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# Managing Gender Equity and Equality Across Borders—A Review and Introduction to the Special Issue

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## ABSTRACT

Achieving gender equality remains a pressing global challenge. In response, many organizations and multinational enterprises (MNEs) have adopted gender diversity management (GDM)—human resource practices aimed at promoting gender equity and equality in the workplace. While prior research highlights the importance of institutional context in shaping the implementation and outcomes of GDM, there is limited understanding of how to contextualize and implement these practices effectively across diverse national settings. In this editorial, we first review existing research in three key areas: (1) the transfer of GDM practices across MNEs, (2) the gender composition of MNEs' top management teams, and (3) comparative studies of GDM. Our analysis underscores the limitations of universal, “one-size-fits-all” approaches and emphasizes the need for context-sensitivity. In this context, we then introduce the contributions to the Special Issue. Together, these articles advance our understanding of the complex interplay between organizational practices and local norms in shaping GDM implementation and outcomes. Finally, we outline research directions that can help propel future work, including the need for a deeper understanding of MNEs' motivations for engaging in GDM, the positioning of gender within broader diversity agendas, and the implications of growing anti-DEI sentiment.

## 1 | Introduction

The world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030. (...) At the current rate of progress, it will take up to 286 years to close gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws, 140 years for women to be represented equally in positions of power and leadership in the workplace, and 47 years to achieve equal representation in national parliaments.

(United Nations 2023)

Attaining gender equality has long been seen not only as a critical social goal but also as a persistent global challenge. At

the policy level, gender equality has been identified as one of the UN sustainable development goals (United Nations 2015) and public policy on gender equality exists in many countries including legislation on anti-discrimination, pay transparency, and gender quotas. At the organizational level, many organizations implement gender diversity management (GDM), that is, human resource management (HRM) policies and practices aimed at providing equal opportunities and equal outcomes for women (Ali et al. 2015). GDM includes a broad range of practices to improve gender equality including targeted gender recruiting, gender blind selection, anti-discrimination/equal employment opportunity programs, mentoring, training and development, family-friendly policies, and performance evaluation systems that hold management accountable for advancing

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## Summary

- What is currently known?
  - Despite empirical evidence that context plays a role for effective gender diversity management (GDM) and that GDM practices and outcomes are influenced by formal and informal institutions in the home and host countries, we still do not know enough about how to successfully manage gender equity and equality across country contexts.
- What this paper adds?
  - This editorial provides an overview of existing research on global GDM in three key areas: Transfer of GDM practices between headquarters and subsidiaries, research on the gender composition of top management teams in multinational enterprises and comparative research on GDM and introduces the contributions the Special Issue makes to this literature.
  - Building on the review and the introduction of the articles included in this Special Issue, we develop avenues for future research in three key areas relevant to the field.
- The implications for practitioners
  - We propose that an increased awareness of contextual differences and an improved empirical evidence base for gender diversity management across contexts will help domestic and multinational enterprises to improve the effectiveness of their GDM policies and practices and contribute to more gender equity and equality on a global scale.

women among others (e.g., Ali et al. 2015; Kalev et al. 2006; Olsen et al. 2016).

Despite these efforts and increased awareness in organizations and societies, progress towards equality for women in business and society has been described as “stubborn” (Gavett and Perry 2019) and “stalled” (Sandberg and Thomas 2018). Women worldwide continue to experience discrimination at work (OECD 2023), remain underrepresented in leadership roles (McKinsey 2024) and are underpaid relative to men (World Economic Forum 2022). While there are differences in the extent of these inequalities, as of yet we are aware of no country that has achieved full gender equality.

The Special Issue was motivated by the question of how research can inform domestic organizations and multinational enterprises (MNEs), on how to improve their GDM approach to increase the success of their GDM efforts, and how such efforts are contributing to fairer and more equal workplaces for all genders on a global scale. As an interdisciplinary team comprising of international human resource management (IHRM) and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) scholars, we sought to explore how country and institutional contexts influence the implementation and effectiveness of GDM. When we speak of institutional context, we refer to the formal (i.e., codified, written rules like equality laws) and informal (i.e., unwritten social norms or traditions such as gender norms) institutions that GDM in organizations is embedded in (North 1991). Despite the fact that institutional context has been highlighted broadly as a relevant

factor driving or inhibiting GDM success (Hennekam et al. 2017; Klarsfeld 2010), and IHRM research which suggests that GDM is particularly sensitive to local contexts as countries differ in terms of their gender laws and norms (Parboteeah et al. 2008), successful contextualization of GDM efforts remains a challenge. In practice, GDM often still follows GDM's roots and practices developed in the US and many MNEs implement globally prescribed best practices rather than practices developed in their specific host country contexts (A. K. Bader et al. 2022). This has hampered implementation success and has often resulted in resistance and backlash (e.g., Moore 2015; Özbilgin et al. 2012). Against this backdrop, we called for papers that combine knowledge from the IHRM and DEI literature, seeking research that can help generate theoretical insights, empirical findings, and evidence-based recommendations on how organizations can effectively tackle the challenges related to managing and improving gender equity and equality in and across different country contexts.

In this introductory article, we reflect on the literature that inspired our SI, introduce the papers in this SI and highlight how they offer novel theoretical contributions and provide evidence-based recommendations for GDM in a global context. Lastly, we present future avenues for research that we consider important to move the field further forward.

## 2 | Key Research Strands Concerned With Managing Gender Equity and Equality Across Borders

Research on managing gender equality across contexts can be broadly grouped into three streams: (1) transfer of GDM practices between headquarters (HQ) and subsidiaries, (2) gender composition of MNEs' top management teams (TMT), and (3) comparative studies on GDM.

### 2.1 | Transfer of GDM Practices Between HQ and Subsidiaries

The largest stream of research regarding managing gender equality across contexts is on the transfer of GDM between HQ and subsidiaries. When transferring practices across countries, MNEs encounter dual, and often competing, pressures between the institutional contexts of the HQs and subsidiaries and need to decide on whether to keep practices the same and push for global standards (standardization) or adjust them to the host context (localization) (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1989; Kostova 1999). Initially, gender issues in MNEs were mostly localized to comply with local institutions (Rosenzweig and Nohria 1994). Given recent trends and public pressure for MNEs to take responsibility for addressing gender equality (Eden and Wagstaff 2021), MNEs have started to develop a global agenda and aim to address gender inequality across the MNEs' countries of operation. Yet, transferring GDM practices across contexts comes with increased risks of failure to establish gender equality due to potential differences between the home and host country gender institutions. This challenge of transfer has been shown for the transfer of GDM as well as wider diversity management approaches not targeted at women

specifically (e.g., Hennekam et al. 2017; E. S. Ng and Klarsfeld 2018; Sippola and Smale 2007).

In this context, two main factors stand out as threats to the success of GDM transfer. First, research has highlighted lack of acceptance of GDM, which can be seen as a “foreign practice” by the local workforce, typically attributed to differences in foreign and local institutions about gender equality (A. K. Bader et al. 2022). For instance, Alhejji et al. (2018) examined a British MNE transferring GDM to Saudi Arabia and showed that even if local laws and global policies seemed to support a stronger focus on gender equality, informal cultural norms led to local resistance and a lack of acceptance of the GDM practices. Similarly, in a study on the transfer of GDM from Western countries to Muslim majority countries, Özbilgin et al. (2012) concluded that “there is a strong legacy of protectionisms, that is, laws that seek to protect women against unsuitable work, and traditionalism, that is, traditions that uphold paternalist and patriarchal interpretations of religion” (p. 354) reducing effectiveness of GDM. Interestingly, even in countries where gender equality is rather similar and the cultural distance is low such as in Germany and the UK, subsidiary employees were shown to be resistant to the implementation of HQ-based GDM practices as the underlying cultural norms and discourses about gender did not align with the local environment (Moore 2015).

Another important factor affecting the success of GDM are subsidiary managers’ personal concerns for gender equality and the effort with which they implement GDM in the subsidiaries. For instance, Kemper et al. (2019) found that when subsidiary executives were serious about gender equality, their approach to implementation was more rigorous and they became an important driver of GDM implementation, whereas executives who did not believe in or support gender equality were more superficial in the implementation of GDM. In a similar vein, Ferner et al. (2005) focussed their investigation on how local managers used their power to resist the implementation of foreign practices. Their study highlighted that while there was only little open defiance, local managers strongly contested the foreign diversity policy, and when it was eventually implemented, the implementation “was at best incomplete” (p. 316). Accordingly, if managers (both expatriates and host country national managers) in the subsidiaries are not supportive of GDM and view it as a “foreign” practice, implementation will be hampered.

Most research in this stream assumes that the home context is more advanced in terms of gender equality than the host context. Therefore, implementation was often considered as a one-way transfer from HQ to subsidiary and the focus was on understanding challenges of implementation and reluctance in the subsidiary. However, recent research suggests that dynamics change (Shenkar 2001) when the host country context has stronger equality-related institutions than the HQ contexts and the host context can become a driver of gender equality in the HQ and for global GDM practices. For instance, Song’s (2022) study on Swedish subsidiaries of Korean MNEs highlighted that even in the absence of HQ pressure, GDM was implemented in the host country as a response to the institutional pressure in the host market. Other research suggests that the subsidiary can be a source of GDM innovation for the HQ if there is reverse

transfer of GDM practices from the host country to the HQ (A. K. Bader et al. 2022). Thus, in some contexts, despite a lack of attention to gender equality from HQ, subsidiaries do strategically address gender equality in the host context with positive impact on HQ.

## 2.2 | Research on Gender Composition of TMTs in MNEs

Another area of research related to MNEs and thematically connected to the first stream, focuses on the gender composition of TMTs and upper management levels at both the HQ and subsidiary level. While the gender composition of the TMT is not a GDM practice in itself, it remains a key topic in research on GDM in MNEs. It is highly relevant for research on GDM as the gender of TMT members has been shown to be both a valid predictor of the GDM strategy adopted by organizations (Ali and Konrad 2017) and an indicator of gender equality and more equal approaches to staffing managerial roles more broadly (OECD 2022).

In a seminal study of US MNEs, Rosenzweig and Nohria (1994) investigated whether the gender composition in the management of the local subsidiary aligned more closely with the host environment or the home environment in the US. Emphasizing the importance of contextual factors in shaping gender equality, their findings revealed gender composition was more strongly influenced by the host context than by the US home context. More recent research highlights a shift, as MNEs are now expected to promote gender equality not only at home but also in their host countries (see Koveshnikov et al. 2019, for a review). This includes a growing recognition of the need to increase female representation in the TMT of their subsidiaries (Saeed et al. 2022). As a prominent strategy to increase gender representation in TMTs of subsidiaries, some MNEs have introduced gender quotas or targets for management positions—but so far this has resulted in only limited success in terms of increasing equality outcomes. Even more concerning, when women are placed in TMT positions of subsidiaries, they experience significant challenges and discrimination, and often suffer from tokenism (Paludi et al. 2020) leading to a lack of inclusion, integration, and influence.

Researchers have also examined the specific relevance of institutional context of MNEs home and host countries for female TMT representation. This research demonstrates that when operating in host countries with stronger institutional gender equality, in response to local institutional pressures subsidiaries might become more gender equitable than their HQs. This increased equality in subsidiaries is important for MNEs’ success abroad as research shows it helps to overcome parent firm reputational risk (Saeed et al. 2024) and the liability of origin (Saeed et al. 2024, 2022) as increased gender equality signals local adaptation and commitment to local institutions. Furthermore, in the case of mergers and acquisitions, if the country of the acquisition target is characterised by higher institutional gender equality, this can spill over to the home country of the acquirer and result in greater female representation in the board of the acquirer (Bao and Li 2024).

## 2.3 | Comparative Research on GDM

Finally, studies comparing GDM practices across countries represent the third stream of research on managing gender equity and equality across borders. Comparative work on GDM remains sparse and with few exceptions, most studies to-date take a wider view on diversity management rather than adopt a targeted focus on practices aimed at gender equity and equality. This research has examined whether country context influences the uptake and shape of GDM strategy and practice and the outcomes of GDM.

Using the GLOBE dimensions, Peretz et al. (2015) investigated how national cultural values affect the adoption of diversity programs and how cultural practices moderate their effect on employee withdrawal and innovation performance. Likewise, Stoermer et al. (2016) drew from Hofstede's (2001) cultural values framework to propose that certain cultural characteristics and combinations thereof provide a more supportive environment for the positive effects of inclusive practices on employee outcomes than others. Further, Cooke and Saini (2012) compared diversity management (including gender equality) in China and India, highlighting how Chinese firms had not yet adopted diversity management as an HR practice, whereas in India the notion of diversity was much more relevant and a part of the HRM system. Supporting contextual differences, Nielsen (2017) showed that universities in Norway and Sweden took a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to GDM practices in order to tackle systemic inequities than their counterparts in Denmark who more often relied on a "fix the women" approach.

This line of research also indicates that while many practices seem to follow a best practice approach, some country-specific practices emerge. Most studies have found preference for contextual adjustments to existing practices such as adjusting flexible working to local laws rather than for locally developed approaches. But unique adaptations may arise in response to unique contexts: for example, Indian IT firms provide self-defence training and shuttle transportation as part of their GDM, as this can be critical for the safety of women who work irregular hours at these firms (Donnelly 2015). Such interventions are not typically considered in GDM in other contexts. Further, Georgiadou and Syed (2021) highlighted the role of culturally-bound phenomena such as the importance of social networks in Asian countries in shaping the development and effectiveness of GDM.

Focussing more directly on the role of context for outcomes of GDM, Olsen et al. (2016) analysed whether and how GDM enhances organizational attractiveness for women in two different contexts: the US and France. The main premise of their work was that given the regulatory framework in both countries focus on different aspects of gender equality, perceptions of organizational attractiveness will vary by the raters' country of origin. While they did not find support for the proposed interaction of GDM programmes and country context on attractiveness, they found a three way interaction of GDM programmes, country context and individual level diversity attitudes: In France, diversity attitudes did not affect the relationship between GDM programmes and attractiveness, but in the US women with stronger diversity attitudes were more attracted to companies signalling a more proactive GDM. Research further reveals that the positive effects of

GDM practices on gender equality outcomes are intensified in countries with "cultural tightness," i.e., those characterized by a high degree of commitment to and strict enactment of cultural norms (Gelfand et al. 2011; Toh and Leonardelli 2012).

## 3 | Contributions of the Special Issue

Past research has provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of promoting gender equity and equality across different contexts, yet many questions remain unanswered. Although comparative and IHRM research has grown significantly in recent years and has offered important insights into the role of context in shaping the development, implementation and outcomes of HRM in a global context, issues related to managing gender equity and equality remain under-explored relative to their importance (Cooke et al. 2019). Various gender indices and prior research have consistently highlighted the differences in the nature and level of gender inequality across countries (Cooke 2010; E. S. Ng et al. 2021; OECD 2023). But only recently attention turned towards MNEs as "gendered" spaces and has recognized the need to actively address and manage gender equity and equality on a global scale (Koveshnikov et al. 2019). Critical and feminist scholars have long advocated for placing gender equality at the forefront of IHRM research (Bullough et al. 2017; Sposato and Rumens 2021), yet this research remains sidelined. Review articles show limited knowledge on how to manage gender equality in an international context. While gender equality has occasionally been used as an example to illustrate the influence of home and host contexts on HRM adoption (Schotter et al. 2021), other reviews on IHRM suggest little or no systematic and comprehensive research on managing gender equity and equality, beyond the experiences of women's expatriation (Cooke et al., 2019; Fan et al. 2021; Sanders and De Cieri 2021).

Building on this line of research, our Call for Papers aimed to specifically encourage research addressing how local and multinational organization can raise gender equity and equality on a global scale – using perspectives of international as well as comparative research. The key questions we raised in our Call for Papers centred around how the challenges of implementing effective GDM and any possible resistance to that will vary across specific host contexts. Related to this, we were particularly interested in how MNEs tackle GDM when operating in multiple foreign contexts. We encouraged research in country contexts that have been relatively overlooked previously. Similarly, we called for targeted comparative research and the inclusion of multiple contexts to better understand the role of country context in the design, implementation, and success of GDM. We were also interested in broadening the conversation through calling for research that examines how GDM is embedded in the overall diversity strategy and in how expatriates are utilized in this process. A final key issue we raised was the need to enrich the theoretical debate in the area. Existing research has been largely based on theories around national culture (Hofstede 2001; House et al. 2004) and institutions (Kostova 1999; North 1991). We aimed for submissions that considered other IHRM relevant theories or introduced theories from the DEI literature to GDM research.



Collectively, the submissions we received and the papers that were ultimately accepted for this Special Issue make important contributions to the ongoing research on international dimensions of GDM. First, we were pleased to observe that there were studies on GDM issues in a variety of country contexts, including non-Western contexts (Pudelko & Tenzer), as well as in developed and emerging countries (Saeed, Riaz, & Riaz; Scheibmayr & Reichel; Tran, Jubb, & Rajendran). Another strength is the breadth and novelty of topics addressed, which range from identifying the lack of attention to expatriates in global GDM (Bader, Bucher, & Sarabi) and identity processes triggered by GDM in foreign subsidiaries (Pudelko & Tenzer) to the relevance of gender composition/representation in professionalization processes across multiple country contexts (Scheibmayr & Reichel). Finally, the set of papers highlights a variety of novel theoretical perspectives that serve as a fruitful basis for MNE research, such as Acker's Theory of Gendered Organizations (Bader, Bucher, & Sarabi), Status Characteristics Theory (Terpstra-Tong et al.) and Role Congruency Theory (Scheibmayr & Reichel). Enriching the theoretical foundation of GDM studies is an important step towards expanding the necessary theoretical discussions and debate in this area of research. Table 1 summarizes the collection of papers and the section that follows briefly introduces each article and its contributions (in alphabetical order).

### 3.1 | Bader, Bucher and Sarabi: Female Expatriates on the Move? Gender Diversity Management in Global Mobility

Addressing organizational explanations for women's underrepresentation in MNEs' global assignments, Bader, Bucher, and Sarabi provide rich insights into the accounts of 31 senior global mobility managers from European and North American MNEs. Their definition of GDM encompasses all organizational practices that aim at improving gender equality at work. Their findings reveal that expatriation and gender equality management do not reflect the reality of MNEs and that expatriation management is still largely shaped by gender stereotypes favouring men. Their work encourages researchers and practitioners alike to pay greater attention to gendered mobility practices that discourage women expatriates and fail their demands and potentials and highlights the necessity of adopting a gender-blind approach in global mobility. This study emphasizes the relevance of gender-sensitive perspectives on MNEs' global mobility strategy—not only for managing subsidiaries but also for global gender equality. It may further inspire future research to study expatriates as agents of change towards more gender equality.

### 3.2 | Pudelko & Tenzer: From Professional Aspirations to Identity Confirmation and Transformation: The Case of Japanese Career Women Working for Foreign Subsidiaries in Japan

Pudelko and Tenzer shed light on how the experience of working for a foreign company may confirm or alter the identities of

working women in a unique cultural context: Japan, a country known to be historically highly discriminating against women. Building on 125 interviews, the authors investigate the changes women experience when working for foreign MNEs originated in country contexts with more advanced gender equality institutions and providing an environment that fosters more equal participation of men and women in the workplace. The article provides important new theoretical insights and expands current literature on global GDM by introducing the identity salience of home country HRM and GDM practices in MNEs for local women in the host country. The authors conclude that by implementing standardized home country practices MNEs can support local women in their strive for gender equality and take on their responsibility for gender equality worldwide. Their research also provides important practical insights as given the competitiveness of the Japanese labour market, targeting recruitment at highly qualified and career oriented women may turn foreign HRM practices from a liability into a recruitment and retention advantage in the war for highly skilled talents.

### 3.3 | Saeed, Riaz, & Riaz: Women's Representation in top Management Teams of Emerging Markets' Multinationals in Developed Countries: A Legitimacy Perspective

Saeed, Riaz, and Riaz examine whether emerging market multinational enterprises' (EMNEs) strategy to increase women's representation in top management teams can help them overcome the "liability of origin"—negative perceptions associated with their home country's institutional environment. They argue that EMNEs employ GDM as a strategic response to legitimacy challenges. By increasing women's presence in leadership positions, EMNEs signal alignment with the ethical values and norms of developed countries, thereby mitigating negative stereotypes and gaining acceptance from stakeholders. The authors analyse a panel dataset of 774 EMNEs from 20 emerging markets operating in 26 developed countries. The results support the hypothesis that when there is an institutional void (i.e., a lack of institutional regulation in the home country), EMNEs increase women's representation in TMTs as it enhances the EMNEs' social and moral legitimacy in the host country. Investigating the boundary conditions of this relationship, the study finds that EMNEs with market-seeking objectives face greater legitimacy challenges and are thus more inclined to adopt GDM. Furthermore, longer duration in the host market allows EMNEs to better understand stakeholder expectations and integrate GDM more effectively. Finally, state-owned firms, often perceived with suspicion due to their home government's image, experience amplified pressure to adopt GDM to maintain legitimacy. This research makes an important contribution to IHRM and GDM literature by identifying legitimacy as a primary driver for the implementation of GDM practices in a cross-country context. By also shedding light on the boundary conditions of this relationship, the paper further advances existing research by demonstrating that the effect of institutional voids on legitimacy seeking through GDM is not uniform but contingent on firm characteristics.

**TABLE 1** | Summary of contributions to the special issue.

Contribution	Research question(s)	Findings	Countries	Theory
B. Bader et al. 2024: Female expatriates on the move? Gender diversity management in global mobility	Are female expatriates considered an explicit GDM target group by MNEs and how do organizational practices contribute to the low numbers of female expatriates in global mobility?	The study finds that the relation between a company's global mobility management and its respective GDM is, in most cases, non-existent and due to gender stereotyping MNEs still favour the selection of male employees in global mobility.	MNEs from Europe and North America	Gendered organizations
Pudelko and Tenzer 2024: From professional aspirations to identity confirmation and transformation: The case of Japanese career women working for foreign subsidiaries in Japan	In Japan, a host country where domestic companies favour men over women, what attracts local career women to foreign subsidiaries and how do they experience this work context?	Investigating the identity work of Japanese women who work for foreign MNEs, the study finds that the choice of foreign employers is not only motivated by professional aspirations but also driven by identity-related aspirations. The study highlights how implementing GDM can create a competitive advantage in a country context where local companies still favour men over women.	Foreign MNEs in Japan	Identity and professional career aspirations
Saeed, Riaz, & Riaz 2024: Women's representation in top management teams of emerging markets' multinationals in developed countries: A legitimacy perspective	Can adopting GDM practices to increase women's representation in TMT be used to overcome the liability of origin originating from the presence of institutional voids at home?	The results provide evidence indicating that the pervasiveness of institutional voids at home is positively related to women's representation in top management teams of emerging markets firms. Time in the foreign market, market-seeking intent, and state ownership further exacerbate this effect.	EMNEs from 20 emerging markets operating in 26 developed countries	Liability of foreignness
Scheibmayr and Reichel 2024: Who benefits from (human resource management) professionalization? The moderating role of gender on professionalization effects in organisations	How does gender influence the relationship between professionalization, organizational closure and reaching board positions in organizations?	Investigating how gender affects the relationships between HRM professionalization, organizational closure and reaching board positions, this study finds that the positive relationship between professionalization and closure is weaker for female HR directors and high proportions of	34 countries	Role congruity theory

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Contribution	Research question(s)	Findings	Countries	Theory
		women in the occupation. Organizational closure, in contrast, is negatively related to board representation; yet in countries with high proportions of women in the occupation this effect reverts.		
Terpstra-Tong et al. 2024: Gender composition at work and women's career satisfaction: An international study of 35 societies	To what extent does gender composition contribute to the career satisfaction of female employees?	The study's findings highlight the complex and paradoxical nature of gender composition effects on women's career satisfaction. Whereas institutions that support gender equality weaken the positive effect of working with a female majority at the next higher level, they amplify the negative effect of a female majority at the same hierarchical level.	35 countries	Status characteristics theory; Cooperation-competition framework
Tran et al. 2024: Female directors and firm performance following mergers and acquisitions	Do higher percentages of female directors contribute to firm performance after a merger and acquisition?	The study finds that the percentage of female directors is associated with better firm performance in the years after the merger. Using data from two countries with comparable mature capital markets and jurisdictional conditions, the study provide new evidence for the debate on gender targets for boards.	Singapore and Australia	Resource dependency theory; Human capital theory

### 3.4 | Schreibmayr & Reichel: Who Benefits From (Human Resource Management) Professionalization? The Moderating Role of Gender on Professionalization Effects in Organisations

In their contribution, Schreibmayr and Reichel examine the influence of gender composition of the profession (country level) and the HR director (organizational level) on the outcomes of HRM professionalization. Professionalization refers to the process of how occupations become professions by establishing closure of the occupational group and having the monopoly protection of the occupational jurisdiction. Interested in professionalization in the context of HRM, typically considered to be a more feminine profession, they investigate how the effect of professionalization of HRM on organizational closure (i.e., the degree to which HRM expertise is protected within an

organization) and eventually for HRM having a seat on the board (power of the profession) is affected by the gender composition of the occupation and the gender of the HR director. Using role congruity theory to build their model and data from 3276 organizations embedded in 34 countries, they find that the positive relationship between professionalization and organizational closure is weaker for female HR directors and in countries with high proportions of women in the HR occupation. Organizational closure, in contrast, is negatively related to board representation of HRM. However, in countries with high proportions of women in the HR occupation closure is positively related to board representation. Their research disentangles how professionalization outcomes and power of the HRM function depend on gender composition of the profession and gender of the HR director as relevant for gender (in-)equality. By doing so, they open up important new avenues of research looking into

under-researched institutional actors – such as professional associations – relevant global gender equality.

### 3.5 | Terpestra-Tong et al.: Gender Composition at Work and Women's Career Satisfaction: An International Study of 35 Societies

Drawing primarily on status characteristics theory, this study seeks to understand the intragender dynamics in various gender composition contexts and their impact on women's career satisfaction. Using data from 2291 women across 35 societies, the study finds that having a female supervisor is negatively related to career satisfaction. The authors discuss the relevance of the “queen bee” phenomenon, where senior women may create a less supportive environment for junior women. The study further finds that female majority at the same hierarchical level is negatively related to career satisfaction, a finding the authors explain through the career-as-a-tournament model, where increased competition among peers in a female-majority context can lead to lower satisfaction. The findings also indicate that a female majority at the next higher hierarchical level is positively related to career satisfaction. Examining the role of context, the study finds no evidence of moderating effects of gender-egalitarian values and limited evidence for the moderating effects of gender equality laws and regulations: namely, while institutions that support gender equality weaken the positive effect of working with a female majority at the next higher level, they amplify the negative effect of a female majority at the same hierarchical level. Terpestra-Tong et al. provide an important contribution by integrating status characteristics theory with the competition-cooperation paradox to understand gender composition effects on women's career satisfaction. Another contribution is the cross-societal nature of the study and its broadly generalizable results, which extends the geographic boundaries of the literature.

### 3.6 | Tran, Jubb, & Rajendran: Female Directors and Firm Performance Following Mergers and Acquisitions

Tran, Jubb, & Rajendran's study investigates the effect of the percentage of female directors on firm performance. While the global average of female directors has risen in the last years, there is still significant inequality in female board representation. Establishing the relevance of a change in the boardroom, this study investigates whether higher percentages of female directors contribute to firm performance after a merger and acquisition (M&A). Integrating resource dependence and human capital theories, they suggest that gender-diverse boards are of particular benefit for M&As—a setting that requires complex decision-making and close monitoring. Using a sample of 56 Singaporean and 126 Australian acquirers they find support that the percentage of female directors is associated with better firm performance in the years after the M&A. Highlighting that gender balance in the boardroom is more effective for firm performance than the mere presence of at least one female director, their results provide important new evidence to for the relevance of gender equality targets for boards.

## 4 | Avenues for Future Research

The collection of papers has generated valuable insights into GDM across contexts. Building on the important contributions of the Special Issue papers, and reflecting on the broader GDM research, we next highlight several key issues we consider critical to the future of global GDM research from both a theoretical and a practical perspective. While the opportunities for studying the role of context in GDM research are vast, we focus on three areas of research and related questions that deserve attention and can benefit from theoretical elaboration as well as from rigorous empirical work.

1. What motivates MNEs to engage in GDM and how do different motives affect GDM outcomes across country contexts?
2. Should MNEs target their diversity management on gender specifically or focus on general diversity?
3. How can GDM stay effective both on a local and international level in an increasing anti DEI climate arising from current political and social developments?

### 4.1 | Research Into MNEs' Motives for GDM

In this section, we advocate for research investigating the internal motives of MNEs to engage in GDM and the effect of these motives on GDM success across contexts. We believe that research and practice can benefit from investigating two important issues regarding the motives behind MNEs' engagement in global GDM: (a) the effectiveness of different types of internal motives to engage in GDM across contexts and (b) the effectiveness of external pressures such as mandatory regulations (e.g., quotas and numerical targets for women) vis-à-vis voluntary (proactive) GDM in MNEs.

DEI research has a long-standing interest into the motives behind organizations' GDM efforts. Relevant research by E. S. Ng and Wyrick (2011) has proposed that organizations can be committed to GDM on three primary bases: *instrumental*, *normative*, and *affective*. Aligned with the “business case” for diversity, *instrumental* motives are grounded in economic maximization for the firm and the need to meet societal expectations and legal requirements to avoid negative sanctioning. Second, and aligned with the “moral case” (the “right thing” to do), organizations may also engage in GDM because of *normative* imperatives. GDM should then serve to ensure equal opportunity and fair treatment for women arising from a deep belief in its societal value and commitment to equality. Finally, *affective* motives are rooted in organizational leaders' desire to be associated with a programme of social importance (i.e., arguments for wanting to make the world better), and a desire to be remembered for leaving a positive legacy (the “legacy case”).

To date, both research and practice are still far more likely to be motivated by instrumental motives or the business case. A recent review of DEI in the IB literature has highlighted that the focus on the business case in IB research is still prominent (Fitzsimmons et al. 2023). This is problematic, as while historically important, this approach is being strongly contested by



recent DEI research and is encountering backlash from employees in practice (Georgeac and Rattan 2023; Seierstad 2016). Although it has provided important arguments for organizations to engage in GDM, this narrow focus on business outcomes also has several caveats that limit our understanding of GDM effectiveness, which opens many opportunities for future research.

First, adopting the business case as a primary motivation for research has resulted in empirical studies primarily concerned with business outcomes such as performance or innovation outcomes, while we know far less about the actual impact of GDM on gender equality and equity beyond the share of women in the boardroom (Saeed et al. 2024; Saeed et al. 2024, 2022). Future research could address this by focussing on wider gender equality measures and including constructs such as inclusive organizational climates (Nishii 2013) across countries. Second, while there is emerging evidence that adopting the moral case as a motive is more effective in generating gender equality in practice (Georgeac and Rattan 2023; Seierstad 2016), research on GDM in MNEs has yet to address this and explicitly study the role that different motivations may play in achieving equality success. Comparing the outcomes of different motives of GDM is therefore a promising avenue to move the field forward. In particular, it is important to understand the interplay between the motive of an MNEs and the specific country context they operate in, and determining whether certain motives work better in specific institutional contexts. For instance, research could address whether the moral case might be more effective in cultures characterized by high gender egalitarianism (House et al. 2004), while the business case may carry more weight in cultures with lower gender egalitarianism.

A second area of research regarding the motives of GDM is the need to assess the effectiveness of mandatory compliance with gender-based regulations (e.g., quotas and numerical targets for women) versus voluntary (proactive) GDM in MNEs (i.e., arising from the business or moral case) (E. S. Ng and Klarsfeld 2018). Many countries have introduced legislation aimed at promoting gender equality in the workplace. They often mandate employers to meet specific numerical goals and report on gender diversity metrics (Klarsfeld et al. 2012; Klarsfeld et al. 2016), and MNEs need to comply when operating in these contexts. For example, in Canada, women are identified as one of the designated groups who have faced historical discrimination in the labour market, and thus employers are required to implement special measures to correct gender imbalances in their respective workplaces (E. S. Ng and McGowan 2023). All MNEs in federally regulated industries, including foreign owned subsidiaries, are obligated to comply or face sanctions and penalties. However, while legal mandates for increasing the representation of women can lead to increased numbers of women in senior positions (Toh and Leonardelli 2012), they may also result in backlash and reinforce perceptions of women as tokens (Rixom et al. 2023). In this respect, some MNEs may choose to avoid these measures, and simply not operate in these jurisdictions (cf. E. S. Ng and Sears 2017) with potential negative effects on the economy of these regions. Conversely, reliance on voluntary proactive measures may suggest greater MNE buy-in, more innovative solutions, and potentially higher effectiveness in terms of fostering gender equality (E. S. Ng et al. 2024).

However, the uptake of voluntary measures has proven rather low on a global scale. In the absence of regulations, gender equality remains low or progresses inconsistently within countries. Recent research suggest that organisations tend to actively support change on polarizing social issues (such as LGBTQ + rights) only after their legal enactment (Chung et al. 2025). On this basis, it would be valuable for future research to examine the effectiveness of different types and levels of regulations that require different levels of compliance (particularly those requiring different degrees of compliance compared to voluntary measures). This includes examining the nature and extent of potential backlash and how diverse views can be integrated into effective regulations. Furthermore, investigating how such regulations interact with the motives of MNEs (see point a) would be an important way forward. MNEs are an ideal context for investigating these dynamics as their operations span across different country and regional contexts.

## 4.2 | Research Into Gender as a Specific Focus of Diversity Management

Adding to the need for a better understanding of the “why”, future research is also needed in terms of the “how” to successfully engage in GDM. Below we will suggest two main future areas of research focussing on “gender” in GDM. While we have established the relevance of specific GDM and gender equality research, this focus can benefit from further reflection. In particular, we see important avenues of research in systematically comparing the effects of (a) using a *general* diversity management approach versus developing diversity management *targeted at gender specifically* and (b) the differentiation between gender and biological sex in GDM in a global context.

A key concern is the need to distinguish between *general* diversity and targeted *gender diversity* management. General diversity management is intended to create an inclusive environment for a variety of demographic groups, which encompasses a broad range of differences including age, race and ethnicity, nationality, origin, religion, and other underrepresented or marginalized groups. In practice, gender is often incorporated into a broader diversity management approach with the expectation wider diversity policies will foster greater inclusivity across contexts (McKay and Avery 2015). Similarly, research in an international context has examined the effects of a wider diversity management approach across countries (Nishii and Özbilgin 2007) using gender as one of the characteristics considered within the wider diversity approach of MNEs and local companies (Cooke and Saini 2012; Sippola and Smale 2007).

Given contextual differences in gender equality institutions across countries, however, it can be argued that targeted GDM policies and practices may be more effective to address systemic barriers and biases that women face (Meriläinen et al. 2009) rather than using a general diversity approach. This also holds true for all marginalized groups because, considering institutional differences, each group faces distinct stigmas and challenges within each host country that require specific analysis and context-driven solutions, as opposed to a single, universal approach. While we do see the value of an all-inclusive approach,

taking a global perspective, research and practice need to be mindful that for instance the acceptance of LGBT+ individuals varies from being recognized and protected, to being persecuted and punishable (Han and O'Mahoney 2011) across contexts. While the status of women varies significantly across countries (OECD 2023), this does not necessarily reflect the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals or the discrimination faced by older workers in the same contexts. Therefore, we advise that effective, context-sensitive practices should begin with a thorough assessment of unique diversity characteristics. Overly broad diversity management approaches risk weakening the effectiveness of interventions on the local level. Such an increased understanding would help to inform tailored and context-sensitive approaches.

In that respect, there is, however, insufficient evidence examining which approach (general vs. targeted) is more successful in practice and across countries. One reason for this lack of evidence is that a large share of GDM research to-date, is qualitative, case-study based and/or cross-sectional (e.g., Alhejji et al. 2018; A. K. Bader et al. 2022; Ferner et al. 2005; Poster, 2008; Sippola and Smale 2007) with limited insights into effectiveness, hence new methodological approaches are welcome and needed. We suggest that questions of effectiveness present an opportunity for research not only from a theoretical but particularly from methodological perspective. Using research designs more typically used in psychology and organizational behaviour research such as intervention studies, with control groups across countries, might be a useful approach, complemented by longitudinal data and multi-country designs. While collecting such data is a challenging and demanding process, applying more complex research designs can lead to much more reliable evidence base for decision making for MNEs.

Adding to the need to understand the specifics of different diversity groups, while the difference between gender versus biological sex seems long established (Deaux 1985), it remains largely unrecognized within global GDM research. In general, “sex” refers to biological differences between men and women, while “gender” encompasses a wider definition including the roles, behaviours, and expectations that society constructs around gender. It also addresses the diversity of individual gender identities and gender expressions. The legal and cultural assumptions of gender as a binary category (i.e., women and men) remains a critical barrier to the advancement of those who identify as non-binary (Kaufmann and Derry 2024) and contributes to a research neglect on transgender and non-binary individuals in international HRM literature. Research on GDM in MNEs has been mainly concerned with discrimination directed at women, on the basis of biological sex, with limited to no considerations for diverse gender identities (Koveshnikov et al. 2019). With rising research focus on sexual orientation (e.g., highlighting the relevance of country context for the acknowledgement and acceptance of different sexual orientations) (Luiz and Spicer 2021; Moeller and Maley 2018), there has still been little research attention on different gender identifications across different national contexts (Ahmad et al. 2024). In the public space, however, there is increasing attention and public debate, from the use of public bathrooms (Lavietes 2024) to the gender identity of athletes in Olympics games (Travers 2024). Furthermore, we observe increasing negative developments with policy

makers introducing terms such as “gender identity ideology” (Mackay 2024) and reverting definitions of gender to binary sex (Wendling and Epsetin 2025). Hence, extending our arguments above, understanding the specific challenges of different groups (and their intersections) across different countries is needed, since replacing gender with sex limits the scope of GDM and its ability to address the nuances of gender disparities and the lived experiences of individual employees who identify differently. It can also lead to a focus on numerical representation of women only, and failing to create an agenda that recognizes and understands the specific needs and unique experience of individuals with different gender identities (Cameron and Stinson 2019). This presents a missed opportunity for meaningful change in addressing global gender equity and equality.

In this respect, we propose that more research is necessary (both within the MNE context and in comparative settings) to better address gender identity concerns and unravel the unique experiences of different gender identities across contexts (Ahmad et al. 2024). A wider but more nuanced definition of gender can then be used to guide research aimed at enhancing greater acceptance of different gender identities across different countries and regions where a MNE operates. This approach will help achieve gender equity and equality across borders and genders.

### 4.3 | Research Into GDM in an Era of Anti-DEI Movements

Finally, we believe that our call for more research on GDM across borders is now more relevant than ever. Given the recent rise in anti-diversity action and misogyny in politics, companies and societies (Boukemia et al. 2024; Gregorian 2025; Griffin 2025), values of diversity and equality have become increasingly threatened. Research and practice of DEI in general and GDM in particular seem to be at a crossroads as individuals and societies become increasingly polarized. Right-winged rhetorics and a return to “masculine” values threaten the hard-won progress towards equality. This is further illustrated by ongoing debates where the term “woke,” once indicating genuine commitment to diversity and equality, is now used to criticize organizations that superficially adopt GDM to gain legitimacy without genuine effort. While facades and commercialization of GDM are indeed a risk for actual progress, the turn of the discourse towards “woke capitalism” (Foss and Klein 2023) fuels the backlash even further as it stigmatizes organizations for public support of GMD (Roberson et al. 2024).

Against this backdrop, we argue that providing evidence of GDM's broader benefits, in extending beyond women to individuals, organizations, and societies globally, remains crucial for informing public debate and shaping discourse. For women, who have faced historical bias and discrimination, the intended benefits from GDM seem to be obvious, yet less is understood about how men and society at large can benefit from these efforts and what the role of MNEs is in this process. For instance, there is evidence that in more gender equal societies men are healthier and more satisfied with their life (OECD 2017) and both genders experience less violence (Zawisza et al. 2025).

Furthermore, closing the gender gap improves a country's prosperity (Dabla-Norris and Kochhar 2019). Hence, we need a better understanding of how to shape the instrumentalized narratives from a zero-sum game (women win, men lose) towards a more positive outlook for all. We advocate that GDM research actively include individuals who feel sidelined by evolving social structures, to better understand their concerns and identify potential benefits. Moreover, research could explore inclusive approaches that actively engage these individuals as allies, mentors, and leaders in promoting GDM globally, ensuring alignment with the overarching goals of gender equality and providing MNEs with an active role in change. We further propose that incorporating critical and feminist theories in this line of research could offer fresh perspectives and generate new insights into the dynamics of GDM. As Ainsworth and Pekarek (2022) argued, the integration of critical and feminist theory provides fruitful ground to move the HRM field forward by fostering a more in-depth consideration of power and context and by a promoting reflexivity around often unchallenged assumptions. We suggest that including such a perspective would provide a more balanced understanding of the roles of all genders in organisations and society for advancing gender equality. A contextualised, more reflective approach could open new pathways for fostering gender equality in ways that will promote satisfaction, wellbeing and broader social benefits for all genders.

Building on the above points, future research might also explore how to foster collective momentum across marginalized groups. Key questions include: How do interventions targeting gender and other historically marginalized groups interact? Do initiatives aimed at groups other than women reinforce or undermine GDM initiatives, and vice versa? How do GDM initiatives benefit or further disadvantage other marginalized groups? Further, we propose an intersectionality lens (Thatcher et al. 2023) to advance knowledge on how GDM may serve to overcome inequalities between different groups of women within MNEs, for example, those working in the high-income headquarters versus those in low-income subsidiary locations. Further, as we write this, President Trump's political shift towards an anti-DEI agenda (E. Ng et al. 2025) threatens GDM not only in the US but affects gender equality on an international scale. Hence research is needed to understand, how different countries and MNEs respond to the rollback of DEI in the US (and other countries), and what alternative approaches might they adopt to continue their GDM efforts? More importantly, how will this affect the mobility of talents in MNEs and the attractiveness of different countries as workplaces for individuals with diverse gender backgrounds?

Finally, beyond individuals and social groups within organizations, research should examine broader stakeholder interests, collaboration, and impact on GDM. While multi-actor perspectives are gaining momentum in management research (Knappert et al. 2023), and in diversity management studies in particular (Kornau et al. 2023; Tatli 2011), we have little knowledge of how external actors in home and host countries shape GDM in MNEs. Further, we lack insights on how interactions with and between these actors look like, and on how processes of influence on GDM are negotiated. We see a fruitful research avenue in studying the impact of MNEs' GDM on local

actors and institutions. For example, how do MNEs push for gender egalitarian norms in particular industries in countries characterized by low gender egalitarianism (Garr-Schultz et al. 2023), and how does the presence of highly visible MNEs that enforce gender egalitarian norms feed into local actors and activists' strategies to support gender equality more widely.

## 5 | Conclusion

In closing, our carefully curated special issue highlights important and under explored topics in GDM across various countries and cultures. The collection of papers offers new perspectives and valuable theoretical and practical insights, contributing to the evidence base for both MNEs as well as local organizations engaging in GDM. We hope that this Special Issue, along with our proposed avenues for future research, will inspire new and impactful research that contribute to the global gender equality agenda.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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