a scoping study to establish a broad set of search terms for SMs and SIEs. For the SMs, various combinations of “skilled migrants” and “gender” were attempted, with terms focused on employment and managerial career advancement added. “Career advancement” and “progress” emerged as important terms for deriving studies of SMs’ managerial advancement. For the SIEs, specific terms such as “self-initiated” and “self-directed” yielded satisfactory results. Terms were added to the search strings based on “gender”, “employment”, and “managerial career advancement” or “career advancement” to capture the targeted literature.

Based on the scoping study and using WoS and Scopus databases, we conducted the search for journal articles of SMs associated with women's managerial career advancement, employing the following search strings. The selected key words for SMs included: “qualified”, “professional”, “highly skilled”, “migrant”, “immigrant” (terms informed by Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2018); “job”, “career”, and “work” (terms informed by Farashah *et al.*, 2023). As well as “managerial career advancement” and “career advancement”, the terms “manager”, “supervisor”, and “director” (informed by Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2018) were employed to capture managerial advancement and, to capture gender, “female” and “women” and “race”, as informed by Anastasiadou *et al.* (2023). As shown on the PRISMA chart, following Page *et al.* (2021), and provided as Figure 1 in the supplementary material, the search of SMs identified 795 relevant articles (591 from WoS, 204 from Scopus databases).

Similarly, the search for journal articles of SIEs associated with women's managerial advancement was conducted employing the following search strings, based on the scoping study. We used the WoS and the EBSCO Host databases, the latter *in lieu* of Scopus, as it identified more studies of SIE women's managerial advancement. The selected keywords for the SIE search included: “self-initiated”, “self-directed”, “self-selected”, “self-made”, “expatriate”, and “repatriate” (Brewster *et al.*, 2021; Lugar *et al.*, 2023; Mello *et al.*, 2023). We identified studies relating to SIEs’ managerial advancement by adding the terms: “job”, “profession”, “career advancement”, “manager”, “supervisor”, “advancement”, “success” and “performance” (Crowley-Henry *et al.*, 2018; Farashah *et al.*, 2023). Gender-screening mirrored the SM search. As shown on the PRISMA chart, following Page *et al.* (2021), and provided as Figure 2 in the supplementary material, the search of SIEs identified 768 relevant articles for SIE women's managerial advancement (654 from WoS, 114 from EBSCOhost).

Before screening the 795 SM articles, we used automated tools to retain only peer-reviewed articles in English and to remove 46 SM duplicates and 30 ineligible SM articles, leaving 719

SM articles, as shown in [Figure 1](#). We then independently reviewed the remaining 719 SM articles, first by title, removing 625 irrelevant articles from the 719, leaving 94 SM articles. Screening the abstracts removed 54 articles, leaving 40 eligible SM articles. Following full-text screening, we removed 20 articles, leaving 20 articles on or including SM women. We added a further 18 SM articles gained from external sources (alerts, reference lists, initial screening of the literature and manual finds), representing new and relevant contributions to the review. The inclusion of the 18 additional eligible articles from external sources resulted in an SM database of 38 articles on or including SM women.

The final make-up of the SIE database followed a similar process. Before screening the 768 SIE articles, we used automated tools to retain only peer-reviewed articles in English and to remove one SIE duplicate and 21 ineligible SIE articles, leaving 746, as shown in [Figure 2](#). We independently reviewed the remaining 746 SIE articles, first by title, removing 686 irrelevant articles leaving 60 articles, and then, by screening the abstracts, removed 33 articles, leaving 27 SIE articles. Following the full-text screening stage for the 27 SIE articles, we excluded eight articles, leaving 19 articles on or including SIE women. We added a further seven SIE articles from external sources to the 19 eligible full-text articles, resulting in 26 articles of SIEs on or including SM women for the review. The PRISMA charts ([Figures 1 and 2](#), [supplemental material](#)) present the specific reasons for SM and SIE study removal.

Finally, we assessed quality control using [Cohen's \(1960\)](#) Kappa, following [Page et al. \(2021\)](#). Values of 0.66 (Titles' search) and 0.65 (Abstracts' search) for the SM search and 0.64 (Titles) and 0.60 (Abstracts) for the SIE search indicated substantial reviewer agreement.

Overview of the 64-study database

[Table 1](#) presents the 43 journals in which the 64 studies of SM (38) and SIE (26) women were published and indicates their multi-disciplinarity and international/HRM and management focus. [Table A1](#) in [Appendix](#) provides the 64-study sample, while [Table A2](#) compares the characteristics of the SM and SIE women in the sample.

All 38 studies of SM women indicated they had migrated to developed countries (i.e. the global north), as [Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski \(2025\)](#) also found in their review. In contrast, the 26 studies of SIE women demonstrated their more diverse expatriation: to developed (15), developing (7), and mixed (4) countries.

SM women were more often married and mothers of dependent children; had arrived as dependent applicants/trailing partners; and were slightly older, whereas SIE women were less likely to have families. Women had most often migrated within the previous six months and were in their first job, especially SIEs who had migrated more recently than SM women but on average had gained (and maintained) employment soon after migrating.

Literature review

Theoretical mechanisms

The customized database revealed that the theory utilized in studies of SMs (21 of the 38 studies included theory) and SIEs (21 of 26 studies included theory) differed for the two mobility types. Human capital theory ([Becker, 1993](#)) and intersectionality theory ([Crenshaw, 1989](#)) provided the foundational explanations of SM women's advancement, although a variety of other theories were applied to a lesser extent (e.g. modes of engagement, [Al Ariss, 2010](#); labor-related mobility, [Becker, 2019](#); critical whiteness theory, [Carangio, 2023](#)), or only once each. In contrast, career capital theory and a boundaryless career orientation ([Arthur et al., 1995](#)) were the newer career theories providing foundational theorizations for SIE women and explained career and personal development/growth (i.e. subjective managerial advancement) rather than objective managerial advancement. Several other individual theories were also applied, including the kaleidoscope career model, which elucidates SIE women's career development across life stages ([Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005](#)).

Table 1. Journals providing empirical studies of skilled migrant and self-initiated expatriate women

Skilled migrants (38 studies)		
Migration (11)	Sociology, social issues and human geography (15)	International management (12)
Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies (3)	Gender, Work and Organization (3)	Journal of World Business (2)
Journal of International Migration and Integration (3)	Population, Space and Place (3)	Labour and Industry (2)
International Migration Review (2)	Work, Employment and Society (1)	Journal of Global Mobility (2)
Journal of Intercultural Studies (1)	Canadian Review of Sociology (1)	Journal of Management and Organization (1)
African and Black Diaspora (1)	Sociological Perspectives (1)	International Business Review (1)
Ethnic and Racial Studies (1)	International Journal of Population Geography (1)	International Journal of Human Resource Management (1)
	Journal of Clinical Nursing (1)	Career Development International (1)
	Social Science and Medicine (1)	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (1)
	Gender and Society (1)	Administrative Sciences (1)
	Geoforum (1)	
	Nursing Inquiry (1)	
Self-initiated expatriates (26 studies)		
Sociology, social issues and human geography (4)	Management (5)	International human resource management (17)
Health Sociology Review (1)	British Journal of Management (1)	Career Development International (5)
Frontiers in Psychology (1)	International Journal of Business and Management (1)	Journal of Global Mobility (5)
Geoforum (1)	International Studies of Management and Organization (1)	International Journal of Human Resource Management (3)
Gender, Place and Culture (1)	Journal of Management and Organization (1)	Journal of World Business (2)
	Cross Cultural and Strategic Management (1)	Human Resource Development International (1)
		Personnel Review (1)
Source(s): Author's own work		

For both mobility types, only two of the explanatory theories were gender-based (intersectionality, kaleidoscope careers), the remainder neglecting important influences on advancement. In the main, apart from intersectionality theory, validated gender-linked theories explaining women's advancement and leadership (e.g. [Eagly and Karau, 2002](#); [Heilman et al., 2024](#)) were not applied. The database revealed that women's lack of managerial advancement arises from the gender-role stereotypes attached to the sexes ([Eagly and Karau, 2002](#); [Heilman et al., 2024](#); [Tabassum and Nayak, 2021](#)), making the theories of lack of fit ([Heilman, 1983](#)), migration-related gender roles ([Markham, 1987](#)) and intersectionality ([Crenshaw, 1989](#)) applicable.

The validated *lack-of-fit theory* ([Heilman, 1983](#); [Heilman et al., 2024](#)) attributes women's failure to advance up the managerial hierarchy to a perceived mismatch between stereotypes about women and the "male" requirements of managerial jobs. Men are "providers" and take charge and get things done (i.e. agency), while women are "caregivers" who build relationships and are concerned about others (i.e. communality) (e.g. SIEs, [Haak-Saheem et al., 2022](#)). When a mismatch is perceived between "feminine" stereotypes and the "male"

requirements of jobs and fields (e.g. as in management positions), bias against women may result. Managerial and leadership roles are most often depicted in masculine and agentic terms (Heilman *et al.*, 2024). The higher the management level, the less effectively women are believed to perform. Consequently, women experience discrimination for their (lack of) fit to managerial jobs, especially at upper/senior management levels (Heilman *et al.*, 2024), which reduces their managerial advancement, as indicated for both SM (Jogulu *et al.*, 2025) and SIE women (Bozionelos, 2020; Yorozu, 2024).

Gender stereotypes attached to family caregiver roles are also linked to women's migration (Bauloz *et al.*, 2024). In migration-situated *gender-role theory* (Markham, 1987) men are socialized to adopt the family provider role, migrating for career advancement (e.g. Gupta *et al.*, 2014). In contrast, wives are socialized to prioritize their partner's career and sacrifice their own careers for the sake of their partner and family (e.g. Elitok and Nawyn, 2023; Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2022).

Tharenou (2008) extended the theory to apply to the migration of childless singles, contending that single SM women without children were in the best position to migrate for advancement (Becker, 2019). Childless single women are not required to adopt the socialized role of caregiver and are free to focus on a career, expatriate for advancement, and seek managerial jobs. Although SM women are more often mothers of dependent children, SIE women are often childless singles (Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh, 2008; Thang *et al.*, 2002; Wechtler, 2018) or part of dual-career couples without children or with nondependent children (Myers *et al.*, 2022; Napier and Taylor, 2002). Supporting gender-role theory (Markham, 1987), childless single women migrating to seek advancement are not restricted by having a caregiver role (Tharenou, 2008). SM and SIE women who are not the family caregiver are able to hold managerial positions more easily and advance in management, albeit less than SM and SIE men (e.g. Banerjee and Phan, 2015; Tharenou, 2008).

Yet binary models (e.g. gender) of the separate experiences of men and women offer limited explanation for the gendered aspects of migration according to Bircan and Yilmaz (2023). Women inhabit other identities apart from gender (e.g. race, religion) (Farashah and Blomquist, 2022; Zikic, 2015), which intersect with gender to influence career outcomes. *Intersectionality theory* (Crenshaw, 1989) explains how intersecting identities affect women's career outcomes. Visible identities such as race (Black women) and religion (Muslim women) are relevant in this context (Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021). Gender can intersect with migrant status and other identities, for example, family (marital status, motherhood), to exacerbate disadvantage for SM women in practicing their professions following migration (e.g. Jogulu *et al.*, 2025; Ressia *et al.*, 2017; Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021). SM and SIE women may incur a multifront disadvantage to their managerial advancement as a consequence of the addition of intersecting visible and family identities to their gender-migrant status intersection.

Methodologies

Before reviewing the empirical literature in the 64-study database, I examine the methodologies used in the studies, given that common "research method" problems arose. The studies employed mostly qualitative research (64%). Most employed an exploratory inductive research design, producing qualitative outcomes (41 studies), rather than a positivist deductive design to elicit quantitative outcomes (14; 26 studies when adding 12 mixed-design studies). SIE studies were worst affected. Proportionately, more studies of SIE (65%) than SM (53%) women used qualitative designs whereas more studies of SM (32%) than SIE (23%) women used quantitative designs.

The studies, mostly of small samples, employed interviews and grounded coding, typical of studies of SM women (e.g. Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski, 2025). Generally, although objective managerial advancement was not measured by standardized or validated measures, most could be categorized into broadly lower, middle and senior management levels. Only 10

studies, 9 of which were of SMs, employed longitudinal designs, enabling prediction; other studies assumed causal paths from influential factors to managerial advancement outcomes.

Most comparative quantitative studies (e.g. of SMs or gender differences) ensured the groups were comparable (e.g. Andresen *et al.*, 2015; Bharadwaj and Buchanan, 2023; Bozionelos, 2009; Masso *et al.*, 2014; Traavik and Richardsen, 2010) by applying control variables in multivariate analyses (e.g. Banerjee and Phan, 2015; Banerjee and Verma, 2012; Becker, 2019; Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2020; Karlsen, 2012; Salaff and Greve, 2003). Studies of SMs were marginally larger—the average sample sizes for qualitative and quantitative studies respectively were 25 and 430—than for (comparable) studies of SIEs—22 and 366.

Overall, the SM research field is more mature in research design than the SIE field (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Biases occur however from reliance on interviews, self-report, small samples, cross-sectional data, unvalidated measures and non-representative samples (e.g. south–north migration), and occur more often for SIE than SM research.

Reviewing the evidence for the research questions

To address RQ1, I estimated the average frequencies with which SM and SIE women held a managerial position, locating the relevant studies available in the systematic database. To address RQ2a I then conducted a narrative literature review of studies in the database which identified facilitators of, and barriers to, SM and SIE women’s managerial advancement, also considering gender. By comparing the facilitators and barriers identified in the SM studies with those in the SIE studies in the narrative review, I considered the possibility that mobility type functions as a boundary condition for the impact of factors on advancement (RQ2b). To address RQ3, I located the few studies in the systematic database where SM women crossed a major management level to advance up the hierarchy to reach middle and senior management and which identified facilitators and barriers to that crossing.

RQ1: SM and SIE women holding a managerial position

RQ1 examined data from the database (38 SM, 26 SIE studies) to assess how frequently: (a) SM and SIE women held a managerial position; (b) women versus men held a managerial position to assess gender equality; and (c) women with intersecting identities held managerial positions. I employed three types of samples: (a) SM (or SIE) women only; (b) SM (or SIE) women relative to comparable SM (or SIE) men; and (c) intersecting identities for SM (or SIE) women and men (e.g. gender by migrant status by race). After I considered studies with missing data, 44 of the 64 studies remained.

Frequency of managerial advancement. Authors reported the managerial positions of the women’s samples, typically using broad labels (e.g. “managers”, “middle and senior managers”), usually for everyone in the small samples. Authors gave the frequencies of SM or SIE women in a study holding a managerial job as either: a percentage (in 26 studies) or as raw data (in 18 studies) I converted to percentages for this review. For a further 10 studies, I could calculate the percentage of women and men holding managerial positions from data provided in each article for every person, increasing the number of studies to 54. Table 2 provides the average frequencies for the four groups of SM and SIE women and men.

Addressing RQ1, for the women-only samples, I present the average frequencies in Table 2 for studies in which SM and SIE women held a managerial position (based on frequencies given in Tables B1 and B2 in the supplemental material). On average, a low 28.68% of the samples of SM women, usually in their first job post-migration, held a managerial position.

In addition, from results from mostly longitudinal predictive studies from the systematic review database, only 10 of which existed in this review, SM women regressed from being managers pre-migration to nonmanagers post-migration (Banerjee and Phan, 2015; Fernando and Patriotta, 2020; Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Salaff and Greve, 2003).

Table 2. SM and SIE women with managerial positions vs. comparable SM and SIE men, by percentage

	Percentage of SM or SIE women of women's samples who hold a managerial position	Percentage of SM or SIE men of men's samples who hold a managerial position
Studies of SM or SIE women and men		
Skilled migrants	SM women	SM men
Average percentage (<i>n</i> of samples/studies)	28.68% (<i>n</i> = 22)	40.05% (<i>n</i> = 19)
Self-initiated expatriates	SIE women	SIE men
Average percentage (<i>n</i> of samples/studies)	38.32% (<i>n</i> = 10)	58.55% (<i>n</i> = 2)
Source(s): Author's own work		

The SIE women in the studies fared better on average, with 38.32% holding managerial positions (Table 2). Self-initiated expatriation may account for more women gaining a managerial position.

In studies reporting both women and men (Table 2), SM women held managerial positions on average less often (28.68%) than SM men (40.05%). Similarly, a low 38.32% of SIE women held a managerial position, while the figure for SIE men was 58.5% (two studies), but too few studies were available from which to draw conclusions.

Frequency data were not available for studies of managerial advancement comparing intersectional identities for SM or SIE women. The present systematic review did not locate any studies of SIE women's managerial advancement conducted from an intersectional-identity approach (Crenshaw, 1989). It was therefore impossible to conclude whether SIE women, relative to SIE men (or Black relative to White SIE women), had a reduced or increased chance of gaining a managerial position, an area requiring future research.

Qualitative data assessing managerial advancement. Interview responses were also provided in the qualitative studies relevant to addressing RQ1—the frequency with which SM and SIE women gain a managerial position—enabling their narrative review. In nine of the 38 studies, SM women complained of their under-representation in management and leadership positions (Alcorso and Ho, 2006; Banerjee and Phan, 2015; Colakoglu *et al.*, 2018; Fernando and Patriotta, 2020; Karlsen, 2012; Konnikov, 2023; Riaño, 2021a, b; Salaff and Greve, 2003). The qualitative results from the narrative review given by the study authors supported gender differences: SM women advanced less in management than comparable SM men (Groutsis and Arnold, 2012; Jacobs and Kreisberg, 2022; Riaño, 2021b; Salaff and Greve, 2003; Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021). No such comparative data were available for SIE women.

The results of studies conducted from an intersectional perspective indicated that intersecting identities (gender, race and migrant status) disadvantaged SM women in gaining a managerial position. Bayuo *et al.* (2023) reviewed the findings of nine qualitative studies of internationally qualified African (Black) SM nurses (almost all women) who migrated to developed countries. Exemplifying the disadvantage of intersecting identities, argued from intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), race intersected with migrant status. Black SM subordinate nurses failed to achieve promotion to a managerial position. Across studies, subordinate White nurses were preferred over similarly qualified and experienced African (Black) subordinate nurses, who highlighted the racial discrimination against them for promotion compared to native and other foreign-trained nurse counterparts. Human capital (Becker, 1993) did not explain gaining managerial positions, but racial bias and discrimination from an intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 1989) perspective did.

Despite the results for racial identity, gender remains the factor that most explains women's consistently lower managerial advancement in the few comparative studies available (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2020; Jain, 2021; Riaño, 2021a, b). For example, among tertiary-educated native- and foreign-born men and women who migrated to Switzerland, gender more than migration status—or their intersection—influenced progression into leadership. Yet results for intersectional theory are inconsistent. Not supporting an intersectional perspective (gender by migrant status), 45% of men occupied leadership positions in their workplace and only a quarter of women (Riaño, 2021a, b). But gender's intersection with race did exacerbate discrimination against SM women entering supervisory positions (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2020).

In summary, addressing RQ1, SM and SIE women, even when previously managers in their home country (Banerjee and Phan, 2015; Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Jogulu *et al.*, 2025; Salaff and Greve, 2003), are unlikely to gain a managerial position. SIE women may have a greater chance than SM women, who themselves have less chance than SM men and native-skilled women. It is unclear whether SIE women are more likely to gain a managerial position than SM women and less likely than SIE men.

Supporting the key tenets of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), from the limited evidence, gender intersects with migrant and racial status to reduce SM women's chances of gaining a managerial job. Research propositions (RP) need to consider the intersecting identities of gender, migrant status and/or race, based on intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), to help explain SM and SIE women gaining a managerial position:

RP1: Are SIE women more likely to gain a managerial position than SM women and less likely to than SIE men; Are Black SIE women less likely to than White SIE women?

The SM and SIE studies in the review mostly deal with women in their first job, who may not achieve a managerial position until they have accrued host-country experience. RP2 requires examination:

RP2: To what extent are SM and SIE women more likely to hold a managerial position in their second or subsequent jobs than in their first job post-migration and why?

RQ2a/2b: facilitators of and barriers to SM and SIE women's managerial advancement

I assessed RQ2a by identifying the influences assisting (facilitators) and preventing (barriers) women's managerial advancement in the 53 studies (Table A2) comprising 32 studies of SMs and 21 studies of SIEs, chiefly employing qualitative (41) and mixed-research (12) designs. The findings typically came from interviews of women who provided demographic information and information on their career paths; career history; motives for migration; family situation; current employment, and career outcomes.

The two reviewers independently read each of the 38 SM and 26 SIE studies to identify the factors influencing women's managerial career advancement, defined as objective and subjective advancement/progression. We used a grounded approach to identify themes. The reviewers identified the most frequent factors women linked to their managerial advancement in each study's results, either as negative (barriers) or positive influences (facilitators).

The reviewers listed the main themes to enable calculation of inter-rater agreement (Kappa = 0.618). Where disagreements occurred, we discussed their labels, meaning, and difference from other themes to reach almost-perfect agreement (Kappa = 0.857).

Table 3 presents the themes influencing managerial advancement for more than 10% of studies of SM or SIE women, which indicates important influences. Table 4 gives the specific factors distinguishing SM and SIE women on the various dimensions linked to managerial career advancement.

Factors influencing SM women's managerial advancement. Assessing RQ2a, SM women most often attributed their lack of a managerial position to discrimination by gatekeepers (e.g. superiors). In 11 of the 38 studies, SM women claimed they were subject to discrimination hindering their managerial advancement due to their: (a) gender, being women (Becker, 2019;

Table 3. SM and SIE women’s managerial career advancement database: common findings

Common findings across studies regarding SM and SIE women’s managerial career advancement ^a	Frequency of studies of skilled migrant women	Frequency of studies of self-initiated expatriate women
Discrimination arising from gender and racial bias against women is a barrier to their managerial career advancement	38.28% (11 studies)	–
Discrimination arising from motherhood bias against women is a barrier to their managerial career advancement	15.80% (6 studies)	–
Family commitments and responsibilities for a caregiving role hinder women’s managerial career advancement opportunities	39.47% (15 studies)	–
Career opportunities for women: lack of opportunities is a barrier to managerial career advancement for SMs and availability of opportunities is a facilitator for managerial career advancement for SIEs	15.80% (6 studies)	46.15% (12 studies)
Dissatisfaction with careers in the home country motivates women to initiate expatriation to pursue managerial advancement and career opportunities in the host country	–	26.90% (7 studies)
Agency exercised by women to deal with the context regarding their advancement gains women managerial and career advancement	–	23.08% (6 studies)
Note(s): ^a 38 empirical studies of SM women and 26 empirical studies of SIE women		
Dashes indicate where findings on common factors in relation to managerial career advancement are not reported by more than ten percent of studies of SM or SIE women		
Source(s): Author’s own work		

Sang and Calvard, 2019; Sang *et al.*, 2013); (b) race/ethnicity, especially their skin color/ Black, accent and poor language proficiency (Carangio, 2023; Christiansen and Kristjansdottir, 2022; Fernandez, 1998; Henry, 2007; Iheduru-Anderson, 2020); or both (Al Ariss, 2010; Bhatt, 2013; Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2020). Race affected SM women’s managerial advancement due to their lacking the “privilege of whiteness” (e.g. Carangio, 2023).

Relative to race, the available comparative studies demonstrate that gender is the major “discriminatory” influence reducing SM women’s managerial advancement, more than racial bias (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2020; Jain, 2021). Guo *et al.* (2020) explained that, when foreign women executives were subject by necessity to job mobility (their job loss necessitated their international mobility to find a job), they incurred a “gender penalty”, dropping in rank relative to comparable men.

SM women also attributed discrimination to superiors preventing their managerial advancement due to their family roles, especially to their being mothers (Jogulu *et al.*, 2025). In six of the 38 studies, superiors discriminated against mothers by not selecting them for managerial jobs or supporting their promotion into management (Becker, 2019; Bhatt, 2013; Cooke *et al.*, 2013; Elitok and Nawyn, 2023; Sang *et al.*, 2013; Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021).

Confirming the negative impact of family, in 15 of the 38 studies, SM women reported that family commitments and responsibilities of a caregiving role hindered their managerial career advancement (Alcorso and Ho, 2006; Bachan and Sheehan, 2011; Banerjee and Phan, 2015; Banerjee and Verma, 2012; Becker, 2019; Bhatt, 2013; Bodankin and Semyonov, 2016; Cooke *et al.*, 2013; Elitok and Nawyn, 2023; Jain, 2021; Nardon *et al.*, 2022; Pio *et al.*, 2023; Purkayastha, 2005; Riaño, 2021b; Sang *et al.*, 2013). SM mothers explained that they prioritized childcare over their professional career growth (15 studies just cited) and that child-rearing negatively impacted their managerial advancement (12 of the 15 studies).

Overall, for SM women, the findings support gender-role theory (Markham, 1987). SM women who are mothers prioritize family caregiving, adopting traditional gender-roles (Dickson, 2019) rather than focusing on their careers. Re-domestication, where SM women prioritize family’s needs by returning to homemaker roles, transfers their

Table 4. Distinguishing SM and SIE women on factors linked to managerial career advancement

Level of barrier	SM women Type of barrier	SIE women Type of barrier
<i>Individual</i>	Ascribed identities: • Gender, race Intersecting identities: • Gender (woman) by migrant status (migrant); gender by race (non-White)	na
<i>Organizational</i>	Gender discrimination and racial discrimination by superiors: • Gender bias (women) and racial bias (non-White, accent, language deficiency) • Gender more than racial bias • Bias marked at intersection of gender by race	na
<i>Organizational</i>	Discrimination against motherhood by gatekeepers: • Superior bias during selection and promotion processes	na
<i>Organizational</i>	Career opportunities • Lack of opportunities	Career opportunities • Opportunities available
<i>Family</i>	Family commitments and caregiver responsibilities • Mothers prioritize childcare over own career growth • Child-rearing	na
Level of facilitator	Type of facilitator	Type of facilitator
<i>Individual</i>	na	• Career dissatisfaction motivating initiating expatriation to gain managerial advancement
<i>Individual</i>	na	• Personal agency exercised to initiate actions to overcome problems in the environment for managerial advancement

Note(s): na = not applicable: studies not conducted or common factors influencing managerial advancement given by fewer than 10% of a sample
Source(s): Author's own work

focus to their partner's advancement (Elitok and Nawyn, 2023; Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski, 2025).

Linked to the negative impact of discrimination and family commitments on SM women's managerial advancement is a lack of opportunity. In six of the 38 studies, SM women cited limited opportunities in their organizations to advance in management, especially those with family commitments (Becker, 2019, 2023; Colakoglu *et al.*, 2018; Nardon *et al.*, 2022; Samuk *et al.*, 2023; Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021). There are exceptions. Opportunities were provided in senior public and government leadership positions in Israel linked to affirmative action policy where their Ethiopian race was an asset for married women (Fanta-Vagenshtein and Anteby-Yemini, 2016). Cooke *et al.* (2013) found that newcomer SM women in Chinese dual-career couples in Australia praised their workplaces for providing opportunities for advancement, discrimination-free environments, and supervisor support for their promotion to lower-level management, although opportunities to higher levels subsequently diminished.

Factors influencing SIE women's managerial advancement. Assessing RQ2a, the three most frequent factors SIE women cited in the 26 studies as influencing their managerial advancement were: *career opportunities* (cf. SM women's expressed lack of opportunities); *career dissatisfaction* at home motivating self-expatriation to seek career opportunities and advancement in the destination country; and *personal agency* initiating actions to overcome dissatisfaction with advancement and gain managerial advancement from expatriation. These three positive factors contrast with SM women's frequent articulation of environmental negative factors as preventing their managerial advancement.

Regarding *career opportunities*, in 12 of the 26 studies, SIE women reported initiating expatriation to host countries to gain opportunities for career and managerial advancement unavailable to them at home (Bozionelos, 2009; Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh, 2008; Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2022; Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021; Myers *et al.*, 2017; Myers and Pringle, 2005; Napier and Taylor, 2002; Stalker and Mavin, 2011; Tahir, 2023; Thang *et al.*, 2002; Thorn, 2009; Yorozu, 2024). In the main, SIE women claimed their expatriation was most often for personal development and growth; that is, subjective advancement (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021; Langinier *et al.*, 2024; Myers and Pringle, 2005; Myers and Thorn, 2023), especially older women (Myers *et al.*, 2017, 2022). In contrast to SM women, SIE women initiated expatriation to escape family commitments, for a career break, and for personal growth (Myers *et al.*, 2017, 2022).

Regarding *motivation fueled by career dissatisfaction*, in seven of the 26 SIE studies (Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh, 2008; Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2022; Myers *et al.*, 2017, 2022; Napier and Taylor, 2002; Suutari and Brewster, 2000; Thang *et al.*, 2002), women self-initiated expatriation to proactively resolve career progression problems. For example, childless single women self-initiated expatriation to the Cayman Islands for senior management jobs and managerial roles unavailable at home and to increase their chances of advancement on return (Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh, 2008). Some SIE women, chiefly older women, reported that work dissatisfaction, career dissatisfaction and managerialism motivated them to expatriate (Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh, 2008; Myers *et al.*, 2017, 2022; Thang *et al.*, 2002).

SIE women exercised *personal agency* in pursuit of managerial advancement, as indicated in six of the 26 studies of SIEs (Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh, 2008; Myers and Pringle, 2005; Napier and Taylor, 2002; Pio *et al.*, 2023; Stalker and Mavin, 2011; Thang *et al.*, 2002). In contrast, due to the considerable work and family barriers they faced, SM women had less freedom to exercise such agency. According to human agency theory (Bandura, 2001), personal agency refers to acts intentionally undertaken to make particular events occur. Career agency specifically relates to the capability to act independently and influence the career environment (Qin and Sekiguchi, 2024; Tams and Arthur, 2010). SIE women acted to overcome discrimination and a lack of career opportunities by exercising their agency to address career barriers and obstacles preventing managerial advancement in their environment (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir, 2022; Despotovic *et al.*, 2022; Qin and Sekiguchi, 2024) and reacted proactively to adversity in their workplace (Muir *et al.*, 2014; Qin and Sekiguchi, 2024; Wechtler, 2018), pursuing opportunities by "job hopping" across companies and countries to gain advancement in management (e.g. Thang *et al.*, 2002).

"Steppingstone jobs"—whereby individuals undertake lower-level jobs to enable them to later step up into higher-level jobs (O'Dwyer and Colic-Peisker, 2016)—played a positive role in indirectly leading to managerial advancement for both SIE and SM women. Applying career capital theory (Arthur *et al.*, 1995; Defillippi and Arthur, 1994), steppingstone jobs build human, social, cultural and psychological capital, which, in turn, produce knowing how, whom, what and why career competencies (Farashah and Blomquist, 2022). Over time, the competencies facilitate advancement in management, as indicated for both SM women (Colakoglu *et al.*, 2018; Cooke *et al.*, 2013; Gupta *et al.*, 2014) and SIE women (Liversage, 2009; Thang *et al.*, 2002). For example, from career capital derived from undertaking steppingstone jobs, SM women gained: (a) fast and frequent promotions, which facilitated better managerial jobs in a short time for Turkish SM women in the US (Colakoglu *et al.*,

2018); and (b) internal promotion for Chinese SM women in Australia, who, with supervisor support, moved up early into lower-level management roles (Cooke *et al.*, 2013).

Similarly, SM and SIE women undertake academic study in the host country, including advanced degrees (Bodankin and Semyonov, 2016), to develop host-country-relevant career capital, which aided their ascendancy into managerial positions (Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Liversage, 2009). Through greater investments in host-country education (Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Traavik and Richardsen, 2010) and in training and lower-level jobs, SM women entered a promotional stream into management (McCoy and Masuch, 2007). However, supporting gender-role theory's prioritizing of men's careers (Markham, 1987), SM women more often assisted their partner in his/her migrant role rather than pursue further education themselves (Banerjee and Verma, 2012; Purkayastha, 2005). When SM women subordinated their educational aspirations to their husband's career, they did not always benefit from contingent education (Gupta *et al.*, 2014). In new migrant families in Canada, a longitudinal study showed that, although SM women engaged in post-migration education to gain a managerial role, male SM managers were more likely to (Banerjee and Verma, 2012).

In summary, addressing RQ2a, SM women identified environmental factors *hindering* their managerial advancement, but rarely identified facilitators. Endorsing intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), discrimination was more pronounced when gender intersected with race: Black SM women advanced less in management than male peers. In contrast, chiefly individual-level proactive factors *facilitated* SIE women's managerial advancement. Unlike SM women, SIE women exercised a positive, agentic, proactive approach (cf. human agency theory, Bandura, 2001), supporting a boundaryless career orientation (Arthur *et al.*, 1995; Defillippi and Arthur, 1994).

Almost none of the influential factors affecting the managerial advancement of SM and SIE women overlapped for the two mobility types (Table 4). Actively managing and navigating their careers in a changing work environment (e.g. moving from home to host country), SIE women appear to take ownership of their career paths rather than rely on organizational structures. By contrast, SM women seem to enact more traditional careers, gradually advancing their positions within organizations. Future research needs to examine whether SIE women deliberately use their agency to influence their environments to gain managerial advancement, as opposed to SM women, whose gender, racial and motherhood discrimination limits their use of agency.

RP3: To what extent do SIE women exercise their personal and career agency to resolve barriers in their environments and achieve managerial advancement while SM women incur gender, racial and motherhood discrimination which limits their use of agency?

RP4: To what extent is SM women's managerial advancement decreased through their lack of exercise of an agentic, proactive approach to dealing with barriers and how?

Addressing RQ2b—whether mobility type moderates the influence of factors on women's managerial advancement—the findings suggest skilled migration is negatively linked to advancement in comparison to self-initiated expatriation, which appears to be positively linked (Table 3). Skilled migrant women incur both more discrimination and family commitments reducing their managerial advancement. In contrast, SIE women's motivation arising from dissatisfaction with their advancement at home results in their initiating expatriation for advancement, aided by their personal agency in addressing negative factors in the environment. Overall, skilled migration and self-initiated expatriation provide contrasting boundaries to managerial advancement—one hindering, the other facilitating—to moderate the influences of the environment on their career advancement.

RQ3: *advancing up the managerial hierarchy*

Both SM and SIE women who gain lower-level management positions report difficulties in advancing further into middle or senior management (Cooke *et al.*, 2013; Colakoglu *et al.*,

2018; Yorozu, 2024). To address RQ3, in 15 studies (14 SMs, one SIE) in the systematic database, women explicitly advanced into lower, middle or senior/higher levels crossing from a lower level, which helped to identify facilitators and barriers to advancement to higher management levels. Given the small number of studies, the results are treated as exploratory. According to the differential-prediction hypothesis (Tharenou, 2001), individual factors facilitating advancement into lower management levels (e.g. human capital, aspirations) should differ from the environmental factors facilitating advancement into senior management levels (e.g. networks, organizational politics). To advance up the managerial hierarchy, studies of three transition points from lower to higher levels were examined.

Entry into (lower) management. Human capital—high job performance, a strong work ethic—facilitated SM women’s promotion from subordinate status to lower management soon after host-country entry (Cooke *et al.*, 2013; Iheduru-Anderson, 2020), aided by a favorable discrimination-free environment and supervisor support (Cooke *et al.*, 2013).

However, merit alone may be insufficient for women to gain entry to a management position. Gender-role stereotyping plays a significant role in who enters the management profession (Bauloz *et al.*, 2024). Occupations are gender-stereotyped, with “management” stereotyped as a male occupation (Groutsis and Arnold, 2012; McCoy and Masuch, 2007). At the national level, men are favored for selection into typically “male” stereotyped occupations, such as management, while women are more often selected into typically female professions (e.g. teaching, nursing), as demonstrated for SMs in the European Union (Gropas and Bartolini, 2016). Even in female-dominated occupations, male SMs are often favored for management positions, due to traditional gender roles and societal expectations.

Once in an organization, SM women subordinates encounter substantial barriers to entry into first-level supervisory and lower-level management positions (Bayuo *et al.*, 2023; Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2020; Iheduru-Anderson, 2020). Gender-role stereotyping again provides an explanation, consistent with lack-of-fit theory (Heilman *et al.*, 2024). The lack of fit of SM women’s feminine attributes with the masculine attributes of the managerial role has been a major reason for SM women subordinates’ lack of promotion into first-level managerial positions. So also was a foreign accent, equated to a perceived lack of intelligence and suitability to lead, with the issue further exacerbated by racial bias (Iheduru-Anderson, 2020).

Family barriers also hinder SM women’s entry into lower-level management. Work–family conflict, linked to gender stereotyped family roles, exerts a negative impact on SM women subordinates’ advance into lower-level management, resulting in women failing to make this early, critical transition (Cooke *et al.*, 2013; Purkayastha, 2005). Consistent with gender-role theory (Markham, 1987), work–family conflict forced SM women in early career to lower their managerial aspirations and abandon the search for managerial advancement to care for their children (Cooke *et al.*, 2013; Fernando and Patriotta, 2020). After starting their families, dependent applicants encountered a second hindering glass ceiling (Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021). SM women’s poor managerial advancement at lower levels jeopardized their advancement into middle management (Cooke *et al.*, 2013; Purkayastha, 2005).

Advancement into middle management. Women’s advancement into middle management, if it occurs at all (Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021; Yorozu, 2024), is problematic for SM women. SM women’s failure to progress into middle management arises from a lack of correspondence between their gender-stereotyped attributes (doubts about women’s technical competence, the efficacy of their feminine traits for leadership) and the desirable attributes for senior managers (Jain, 2021; Jogulu *et al.*, 2025; Yorozu, 2024). Lack-of-fit theory (Heilman *et al.*, 2024) supports the mismatch between women’s “feminine” attributes and the “masculine” attributes required for higher management as reducing managerial advancement.

To solve the problem of failure to advance to middle management, SM women take contingent paths, “job hopping” to *eventually* advance from lower to middle management (Colakoglu *et al.*, 2018; Cooke *et al.*, 2013; Jain, 2021). For example, when superiors are unsupportive, SM women lower-level managers transfer to larger and more reputable organizations to reach middle management (Cooke *et al.*, 2013). The circuitous, contingent

path builds the human, social and cultural career capital needed to advance (Colakoglu *et al.*, 2018; Cooke *et al.*, 2013). The acquisition of host-country cultural capital (e.g. language proficiency, cultural understanding) in particular helps SM women's advancement beyond lower to middle and senior management (Cooke *et al.*, 2013; Langinier *et al.*, 2024).

Social capital is particularly important for advancement into higher levels. Networks form a significant facilitating factor for SM women's transition from lower to middle management, in that they expedite promotion and nurture effectiveness in the managerial role (Jain, 2021). In seven of the 38 SM studies, women reported networks as key for their career progression at middle and senior management levels: failure to network disadvantaged them in sourcing potential senior managerial jobs and prevented their promotion from middle to senior management (Carangio *et al.*, 2021; Cooke *et al.*, 2013; Elitok and Nawyn, 2023; Jain, 2021; Kōu and Bailey, 2014; Purkayastha, 2005; Riaño, 2021a).

Advancement into senior management. SM women rarely advance past middle management into senior management positions (Bhatt, 2013; Purkayastha, 2005; Riaño, 2021b). They reported that gender and racial discrimination by their superiors prevented their progression (Bhatt, 2013; Carangio, 2023; Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir, 2022; Purkayastha, 2005; Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021) and, further, that they faced more barriers than SM men to achieving top positions (Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021). Gender is the most influential disadvantaging identity for SM women's advancement into senior leadership positions, more than migrant status (Becker, 2019; Bernstein and Shuval, 1998), forming a barrier beyond middle management (Colakoglu *et al.*, 2018). In longitudinal predictive studies, SM women did not attain the senior management levels they held pre-migration (Salaff and Greve, 2003) and took many years to regain a managerial position (Alcorso and Ho, 2006; Henry, 2007).

Racial bias also plays a significantly negative role for advancing to senior management levels (Carangio, 2023; Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir, 2022; Jain, 2021; Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021). Top management positions are most often restricted to White men (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir, 2022; Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021) and at times White women; white middle-to-senior women managers in Australia gained promotions and pay raises attributed to the “automatic” privilege endowed by their “whiteness”, in contrast to their Black counterparts (Carangio, 2023). However, too few studies consider the factors—apart from whiteness—that lead to SM women's advancement into senior management. Supporting career capital theory (Arthur *et al.*, 1995; Defillippi and Arthur, 1994), developing human, cultural, social and economic capital enabled middle-level SM women from less developed countries—traditionally discriminated against due to their gender, ethnicity and minority status—to build agency and be promoted to senior manager (Langinier *et al.*, 2024).

As occurred at lower management levels, family responsibilities, especially motherhood, reduce SM women's transition into senior management. Supporting the gender-role stereotyping of SM women as family caregivers, executive gatekeepers selected only childless single SM women physicians for senior administrative positions: women with families were perceived as a mismatch for senior leadership roles (Becker, 2019). Supporting gender-role theory (Markham, 1987), the caregiver roles of wife and mother following migration meant that SM women were selected less often for senior management/director ranks than SM men (Becker, 2019; Purkayastha, 2005), attributed to multiple obstacles and balancing the demands of white-collar occupations and family needs (Purkayastha, 2005).

In summary, addressing RQ3, across the various management levels similar barriers reduced SM women's advancement up the managerial hierarchy—gender and racial discrimination, intersecting gender–racial identities, mismatched role attributes, “motherhood” bias, and work–family conflict—contradicting the differential-prediction hypothesis (Tharenou, 2001) and supporting gender-role stereotyping through lack of fit (Heilman *et al.*, 2024), family gender roles (Markham, 1987), and intersecting identities with gender (Crenshaw, 1989); for example, gender with race and motherhood. The barriers of gender, racial and motherhood identities minimize SM women's managerial advancement at

lower, middle and senior management levels. Gender-role stereotyping contributes to SM women's failure to gain managerial advancement at all levels.

Further research is required into: (a) the most influential ways (e.g. networks) SM women advance beyond lower management to gain middle and senior management roles; (b) the relative importance of gender and race for SM women to advance beyond middle to senior management; and (c) whether the barriers to, and facilitators of, SM and SIE women's advancement to middle and senior management differ from those for their male and female counterparts; and if so how?

RP5: From career capital ([Arthur et al., 1995](#); [Defillippi and Arthur, 1994](#)) and personal agency theories ([Qin and Sekiguchi, 2024](#); [Tams and Arthur, 2010](#)), do SM and SIE women advance beyond lower management to gain middle and senior management roles by: (a) developing "managerial" career capital and/or (b) exercising personal and career agency to solve environmental career barriers.

RP6: What is the relative importance of gender and racial identity for SM women to advance to senior management? From an intersectional theory perspective ([Crenshaw, 1989](#)), do non-White women fare worse than other identities based on the intersection of their gender and race?

RP7: Do the barriers to middle and senior management for SM and SIE women differ from those for their male counterparts due to gender-role stereotyping through: (a) their family gender roles ([Markham, 1987](#)); (b) lack of leadership fit ([Heilman et al., 2024](#)); and/or (c) intersecting ascribed and family identities ([Crenshaw, 1989](#))?

Discussion

Encouraged by host-country governments and often in response to critical labor shortages, foreign skilled women migrate (SMs) or expatriate (SIEs) to advanced economies ([Kerr et al., 2017](#)). They simultaneously provide a potential source of talented women for the managerial pipeline, possibly reducing women's under-representation in management in the host country. However, a caveat applies. The review reveals that women's managerial status is often downgraded post-migration ([Bachan and Sheehan, 2011](#); [Banerjee and Phan, 2015](#); [Fernando and Patriotta, 2020](#); [Gupta et al., 2014](#); [Nardon et al., 2022](#); [Salaff and Greve, 2003](#)): SM women, especially non-White women, rarely retain their pre-migration managerial status or advance in management, often encountering barriers to their managerial advancement. SIE women, on the other hand, experience enablers, suggesting not all skilled foreign women gain similar advancement.

This review provides new knowledge into these neglected SM and SIE women in five ways: first, it assesses the extent of their managerial advancement in their new homeland, at a time when improvement in gender equality in management level is highly topical worldwide ([UN Women, 2015](#)); second, it identifies key influences on their managerial advancement from migration and self-initiated expatriation; third, it reveals that theoretical explanations of managerial advancement are gender-linked; fourth, it identifies boundary conditions that affect influences on SM and SIE women's managerial advancement linked to mobility type; and fifth, it provides much-needed answers on SIEs' career outcomes sought by scholars. Moreover, when considering theoretical implications, the discussion tentatively proposes a possible mediator-moderator framework for explaining the women's managerial advancement. In particular, the boundary condition (how) and the mediator-moderator explanation to be proposed (why and how) combine to support a strong theoretical contribution over direct paths (what), previously not found (e.g. [Brewster et al., 2021](#)).

Foremost, this review demonstrates that, despite their qualifications, SIE and SM women are unlikely to gain a management role or advance in management, especially SM women.

Barriers to advancement are plentiful but facilitators are scarce: the finding for SM and SIE women not advancing in management represents an important addition to the women in management literature (Triana *et al.*, 2021). Women worldwide had made some progress in advancing in management (e.g. O’Neil *et al.*, 2008) but progress has slowed more recently in the US (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016; Krivkovich *et al.*, 2024) and other recipient countries such as Australia (Stainback *et al.*, 2024) where a drop in women progressing into lower management levels has occurred, a concerning development since lower-level women managers form the pipeline to higher managerial levels. The review suggests that SM women more than SIE women are less likely to overcome barriers to advancement in management: SIE women’s motivation and self-agency equips them to address problems.

An alternative interpretation, however, warrants attention. Are the challenges faced by women undertaking skilled migration and self-initiated expatriation really any different from those for native-born women in leadership positions? Do the review results simply apply to skilled women irrespective of their migrant status? Comparative evidence exists for SM women (but not SIE women) for answering both questions—and in the negative.

SM women face more barriers to their advancement than skilled native-born women by incurring a “double disadvantage”: they are not only women but are also migrants (De Jong and Madamba, 2001). Compared to native-born skilled women, SM women, being migrants—and usually more often from developing countries—often lack formal recognition of their home-country qualifications and work experience, are less likely to acquire qualification-matched employment, and attract greater bias in recruitment and selection (Tharenou’s, 2024, review); lack proficiency in the host-country language; and experience more discrimination at work (Jacobs and Kreisberg, 2022; Oikelome and Healy, 2013; Riaño, 2021a). Overall, SM women incur more difficult challenges and barriers resulting in their advancing less in management than skilled native-born women (Fernandez, 1998; Riaño, 2021a, b; Salaff and Greve, 2003; Spadavecchia and Yu, 2021).

Second, this review adds new knowledge by comparing SM and SIE women; on the one hand by recognizing that the factors reducing SM women’s managerial advancement are largely gender-linked environmental barriers and, on the other, by acknowledging that the influential factors enhancing SIE women’s advancement mostly comprise more positive, individual-level facilitators. SIE women are more agentic, acting proactively to overcome advancement problems, and using mobility to seek and take up opportunities to gain managerial positions and advancement (e.g. Tharenou, 2010). SM women, on the other hand, are constrained by their negative environments and their inability to overcome them.

Third, the review extends understanding by identifying gender-linked theoretical explanations for SM and SIE women’s managerial advancement that extend beyond foundational human capital and career capital explanations. Gender-linked explanations are paramount, yet, apart from intersectionality theory, have been omitted in past theory for SMs (Farashah and Blomquist, 2022).

Three well-established validated theoretical lenses—intersectionality, lack of fit and gender role—combine to offer a coherent conceptual frame for explaining SM and SIE women’s managerial advancement post-migration. The frame combines: (1) their *ascribed identities* (e.g. female, Black, a migrant) separately and in intersection (intersectionality theory, Crenshaw, 1989), although with gender as the most consistent negative influence; (2) feminine attributes *lacking fit* with the perceived masculine attributes of the managerial role (lack-of-fit theory, Heilman *et al.*, 2024); and (3) caregiver *family gender roles*. They prioritize their partner’s provider role over women’s caregiver role during migration and advantage childless single women’s advancement (gender-role theory, Markham, 1987; Tharenou, 2008). Combining the theoretical constructs of gender and gender by race identity, lack of fit, and migration-situated gender roles supports gender-linked explanations of SM and SIE women’s managerial advancement, underlain at their core by gender-role stereotyping. In general, SM and SIE women’s lack of managerial advancement in the host country arises from

gender-role stereotyping imposed on the sexes. The explanatory frame appears to apply more to SM women than their SIE counterparts.

Fourth, the review advances explanation of the SM/SIE lack of advancement phenomenon by proposing the boundary influence of mobility type on skilled foreign women's managerial advancement. By explicitly addressing whether the mobility type moderates influences on advancement, the review supports the difference in explanations for managerial advancement for SM vs SIE mobility types, providing a notable theoretical contribution through demonstrating the boundary condition. Because SM women experience more discrimination and family responsibilities, they have fewer opportunities to gain managerial advancement. SIE women have fewer family and work barriers to their managerial advancement than SM women and their motivation and agency, on the other hand, attract more opportunities for managerial advancement. The moderating effect of the different mobility types means that the factors potentially influencing managerial advancement differ for SM and SIE women, tentatively suggesting that self-initiating expatriation results in positive factors, which enhance managerial advancement, while skilled migration results in negative factors, which minimize managerial advancement.

Fifth, the review provides answers to insufficiently researched questions into SIEs' career outcomes (Brewster *et al.*, 2021), extending explanations provided by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and gender role theories (Markham, 1987) to a new context: SIE women. Race not only independently disadvantages SIE women's career outcomes, but intersecting identities including race disadvantage SIE women's managerial advancement, worst for non-White women. Supporting the impact of traditional gender roles for SIEs, male providers advance in management whereas domesticated gender roles constrain female caregivers (Markham, 1987), unlike female childless singles (Tharenou, 2008). Not supporting theorization of managerial advancement as both objective and subjective outputs (Mello *et al.*, 2023; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012), SIE women self-initiated expatriation to realize subjective advancement (e.g. personal development/growth), but less for objective managerial advancement. The review shows SIE and SM women rarely gain managerial advancement.

Theoretical implications and future research

Research arising from the review has been flagged throughout as research propositions to be examined (RP1 to RP7). I propose examining a mediator-moderator explanatory model (RP8 to RP11), which emerges as a theoretical implication from the review.

Overall framework. The synthesized evidence to date has focused on *what* factors influence SM and SIE women's managerial advancement, as well as on the boundaries to those factors imposed by the mobility types (*how*; as in Tables 3 and 4), suggesting a possible mediator-moderator explanation. I base the analysis conducted leading to the development of the mediator-moderator explanatory framework on the review findings from the synthesized evidence and on the application of theory (career capital, personal agency). The review findings suggest that the barriers and facilitators have direct, weak paths to managerial advancement (as in Table 2). The findings also suggest the operation of mediators (e.g. career capital development; advancement-motivated personal agency), in turn leading to managerial advancement. Regarding the application of the theory, indirect/mediator paths may explain the mechanisms by which women gain managerial advancement, due to job opportunities enabling their building of career capital and managerial competencies, and due to advancement dissatisfaction motivating women to exercise their personal agency.

Mediation. The review found that career capital and managerial competencies (mediators) developed from SM and SIE women investing in lower-level jobs such as steppingstone jobs and in academic study. In turn, the capital and competencies lead to opportunities for managerial advancement (Colakoglu *et al.*, 2018; Cooke *et al.*, 2013; O'Dwyer and Colic-Peisker, 2016), consistent with career capital theory (Arthur *et al.*, 1995; Defillippi and Arthur, 1994). Women also advanced in management through being motivated to exercise their

personal agency to solve advancement barriers in their environments, consistent with agency theory (Bandura, 2001; Qin and Sekiguchi, 2024; Tams and Arthur, 2010) and supported by review findings (Christiansen and Kristjánsdóttir, 2022; Despotovic *et al.*, 2022; Langinier *et al.*, 2024; Thang *et al.*, 2002; Qin and Sekiguchi, 2024; Thang *et al.*, 2002).

As they travel along contingent job paths of lower-levels jobs or academic study, SM women learn to display their skills and abilities in culturally appropriate ways, signaling their suitability for managerial advancement to gatekeepers and reducing the perceived risk of their “foreignness” (e.g. Cooke *et al.*, 2003). The visibility enables their transition from a perceived misfit of their attributes to those of a managerial role to a perceived fit, supporting lack of fit theory (Heilman *et al.*, 2024). Over time, women, due to the development of their career capital from undertaking a contingent path, are more likely to move up to higher-level positions in part due to supervisor recognition of their competence. Future research proposes:

RP8: The developmental opportunities available from traveling contingency paths build SM and SIE women’s career capital and competencies for managerial jobs and advancement; in turn, they increase the visibility of their perceived leadership fit for management roles to gatekeepers.

RP9: SM and SIE women exercise their personal and career agency motivated by their dissatisfaction with their advancement at home to overcome barriers to their managerial advancement, which, in turn, lead to increasing their managerial advancement.

Moderation. Apart from mediator paths, moderator paths also require further research to assess whether gender or the mobility type (SM vs SIE) moderates the relationship between influential factors and SM and SIE women’s managerial career advancement. The mediated model proposed (e.g. RP8, RP9) is likely to be less supported for women than men. From human capital theory (Becker, 1993), women invest in human capital less than men (e.g. due to family-role disruptions, O’Dwyer and Colic-Peisker, 2016). SM women attract less recognition for their qualifications, work experience and qualifications than their counterparts (SM men, native-born skilled women; Tharenou’s, 2024, review). As a result, SM women’s managerial advancement is more restricted than SM men’s, who more often gain the qualifications required for management roles (Al Ariss, 2010; Cooke *et al.*, 2013). Hence:

RP10: The mediated model should apply more to men than women (moderation).

The review findings suggest that SIE women’s career opportunities and advancement-motivated personal agency lead to managerial advancement, unlike for SMs (Tables 3 and 4). Hence, the mediated model is likely to be more explanatory for SIEs than SMs, supporting mobility type acting as a boundary condition. SIE women have the benefit of their agency and proactivity to attract managerial opportunities whereas SM women have the limitations of discrimination and family responsibilities to reduce their managerial opportunities.

RP11: The mobility type (SM vs SIE) is likely to moderate the links of direct and indirect paths to managerial advancement, favoring SIE women over SM women.

Overall, the main theoretical contribution provided by the suggested mediator-moderator framework for explaining managerial advancement is its ability to explain both *why* and *how* causal factors explain the outcome (Edwards and Konold, 2020). The mediators explain *why* the influencing factors are related to advancement (e.g. through building career capital and competencies, through exercising personal agency). The moderators explain under what conditions the relationship between the facilitators and managerial advancement differs (e.g. for SIEs more than SMs). As a consequence, the framework can develop a deeper contextualized view of relationships, explaining the theoretical processes by which managerial advancement occurs and the circumstances under which links are greatest.

Limitations

Several limitations, particularly in relation to the restricted database, may reduce confidence in the review's findings. The make-up of the 64-study database was not deliberately constituted to test for the influence of all relevant factors on SM and SIE women's managerial advancement: the database is not necessarily complete or its sample of studies unbiased for SMs or SIEs. Limitations include: the lack of an underlying coherent analytical framework for the studies located; the lack of inclusion of macro-level influences (e.g. migration policy, visas); a potentially biased host-country sample for SMs; and an insufficient number of studies of SIE women.

Due to the systematic review failing to locate studies relevant to some areas (e.g. macro level), it was not possible (Table 4) to devise a complete analytical framework to distinguish SM and SIE profiles. An accepted relational framework for explaining SMs' achievement of professional employment and career paths has the three levels of macro-national, meso-organizational, and micro-individual factors (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Syed, 2008). Research needs to apply the framework in its entirety (Syed, 2008), adding a meso-family level, to develop a conceptual framework to compare the profiles of SM and SIE women and identify the dimensions distinguishing their managerial advancement.

Regarding the macro-level factor of host-country bias, the 38 SM women studies were all of migration to the "global north": the database did not include SM studies of migration to the south from south or north. The over-emphasis on south-north migration may have rendered the mobility of other migrations invisible (cf. Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski, 2025). Studies of SIE women were not biased, including south to south and north to south migration.

Also at the macro-level, host-country migration policy affects the type of employment visa gained by SM and SIE women on entry, and therefore whether they can gain managerial positions, but was omitted in studies examined in the database. Visa type affects women's ability to gain paid work and the type of work allowed, and restricts work in the early migration period, all factors preventing managerial advancement on entry (Elitok and Nawyn, 2023; Süpule, 2021). The database did not locate studies for SM and SIE women examining visas and links to their advancement. Future research needs to investigate the influence of such macro-level influences on SM and SIE women's managerial advancement.

A further limitation of the review is the lack of sufficient studies of SIE women, yet women form about half of SIEs (Tharenou, 2010; Thorn, 2009) and SIEs have gained managerial and executive positions (Tharenou, 2013). From the few studies available, it is known that some SIE women who initiate expatriation to gain managerial positions and advancement in the host country succeed in doing so (e.g. Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh, 2008; Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2022; Napier and Taylor, 2002; Thang *et al.*, 2002); that their exercise of agency was influential; and that they "job hopped" (amongst other strategies) to overcome obstacles and advance in management (Tharenou, 2010). In most studies the women were in their first job or early in migration. We do not know whether SIE women advanced further up the hierarchy following those first jobs; what were the nature of the barriers and facilitators they subsequently encountered; or, when they repatriated, did they gain managerial advancement and as often as their counterparts (men, native-born women). Research needs to extend beyond early migration to identify the national, organizational, family and individual factors explaining SM and SIE women's subsequent managerial advancement.

Practical implications from the review's findings

Practical implications arise to reduce the barriers, from the review's findings, SM and SIE women face to gaining managerial advancement. From the results, the major barriers for SM women were gatekeeper discrimination, work-family imbalance, family commitments, and a lack of career opportunities. Of the highest priority (e.g. Table 3) are actions at organizational and family levels to reduce discrimination (especially against non-White women and mothers) and work-family imbalance arising from family commitments.

Foremost, regarding discrimination, organizations need to implement non-discriminatory processes to prevent the bias that occurs against women in selection and promotion processes for managerial advancement, especially for SM women from developing countries/non-Whites and those with family commitments. Organizations need to implement reforms in recruitment, selection and promotion processes to protect marginalized SM women from discrimination (Guo and Al Ariss, 2015; UN Women, 2022), and in particular Black SM women disadvantaged for managerial advancement. Employers need to train gatekeepers to interpret SM and SIE women's foreign qualifications accurately and to recognize their (foreign) work experience (Guo and Al Ariss, 2015; Jacobs and Kreisberg, 2022).

Organizations also need to develop senior managers and executives to raise their awareness of, and increase their competencies in, ensuring organizational practices and policies treat SM and SIE women equitably in their pursuit of managerial advancement (Tharenou, 2010), especially for women from developing countries and non-White women. Engagement by managers in their management development to reduce discrimination against SM and SIE women is crucial for effective implementation (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016).

Regarding work-family imbalance, organizations need to assist SM women with children/families to prevent their having to revert to gender-stereotypical domesticated work roles. Management needs to implement organization policies on work arrangement including enabling working from home and providing parental leave and childcare support (Alcorso and Ho, 2006; Langinier *et al.*, 2024; Ressia *et al.*, 2017) to enhance gender equality, especially when SM and SIE women are seeking to advance beyond lower management.

The micro level is characterized by contextual issues that SM and SIE women must recognize and address if they are to gain managerial advancement, prioritizing resolving a lack of managerial job opportunities and family commitments. Especially, SM and SIE women need to exercise personal agency to solve barriers in their environment the review shows reduce their advancement (Qin and Sekiguchi, 2024). Actions SM and SIE women can take to increase managerial opportunities include further expatriation (Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2022; Thang *et al.*, 2002) and network-building (Riaño, 2021a). To deal with family commitments, women need to negotiate and implement an effective familial strategy with their partners (e.g. Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Riaño, 2021a) and plan for how early in their migration they can take on a managerial job or contingent paths (e.g. steppingstone jobs, academic study; Colakoglu *et al.*, 2018) to be competitive for later managerial advancement.

In conclusion, the migration of skilled employees to advanced economies is often a highly controversial issue, including for SM and SIE women (UN Women, 2022). More systematic research is needed into skilled migrant and self-initiated expatriate women's managerial career advancement to inform theory, government policy, and consultations between government, industry, organizations and unions, such that the talent of these women is utilized and their proportion in management in the host country is maximized. This review has sought to provide the first integration of the evidence to assist researchers in this regard.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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Further reading

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Appendix

Table A1. Characteristics of the studies of skilled migrant and self-initiated expatriate women

Study number	Women only or gender	Research method	Host country	Home country	Marital status	Children
<i>Skilled migrant women (38 studies)</i>						
1	Gender	Qual	France	Lebanon	50% married, 50% single	Most. have children
2	Women	Mixed Long	Australia	China, Hong Kong	Some married, some single	Some are mothers of young children
3	Women	Quant	United Kingdom (UK)	Poland	40% married	30% have 1 or > dependent children
4	Women	Mixed Long	Canada	Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa	All married. 68% are dependent applicants	75% have children. 21% have young children
5	Women	Quant Long	Canada	Not Europe countries; 11 regions	Married	Number of children
6	Gender	Mixed	Europe	Germany	–	–
7	Gender	Qual	Europe	Germany	–	–
8	Gender	Quant Long	Israel	Former Soviet Union (FSU)	56% married	–
9	Gender	Qual	United States (US)	India	92% of first generation married	92% of first generation
10	Gender	Quant Long	Israel	Europe, Americas, FSU, Asia, Africa	Married 38% 76% 67% 74%	Have children 34% 67% 30% 64%
11	Gender	Mixed	Australia	Nine countries (e.g. UK, China)	–	–
12	Women	Qual	Australia	UK, China, India, Philippines	13 women on spouse/partner visa	–
13	Women	Qual	Australia	UK, China, India, Philippines	13 women on spouse/partner visa	–
14	Women	Qual	Iceland	Africa, Asia, Latin America	8 married, 4 single or divorced	83% (10) had children
15	Women	Qual	US	Turkey	11 married	Some with children
16	Women	Qual	Australia	China	12 married	5 children
17	Women	Qual	US	Turkey	All married	All mothers
18	Women	Quant	Israel	Ethiopia	All married	Five mothers
19	Gender	Qual	US	Asian India	–	–
20	Gender	Mixed	UK	Sri Lanka	Most SM women married	Some have children
21	Gender	Quant Long	Canada	Many	–	–
22	Women	Qual	UK	Ghania, 3	–	–
23	Women	Qual	US	3 Sub-Saharan Africa countries	–	–

(continued)

Table A1. Continued

Study number	Women only or gender	Research method	Host country	Home country	Marital status	Children
24	Women	Qual	US	India	All married. 22 dependents of male visa holders	25 mothers; 25 children
25	Gender	Qual	Norway	Many	—	—
26	Gender	Qual	Canada	Many	—	0 to 5 children
27	Gender	Qual	Netherlands or UK	India	6 married, 5 single	Some children
28	Women	Qual	Switzerland	France, US, Canada	16 married, 2 single	7 with children; 7 childless singles
29	Women	Qual Long	Canada	Venezuela, China, Russia, South Africa (SA), Korea	5 married, 1 single	3 mothers with one child each
30	Women	Qual	Canada	26 countries	36 married	24 had school-aged children
31	Gender	Quant	UK	Commonwealth countries	—	—
32	Women	Qual	NZ, Iceland	Developing countries	18 married, 7 singles	—
33	Women	Mixed	US	Asian India	All married	All have children
34	Gender	Mixed	Switzerland	Non-European, European countries	Married	Have children
35	Gender	Mixed	Switzerland	Non-European European countries	Married	All have dependent children
36	Gender	Qual	Australia, NZ	UK, US, Canada, 65 European, 4 developing countries	Some married	Some had children
37	Women	Qual	UK	Developed and developing countries	6 married, 1 single, 2 divorced	4 had children
38	Gender	Mixed, Long	Canada	China	Married, dual career couple	All had single child
<i>Self-initiated expatriate women (26 studies)</i>						
39	Gender	Quant	46 countries	39 countries	—	—
40	Gender	Quant Long	US	India	Married	—
41	Women	Quant	Saudi Arabia	All world regions	134 (65%) married, 72 singles	Children
42	Women	Qual	UK	China	7 married	Children 0 to 3
43	Gender	Qual	UK	Australia	Generally single	—
44	Women	Qual	United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Non-Gulf Arab countries	8 married, 2 single mothers	Mothers of dependent children
45	Women	Qual	Cayman Islands, UK	UK, NZ, Philippines	2 married, 4 singles	Six childless
46	Gender	Mixed	Australia	SA	—	—

(continued)

Table A1. Continued

Study number	Women only or gender	Research method	Host country	Home country	Marital status	Children
47	Women	Qual	UAE	Western countries, Middle East, North Africa Asia	32 married, 18 single, 3 divorced, 3 widowed	24 married/ children 13 childless singles; 6 married/ childless Most partners had children
48	Gender	Qual	Up to 14 countries	Netherlands, UK, Canada, Germany, US, China, others	–	
49	Gender	Mixed	Estonia	Finland, UK Norway, Ireland, US, others	Cohabitation	Number of children
50	Women	Qual Long	China	12 Western (e.g. US, UK, Canada, Switzerland, Germany)	Ten had partner; 1 widowed, 4 divorced, 7 married; 10 singles	Seven had school-aged children
51	Gender	Qual	NZ	UK, Asia	Three married, 4 singles, 1 widow	Some women had children on return
52	Gender	Qual	UK	NZ	Some married abroad, rest singles	–
53	Women	Qual	NZ	UK, Asia, Other	–	–
54	Women	Qual	NZ	UK, Asia, Other	–	Adult non-dependent children
55	Women	Qual	Japan	US, China, Turkey, other	Some married, some trailing spouses	Almost no dependent children in Japan and China, several had children in Turkey
56	Women	Qual	UAE	US, Australia, Canada, UK, Ireland, France	–	–
57	Gender	Qual	Range of countries including European	Finland	Some married	Some have children
58	Women	Qual	UAE	Australia, Canada, NZ, SA, UK, US	21 married, 9 singles	Some have children
59	Women	Mixed	Singapore	Japan	All single	No children with them
60	Women	Quant	Australia, UK, US, Ireland, other countries	NZ	Many married or partnered	Some had dependents
61	Women	Quant	Norway	Many	Some had partner vs single	Some had one dependent child <18

(continued)

Table A1. Continued

Study number	Women only or gender	Research method	Host country	Home country	Marital status	Children
62	Gender	Qual	US	Germany, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Austria	73% married	Few had children
63	Women	Qual	Egypt, Korea, US, India NZ, Australia, Germany, Argentina	Singapore, Netherland, UK, Germany, France	All single	All childless
64	Women	Qual	Japan	Developing countries, e.g. Cambodia, China, Thailand, Vietnam	Some married	Some have children

Note(s): The studies are numbered 1 to 38 (SMs) and 39 to 64 (SIEs), corresponding to their superscript numbers in the reference list of the journal article. Almost all host countries are developed countries. Qual = Qualitative; Quant = quantitative; Mixed = mixed design; Long = longitudinal design

Source(s): Author's own work

Table A2. Description of characteristics of sample of 38 studies of skilled migrant (SM) women and 26 studies of self-initiated expatriate (SIE) women

Study sample characteristics	SM women	SIE women
<i>Migration tenure</i>		
• Early migration in first 6 months	45%	70%
• Time in the host country	10.36 years	5.94 years
<i>Family</i>		
• Married/cohabiting	71%	57%
• Dependent children	71%	65% (one child)
• Childless singles	43%	56%
• Trailing partner/dependent applicant	59%	33%
<i>Employment</i>		
• First job in host country	16%	27%
• Average tenure in host country	5.73 years	5.10 years
• First career step (e.g. entering the labor market)	18%	31%
<i>Average age</i>	43 years	41 years
<i>Education: tertiary degree or higher</i>	97%	92%
<i>Research methodology</i>		
• Longitudinal predictive study	9 SM (11%)	1 SIE (17%)
• Research design		
Qualitative design	23 SM (53%)	18 SIE (65%)
Mixed design	9 SM (16%)	3 SIE (12%)
Quantitative design	9 SM (32%)	5 SIE (23%)
Total	100%	100%

Note(s): The information in the table arises from two researchers coding the sample characteristics given in each empirical study's method section in their journal articles

Source(s): Author's own work

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