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Gender (in)equality in the workplace: the impact of gender bias on workplace dynamics and organizational culture

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Abstract

This thesis explores the impact of gender bias on workplace dynamics and organizational culture. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Gender Stratification Theory and Role Congruity Theory, along with empirical data from the Global Gender Gap Report (2024), it examines how ingrained stereotypes, structural barriers, and cultural norms hinder women's advancement in professional environments. The research is based on a structured literature review of existing academic studies, institutional reports, and workplace analyses. Key findings suggest that both visible and invisible biases contribute to job dissatisfaction, limited leadership representation, and unequal opportunities for women. The thesis concludes with actionable recommendations for organizations to foster more equitable environments through structural reform and cultural transformation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Relevance of the Topic

Through decades, gender inequality in the workplace remains a persistent issue on a global level. Despite some efforts, the progress that has been made is still insufficient for women to confidently say that they are not being faced with various biases, putting them in a lower position than men. According to the most recent Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2024), taking into consideration the current rate of progress, it will take 134 years, or about five generations, to achieve full gender parity. This is an alarming forecast, which highlights how deeply the gender gap is rooted in the global systems.

Within the workplace, this imbalance is manifested in numerous ways - the most prominent problems include barriers in their career advancement, pay gaps, different treatment in the workplace, harassment, and similar (Son Hing et al., 2023). Such issues lead to job dissatisfaction and reduced opportunities for women. Even though some organizations might be aware of this problem, the question remains: how to eliminate gender bias in the workplace? To eradicate such obstacles, it is of paramount importance to firstly, understand the impact that gender bias has on the dynamics in a workplace and organizational culture, what the exact detrimental practices are, and where the problem stems from. That is why I am dedicating my thesis to this topic, with the aim to explore the ways gender bias and inequality is shaping the workplaces all around us. By analyzing the root causes and the consequences of this problem, I would like to make proposals on how organizations can foster a more inclusive and equal environment, which would be beneficial for every party. The main goal of my thesis would be to identify the practical and applicable solutions and strategies in combating gender inequality, ensuring an environment where all the people in an organization, regardless of their gender, can have equal opportunities to thrive and succeed.

1.2 Objectives and Research Questions

The core question this thesis aims to address is:

Main Research Question:

How does gender bias influence workplace dynamics and organizational culture, and what strategies can organizations adopt to address these inequalities effectively?

Sub-questions:

1. *What are the main theoretical and empirical explanations for persistent gender inequality in the workplace?*

2. *How are gender biases experienced differently across organizational levels and structures?*

3. *Which practical strategies can effectively reduce workplace gender bias and foster inclusion?*

1.3 Defining Key Concepts and Terminology

To establish a clear foundation for the discussion that follows, it is essential to define key concepts and terms related to gender inequality, workplace dynamics, and organizational culture.

Gender bias in the workplace refers to the phenomenon of unfair treatment or bias against individuals in the workplace based on their gender (Wang, 2024). It can have an impact on hiring, promotion, leadership roles in a workplace, and similar.

Status beliefs are widely held cultural beliefs about social worthiness and competence of individuals viewed as categorically distinct on the basis of gender, race, class, and other axes of categorization (Ridgeway, 2000). They are usually manifested in a workplace through a belief that men are more suitable for certain roles, especially the leadership ones, while women are considered to fit better for supportive tasks.

Gender pay gap is the difference in average gross hourly earnings between women and men. It is based on salaries paid directly to employees before income tax and social security contributions are deducted (European Parliament, 2020).

Gender equity refers to the fairness of treatment of all genders, taking into account their specific needs. This could mean equal treatment or treatment that is different but is considered equivalent

based on rights, obligations, opportunities, and benefits. Gender equality, on the other hand, does not mean that all genders are the same or that they become the same. It means that rights, responsibilities, and opportunities do not depend on whether a person is born male or female. All genders should have access to the same levels of opportunities despite their gender (Gender Equity vs. Gender Equality, 2023).

Organizational culture is defined as "the set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds and that determines how it perceives, thinks about, and reacts to its various environments" (Kinicki, 2021, p. 551). It plays a paramount role in whether gender bias in an organization is being sustained or dismantled.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

With these key concepts established, the following chapters will expand upon this foundation by reviewing the existing literature on gender bias in the workplace, analyzing its manifestation across various organizational contexts, and proposing strategies to address it.

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical and empirical overview, drawing on both scholarly frameworks and real-world data.

Chapter 3 offers a critical discussion of recurring patterns and workplace dynamics shaped by gender bias.

Chapter 4 presents evidence-based recommendations aimed at policy reform, cultural transformation, and leadership accountability.

Finally, **Chapter 5** summarizes the key findings and emphasizes the broader implications for fostering inclusive organizational cultures.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter provides an overview of existing literature concerning gender bias and inequality in the workplace. It explores both historical and contemporary perspectives, focusing on how these biases influence organizational dynamics, career progression, and workplace culture. By identifying recurring themes and gaps in the current research, this review aims to build a conceptual foundation for understanding their persistence and consequences within organizational settings.

To understand the persistence of gender inequality in the workplace, it is essential to explore the theoretical frameworks that scholars have developed to explain its causes and consequences. Memon and Satpathy (2020), in their systematic literature review, identify eight prominent theories that shed light on how gender bias manifests across different organizational contexts. These theories provide not only explanatory models but also link gender inequality to measurable outcomes such as job dissatisfaction, turnover, and limited career advancement. The theories include: Gender Stratification Theory, Resource Conservation Theory, Social Role Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Social Identity Theory, Role Congruity Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Gender Difference Theory. While each offers valuable insight into the structural, social, and psychological dimensions of gender bias, this thesis will focus primarily on five frameworks that are most relevant to the research objectives: Gender Stratification Theory, Resource Conservation Theory, Social Role Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Role Congruity Theory.

2.1.1 Gender Stratification Theory

Gender Stratification Theory, as described by Blumberg (1984), provides a good framework to understand the inequality in resource, opportunities, and power distribution between the genders. It is stated that the root of such stratification lies in the social norms and various institutional practices, as well as family, education, and the workplace, all of which can challenge or perpetuate the inequality. In terms of a workplace, this theory helps explain how the persistent perception of men holding more

power and status compared to women leads to differences in pay, promotions, and opportunities, as well as in work-family and work-life balance, as highlighted by Memon and Satpathy (2020).

As Memon and Satpathy (2020) emphasize, gender stratification contributes to phenomena such as the gender pay gap, the underrepresentation of women in executive roles, and increased work-family conflict. For example, despite equal or higher qualifications, women often face limited access to high-responsibility roles, and their career paths are disproportionately shaped by external caregiving expectations. The theory further suggests that without deliberate interventions, such as gender-neutral hiring policies or flexible work arrangements, these disparities become self-reinforcing. In this way, Gender Stratification Theory not only highlights the depth of systemic inequality but also underscores the importance of institutional reform in addressing workplace gender bias.

2.1.2 Resource Conservation Theory

Second theory I want to highlight in my thesis is the Resource Conservation Theory (RCT), originally developed by Hobfoll (1989). This theory is not gender-specific; however - it has been applied to gender studies (as in Memon & Satpathy, 2020) to explain how individuals strive to protect their limited resources, including time, energy, emotional capacity, and status. The theory revolves around the fact that when one finds themselves in a position where they feel like their resources are being threatened, they will do all in their power to protect them. It is manifested in a workplace when someone is resistant to change or tries to compete with others for the limited resources, and furthermore, in the context of gender inequality, women are oftentimes perceived as a threat to the resources traditionally held by men. This can lead to subtle forms of exclusion, reluctance to support gender equity initiatives, and increased pressure on women to prove their worth, all of which contribute to an unequal and strained organizational environment.

2.1.3 Social Role Theory

Third theory is Social Role Theory, developed by Eagly (1987), elaborating on how gender differences stem from the roles that men and women play in society, rather than the biological differences between the genders. It is a result of a historical division of labor where women are usually associated with

domestic and nurturing responsibilities, while men are given more task-oriented roles. These divisions have given rise to widespread expectations about how men and women "should" behave, both in society and in the workplace. According to this theory, women are generally perceived as more communal and relationship-focused, while men are viewed as more agentic and assertive. In organizational settings, such stereotypes contribute to occupational segregation, with women often channeled into caregiving or administrative roles, and men disproportionately represented in leadership and decision-making positions. As Memon and Satpathy (2020) note, these expectations not only influence hiring and promotion practices but also affect performance evaluations, with assertive behavior in women often being penalized while rewarded in men. Social Role Theory thus provides a powerful explanation for how entrenched social norms continue to shape professional hierarchies and reinforce workplace gender bias.

2.1.4 Social Identity Theory

Another paramount theory is Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), positing that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-worth from their membership in social groups, such as gender, ethnicity, or professional role. Once individuals categorize themselves and others into "in-groups" and "out-groups," they tend to favor their own group, often at the expense of others. In the context of the workplace, this theory helps explain how subtle exclusion, biased decision-making, and limited access to informal networks can disadvantage women, especially in male-dominated environments. As Memon and Satpathy (2020) highlight, when women are perceived as outsiders within organizational cultures shaped by masculine norms, they may struggle with feelings of isolation, reduced self-esteem, and a lack of recognition - all of which hinder their professional advancement. Social Identity Theory, therefore, sheds light on how group dynamics and perceived difference contribute to persistent gender inequalities within organizations.

2.1.5 Role Congruity Theory

The last theory from Memon and Satpathy's (2020) review that I found particularly relevant to this thesis is Role Congruity Theory, introduced by Eagly and Karau (2002), suggesting that gender-based prejudice arises when there is a mismatch between the stereotypical characteristics associated with a

social group and those required for a particular role. Leadership, for instance, is traditionally linked with traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and independence - attributes culturally aligned with masculinity. Women, on the other hand, are often stereotyped as communal, nurturing, and cooperative. This incongruity results in women being perceived as less suitable for leadership positions and often judged more harshly when they do exhibit agentic behaviors. As Memon and Satpathy (2020) explain, women in leadership roles are frequently caught in a "double bind": if they act in line with gender norms, they may be seen as weak or passive; if they act in line with leadership expectations, they may be viewed as abrasive or unfeminine. Role Congruity Theory thus provides a critical explanation for the biases women face not only in attaining leadership roles but also in how they are evaluated once they occupy them.

2.2 Metaphorical Frameworks

While theoretical models offer valuable insights into the psychological and structural dimensions of gender bias, scholars have also developed metaphorical frameworks to describe how gender inequality is experienced within professional environments. These metaphors not only capture the often invisible nature of these barriers but also provide powerful imagery for understanding the limitations women face across different career stages. The paper *"Glass Ceiling to Sticky Floor: Analogies of Women Leadership"* by Srivastava and Nalawade (2023) explores several of these metaphors and their implications for women's leadership, advancement, and workplace experience. As such metaphors are vital for my thesis topic, I will further elaborate on them and their importance.

2.2.1 Glass Ceiling

One of the most widely recognized metaphors used to describe workplace gender inequality is the glass ceiling. This term refers to the invisible but persistent barriers that prevent women from advancing to top leadership or decision-making positions, regardless of their qualifications, experience, or performance. As Srivastava and Nalawade (2023) explain, the glass ceiling represents a systemic obstruction that is not formally codified but is embedded within organizational cultures, practices, and expectations. These barriers often manifest in biased promotion practices, exclusion from informal leadership networks, and limited access to high-visibility projects. The metaphor

highlights the paradox women often face - being able to see leadership roles but unable to access them due to entrenched structural and cultural obstacles. Despite progress in gender representation at entry and mid-level roles, the upper echelons of corporate and institutional leadership remain disproportionately male. The glass ceiling thus continues to function as a subtle but powerful mechanism of gender exclusion, reinforcing male dominance in top organizational hierarchies.

2.2.2 Sticky Floors

In contrast to the glass ceiling, which restricts upward mobility at the top, the sticky floor metaphor refers to the structural and cultural conditions that keep women anchored in low-wage, low-status positions with limited prospects for advancement. As Srivastava and Nalawade (2023) explain, sticky floors represent the horizontal stagnation many women face at the bottom of organizational hierarchies, often in administrative, caregiving, or support roles that offer little opportunity for professional growth. These roles are frequently undervalued, lack visibility, and are disconnected from leadership pipelines. The metaphor reflects how social expectations, occupational segregation, and unconscious bias can trap women in a cycle of under-recognition and limited upward mobility. Unlike the more visible barriers of the glass ceiling, sticky floors operate subtly, often normalized by long-standing workplace norms and gendered assumptions about competence or suitability. This phenomenon contributes not only to the gender pay gap but also to the persistence of inequality throughout the organizational hierarchy.

2.2.3 Glass Cliff

Another important metaphor explored by Srivastava and Nalawade (2023) is the glass cliff, which refers to the tendency of women to be appointed to leadership positions during times of crisis, instability, or organizational decline - situations where the risk of failure is significantly heightened. While such appointments may appear to signal progress in gender representation, they often place women in precarious positions where the likelihood of criticism, blame, or failure is disproportionately high. This phenomenon reflects how organizations may be more willing to offer women leadership roles only when the roles themselves are devalued or particularly difficult. The glass cliff thereby creates a dynamic in which women are set up to fail, reinforcing stereotypes about female

incompetence and further discouraging gender-diverse leadership. As the authors highlight, this metaphor underscores the conditional and often symbolic nature of female advancement, where representation is granted without real structural support or long-term investment in women's success.

2.2.4 Queen Bee Phenomenon

Another concept that adds complexity to discussions of gender inequality is the Queen Bee phenomenon, which refers to the behavior of some women in senior positions who distance themselves from other women in order to maintain their own authority within male-dominated environments. Rather than advocating for collective advancement, these individuals may reinforce existing hierarchies or even perpetuate gender stereotypes, often as a strategy for survival in settings where leadership is aligned with masculine norms. As Srivastava and Nalawade (2023) point out, this phenomenon is not a reflection of individual failure, but rather a response to the scarcity of opportunities and the pressures placed on women to conform to dominant workplace cultures. The Queen Bee dynamic highlights how gender bias can create divisions among women themselves, ultimately weakening solidarity and making structural change more difficult to achieve.

2.2.5 Additional Metaphors: Glass Wall, Escalator, Door, Floor

These are the vital metaphors in regards to gender inequality in the workplace, however, there are a few more that are worth mentioning, such as Glass Wall, Glass Escalator, Glass Door and Glass Floor. Glass Wall is used to reflect the barriers that women face when it comes to promotion, progress within an organization or advancing to another one. Glass Escalator refers to the phenomenon that men tend to advance quicker even at the female-dominated positions, highlighting the gender inequality even in fields traditionally dominated by women. Glass Door describes all the challenges women are faced with at the very initial entry to a workplace. Lastly, Glass Floor describes how gender bias can affect women in entry-level or low-skill positions, where jobs often require little education and offer few chances for promotion, leaving them disproportionately stuck at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy (Srivastava and Nalawade, 2023).

To summarize, the literature on gender inequality in the workplace reveals a complex interplay between structural, psychological, and cultural factors. Theoretical frameworks such as Gender Stratification Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Role Congruity Theory offer valuable insight into how gender roles and power dynamics are constructed and maintained within organizations. Complementing these, metaphorical concepts like the Glass Ceiling, Sticky Floors, and Glass Cliff vividly illustrate how inequality is experienced across different areas and stages of a woman's career. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that gender bias is not a singular or isolated issue, but a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by deeply embedded social norms and institutional practices. Understanding these layers is crucial in identifying where interventions are needed - and forms the foundation for the next section of this thesis, which explores global data on gender disparity and its implications for workplace dynamics. For clarity, organizational culture refers to all the shared, not necessarily explicit assumptions that a group has and that establishes how it views and reacts to its various environments (Kinicki, 2021). Workplace dynamics describe how people interact between each other in their working environment.

2.3 Empirical Data and Global Context

While theoretical and metaphorical frameworks provide critical tools for understanding how gender bias operates within organizations, global data further confirms the persistent nature of these inequalities. The Global Gender Gap Report 2024, published by the World Economic Forum, highlights the slow and uneven progress toward gender parity across the world. According to the report, it will take an estimated 134 years to achieve full gender equality at the current rate - a staggering forecast that underscores how deeply entrenched systemic disparities remain. The report measures gender gaps across four key dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Of these, economic participation and opportunity - the most relevant to this thesis - continues to show particularly limited improvement, especially in areas such as labor force participation, wage equality, and leadership representation.

These findings are drawn from a global analysis covering 146 countries and provide the empirical grounding for many of the theoretical and metaphorical insights previously discussed.

The report shows that women continue to be significantly underrepresented in the global labor force and are more likely to be employed in part-time, informal, or low-wage sectors. Even in countries with high levels of educational attainment among women, there is a notable disparity in terms of economic engagement. The gender pay gap remains a global concern, with women earning approximately 77 cents for every dollar earned by men, on average. Moreover, occupational segregation persists, with women disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid sectors and underrepresented in technical fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). These trends reflect the mechanisms of both the sticky floor and glass wall metaphors, while also reinforcing the systemic power imbalance described by Gender Stratification Theory.

In terms of leadership, the report highlights a substantial gap between men and women in senior roles. Women hold less than one-third of managerial positions globally, and the number shrinks further at the executive and board levels. Despite progress in some regions, leadership pipelines remain deeply skewed toward men. This phenomenon mirrors the glass ceiling, where women are able to see top positions but are consistently prevented from reaching them. Furthermore, these trends are exacerbated by cultural and organizational biases identified in Role Congruity Theory, which suggests that women in leadership are often perceived as less competent or less likeable than their male counterparts.

The report also reveals significant regional and sectoral disparities. Countries in Northern and Western Europe have made the most progress toward closing the economic gender gap, while nations in the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Asia still lag behind. Sector-wise, women remain drastically underrepresented in high-growth industries such as AI, fintech, and advanced manufacturing. These findings support the glass door metaphor, indicating that barriers to entry in male-dominated fields persist despite broader equality discourse. Additionally, even within more inclusive economies, women continue to face barriers related to career progression and resource access, as described by Resource Conservation Theory.

The 2024 report reveals that women's global labor force participation rate stands at approximately 62.9%, compared to 94.4% for men - a significant gap of more than 30 percentage points. This disparity is not simply a result of choice, but is influenced by a combination of structural barriers, care responsibilities, and unequal workplace policies. In many countries, women are more likely to work in informal sectors or part-time roles that offer limited job security and benefits. These trends align with the aforementioned metaphor of sticky floors, where women remain in roles with little possibility to progress and with insufficient recognition. They also reflect the persistence of gendered labor divisions described in Social Role Theory, which channels women into jobs traditionally considered "feminine" or supportive positions undervalued by organizational structures.

Despite improvements in educational attainment, women still face a significant gender pay gap in virtually every country. On average, women earn 77 cents for every dollar earned by men globally (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2024). The report points to occupational segregation, discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, and lack of transparency in salary structures as key contributing factors. These reflect the dynamics of Gender Stratification Theory, which emphasizes the unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women. The persistence of the pay gap is not only a marker of economic inequality, but also a reflection of how institutional cultures often fail to reward women equally for equal or even greater work.

Another critical issue highlighted in the report is the severe underrepresentation of women in leadership. Globally, only 31.7% of senior managers and leaders are women, and just 28.2% of companies have a female CEO or head of business. These figures illustrate the endurance of the glass ceiling, where women are systematically excluded from top decision-making roles despite having the qualifications and experience to succeed. According to the report, even when women do reach leadership positions, they often face additional scrutiny, limited access to networks, and pressure to conform to masculine leadership norms - outcomes directly explained by Role Congruity Theory.

The report also reveals sharp disparities between sectors and regions. Women remain significantly underrepresented in STEM, finance, and technology, despite often outperforming men in educational metrics. In fields like AI and cloud computing, women make up less than 25% of the workforce. This

trend reflects the glass door metaphor, suggesting that many women face barriers starting at the entry, way before they can even advance. Geographically looking, Northern and Western Europe continue to lead in closing the gender gap, while countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia show the slowest rates of progress. These differences show that cultural, political, and institutional contexts play a huge role in either sustaining or challenging gender inequality in the workplace.

Overall, the Global Gender Gap Report (2024) offers compelling empirical evidence that aligns with, and reinforces, the conceptual models previously elaborated on in this thesis. The combination of slow progress and deeply rooted structural and cultural barriers underscores the critical need for comprehensive policy reform, organizational transformation, and changes in workplace culture. These findings confirm that gender bias in the workplace is not the result of isolated incidents but is persistently embedded in systemic frameworks. Addressing it effectively demands coordinated, intersectional, and sustained efforts across all levels of society and institutions.

3. LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Methodological Approach and Scope of the Review

This chapter is based on a structured literature review, which serves as the primary methodological approach for this thesis. Rather than conducting empirical research, this thesis draws upon existing scholarly literature, institutional reports, and theoretical contributions to analyze the impact of gender bias on workplace dynamics and organizational culture.

Sources were selected based on their academic credibility, relevance to the research topic, and contributions to understanding gender-based inequality in professional settings. These include peer-reviewed journal articles, global reports such as the *Global Gender Gap Report*, and key theoretical works in organizational behavior and gender studies.

The literature review methodology was chosen due to its effectiveness in identifying recurring patterns, giving insight to diverse perspectives, and linking theoretical frameworks to practical organizational challenges. While this approach does not involve primary data collection, it provides a solid analytical foundation for examining the structural and cultural dimensions of workplace gender bias.

3.2 Introduction to the Discussion

Building on the theoretical frameworks, metaphorical analogies, and empirical evidence presented in the previous chapter of this thesis, this section examines how gender bias continues to shape workplace dynamics and organizational culture in both obvious and less visible ways. Rather than simply summarizing existing literature and its findings, this chapter aims to identify recurring patterns, underlying tensions, and the broader implications of gender inequality across different organizational settings. It also considers the distinction between structural and cultural barriers, and how these often intersect to produce compounded disadvantages for women. By analyzing the consequences of these patterns, both for individual employees and for organizations, this chapter aims to deepen the understanding of workplace gender bias and provide a foundation for the practical recommendations that follow.

3.3 Recurring Patterns of Gender Bias in the Workplace

3.3.1 Bias in Performance Evaluation and Promotion

A significant manifestation of gender bias in the workplace lies in performance evaluation and promotion processes, where women are often faced with unequal assessment standards compared to their male colleagues. It has been found that women are more likely to receive feedback that is vague, personality-focused, or critical in tone, while men are more likely to receive actionable and skill-based guidance (Correl and Simmard, 2016). This reflects a broader trend in which leadership traits, such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and confidence, are socially perceived as masculine, leading to biased evaluations when women exhibit the same behaviors.

3.3.2 Work-Life Conflict and Caregiving Responsibilities

Another recurring and deeply gendered challenge in workplace dynamics is the conflict between professional responsibilities and personal caregiving roles. It is a burden that disproportionately falls on women. Despite progress in workforce participation, women continue to take on the majority of unpaid domestic labor, including childcare, elder care, and household responsibilities. This imbalance often forces women to seek part-time work, refuse promotions, or even exit the workforce entirely - not due to lack of ambition or ability, but due to systemic lack of flexibility and institutional support (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). These challenges are encapsulated by the sticky floor metaphor, which describes how women become stuck in lower-tier positions because of inflexible work environments and deeply entrenched gender role expectations (Srivastava and Nalawade, 2023).

Social Role Theory further explains this phenomenon by highlighting how society continues to associate women with nurturing, communal responsibilities (Memon and Satpathy, 2020). In organizational settings, this results in women being automatically perceived as less available, less committed, or less ambitious than their male peers, regardless of their actual performance (Heilman, Caleo, amd Manzi, 2023). These issues were further exacerbated during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, when many women experienced heightened burnout, job loss, or career stagnation (Bateman and Ross, 2020). Ultimately, the failure to accommodate work-life balance not only limits women's

advancement but also perpetuates inequality by reinforcing outdated norms about gender and caregiving.

3.3.3 Exclusion and Workplace Culture

In many organizations, workplace culture is shaped by informal norms and dominant in-groups - often aligned with majority demographics, such as white, male, or upper-management identities (Shore et al., 2009). According to Social Identity Theory, individuals derive a sense of belonging and status from group membership, which often results in in-group favoritism and out-group marginalization. Women, especially those from minority backgrounds, may be perceived as "outsiders" in environments historically dominated by men, which leads to exclusion from important decision-making processes, networking opportunities, and leadership tracks. This exclusion may not always be explicit but is often embedded in informal dynamics, such as who is invited to after-hours meetings or who receives informal mentoring (Durbin, 2010).

Over time, this erodes women's sense of belonging and access to social capital within organizations. The effects are further compounded by dominant organizational cultures that reward competitiveness and self-promotion, traits typically associated with masculinity, while undervaluing collaboration and emotional intelligence. As a result, women may feel pressure to assimilate into a culture that does not reflect their values, or face negative consequences for not doing so. These cultural patterns serve as invisible barriers that uphold gendered hierarchies, even in organizations that strive to promote inclusion through formal policies (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015).

3.4 Structural vs. Cultural Barriers

Addressing gender inequality in the workplace requires a nuanced understanding of both structural and cultural barriers, and on top of that, how the two intersect. Structural barriers refer to conditions within social and economic systems that hinder individuals from securing employment, regardless of their qualifications. These barriers may include factors such as participation in the secondary labor market, racial or gender discrimination, immigration status, job scarcity, inadequate transportation, neighborhood disadvantage, and broader systemic inequalities (Hong et al., 2021). Cultural barriers, by

contrast, include ingrained stereotypes, biased perceptions of leadership, and organizational norms that subtly discourage female advancement (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015).

While structural reform is essential, it is often insufficient if not accompanied by a shift in organizational culture. For example, an organization may offer flexible work arrangements on paper, but if managers subtly shame those who take advantage of them, the policy becomes ineffective. Similarly, diversity training programs may address bias awareness, but if workplace humor, social dynamics, or leadership behavior continues to reflect outdated gender norms, women remain marginalized (Austin-Egole, Iheriohanma, & Nwokorie, 2020). True progress demands both institutional change and cultural reorientation - one without the other is likely to reinforce the status quo.

3.5 Consequences of Gender Bias

The long-term effects of gender bias are not only damaging to women as individuals, but also to the organizations. For women, bias contributes to chronic stress, burnout, career stagnation, and a sense of isolation or alienation from their workplace (Travis, 2025). Resource Conservation Theory helps explain this exhaustion, as women are often required to expend more emotional and cognitive energy to navigate biased environments while receiving fewer returns in terms of recognition, support, or advancement. Gender Stratification Theory also reinforces this dynamic by highlighting how social and institutional systems distribute power and resources unequally between men and women, creating structural barriers that limit women's upward mobility.

Social Role Theory further clarifies how traditional gender expectations, associating women with nurturing and communal traits, often conflict with perceptions of leadership, leading to role misalignment and workplace tension. This aligns with Role Congruity Theory, which explains how women are penalized when their behavior contradicts stereotypical expectations or leadership norms (Memon and Satpathy, 2020). In addition, Social Identity Theory sheds light on the cultural aspect: women may feel excluded from dominant in-groups within the workplace, reducing their access to informal networks and support systems vital for advancement.

These biases also shape promotion decisions. Women are often disregarded for projects of high importance and responsibility or leadership tracks not due to a lack of competence, but because they are perceived as "risky" choices or assumed to have competing priorities, such as family responsibilities (Ely, 2012). Additionally, in-group favoritism, often aligned with Social Identity Theory, can result in women being excluded from informal mentorship, networking, and sponsorship opportunities that are crucial for career advancement.

For organizations, gender bias results in the loss of talent, weakened team cohesion, reduced innovation, and reputational harm (Wang, 2024). Companies that fail to promote gender-inclusive leadership miss out on diverse perspectives that are essential for problem-solving and decision-making in a globalized economy. Gender bias also undermines employee morale, reduces retention rate, and diminishes trust in leadership - all of which have a significant impact on performance and the dynamics. This leads to a conclusion that addressing gender bias is not only a moral imperative, but a strategic necessity.

These consequences are not random at all - they are rather a result of deeply rooted systemic patterns as described in the theoretical frameworks covered earlier. For instance, Role Congruity Theory explains why women leaders are scrutinized more harshly, Social Identity Theory describes how exclusion from in-groups undermines access to advancement opportunities, and Gender Stratification Theory illustrates how these inequalities are structured into everyday organizational practices.

The long-term consequences of this systemic bias extend beyond current workplace dynamics. If left unaddressed, gender inequality can dissuade future generations of women from pursuing certain careers, thereby reinforcing occupational segregation. This could contribute to long-term talent shortages and hinders organizational innovation and competitiveness.

Understanding these wide-ranging consequences is essential to develop targeted, systemic responses - a crucial topic addressed in the following chapter of this thesis, which outlines practical strategies to mitigate gender bias and foster inclusive organizational culture.

3.6 Conclusion

In summary, gender bias in the workplace is reinforced through a combination of structural limitations, cultural norms, and psychological patterns that operate at both the individual and institutional levels. This chapter has explored how recurring issues such as biased evaluations, leadership disparities, and exclusion from dominant workplace cultures continue to shape unequal experiences for women in professional environments. Drawing on the theoretical and empirical insights established earlier, it is evident that meaningful progress will require not only policy reform but also cultural transformation. The next chapter offers specific, evidence-based recommendations for how organizations can address these barriers and work toward more inclusive, equitable, and effective workplaces.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Policy Reform

Effective policy reform is of paramount importance when it comes to dismantling the structural barriers that perpetuate gender inequality in the workplace. While cultural change is essential, without supportive and enforceable policies, progress will most likely remain slow and fragmented. Organizations must implement systems that promote transparency, fairness, and flexibility across all stages of employment, from recruitment and promotion to compensation and work-life balance.

4.1.1 Transparent Hiring and Promotion Processes

To address bias in recruitment and advancement, organizations should standardize hiring and promotion procedures. Structured interviews, skills-based assessments, and diverse hiring panels help minimize the impact of unconscious bias. Disclosing promotion criteria and decision-making processes ensures that all employees, regardless of gender, are evaluated according to the same standards. Transparency builds trust, reduces perceptions of favoritism, and promotes merit-based advancement, counteracting the informal barriers described by metaphors such as the glass ceiling and glass walls.

4.1.2 Regular Pay Equity Audits

Conducting regular pay equity audits is vital to enable pinpointing and addressing disparities in compensation. These audits should not merely compare average salaries by gender but also control for variables such as experience, education, and role responsibility to detect underlying inequities. Once disparities are identified, organizations need to take action to correct them, whether through salary adjustments, revised evaluation criteria, or changes in negotiation practices. It is not enough to just acknowledge the existence of the gender pay gaps - organizations need to take measures and close them over time.

4.1.3 Flexible Work Policies

The implementation of flexible work arrangements, including options for remote work, flexible hours, and comprehensive parental leave policies, is vital for supporting employees with caregiving

responsibilities, the majority of whom are women (Robbins & Mason, 2024). As previously outlined in the discussion of sticky floors and work-life conflict, inflexible work structures disproportionately disadvantage women and limit their opportunities to advance. By offering flexible options without making those who use them worse off, organizations create a more equitable environment where all employees can both grow in their professional field while being able to keep up with personal responsibilities.

4.2 Cultural Transformation

While policy reform addresses formal structures, full gender equality cannot be achieved without a deeper transformation of organizational culture. Cultural change focuses on the unwritten rules, norms, and biases shaping daily interactions and professional expectations (Stevenson, 2021). Shifting organizational culture demands continuous commitment to confronting stereotypes, broadening leadership models, and fostering a workplace environment where diversity is actively celebrated and inclusion becomes the norm.

4.2.1 Comprehensive Bias Training Programs

Organizations must go beyond superficial diversity training sessions and invest in long-term, evidence-based bias mitigation programs. Training should focus on helping employees recognize how unconscious biases influence decision-making, evaluations, and team dynamics. Moreover, bias training must be ongoing - integrated into leadership development, performance reviews, and conflict resolution processes - rather than treated as a one-time intervention. By embedding bias awareness into organizational life, companies can begin to dismantle the informal networks and mindsets that maintain in-group favoritism and gendered stereotypes identified through Social Identity Theory.

4.2.2 Mentorship and Sponsorship Initiatives

Mentorship programs specifically targeting women and underrepresented groups are crucial for ensuring equitable career development. Furthermore, sponsorship, where senior leaders actively advocate for and promote junior employees, could be extremely effective in bridging opportunity gaps. Organizations should create formalized mentorship and sponsorship pipelines to help women gain

access to strategic projects, leadership roles, and visibility. These initiatives directly counteract the exclusion from informal power networks that was highlighted as a key barrier in the literature.

4.2.3 Redefining Leadership Norms

Traditional models of leadership often valorize traits such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and dominance - characteristics socially associated with masculinity. To foster true inclusion, organizations must broaden their conception of effective leadership to include qualities like collaboration, empathy, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. Valuing diverse leadership styles challenges the role congruity biases that penalize women leaders for deviating from masculine norms. When a wider range of leadership models is recognized and rewarded, it becomes possible to create environments where individuals can lead authentically, without facing a double standard.

4.3 Leadership Accountability

Organizational change cannot succeed without proper commitment and accountability at the leadership level. Leaders set the tone for organizational culture, and without their active participation, diversity and inclusion efforts often lose momentum or become symbolic rather than transformative. Holding leadership accountable ensures that gender equality is not treated as an optional or peripheral initiative, but as an integral part of the organization's strategic objectives.

4.3.1 Set Measurable Diversity and Inclusion Goals

Organizations must establish clear, measurable targets for gender representation at every level - from entry-level positions to executive leadership and board membership. These goals should be ambitious but achievable, tailored to the specific context of the organization. Regular tracking and transparent reporting of progress towards these goals create openness, motivate sustained effort, and build trust both internally and externally. Setting targets alone is insufficient - it is the consistent measurement and adjustment based on real outcomes that drive long-term positive change.

4.3.2 Tie Leadership Performance Evaluations to DEI Outcomes

To make sure that leaders are fully invested in promoting gender equity, diversity and inclusion (DEI) outcomes should be incorporated into performance evaluations, bonuses, and promotion criteria for managers and executives. When leaders are held financially and professionally accountable for creating inclusive environments, DEI efforts move from aspirational rhetoric to tangible results (Pulsely, 2022). This approach aligns leaders' personal incentives with broader organizational values and showcases to all employees that inclusion is a core metric of success, not just an optional initiative.

4.3.3 Foster a Culture of Transparency and Public Reporting

Transparency is a crucial driver of accountability. Organizations should commit to publishing annual reports on gender representation, pay equity, promotion rates, and leadership diversity. Public reporting not only demonstrates commitment but also creates external pressure to follow through on stated goals. By openly acknowledging both successes and areas where improvement is necessary, organizations foster trust with employees, customers, and stakeholders. This transparency further dismantles the hidden hierarchies and unspoken norms that perpetuate gender inequalities behind the scenes.

In conclusion, achieving gender equity in the workplace requires a holistic approach that addresses both structural barriers and cultural norms. Policy reform, cultural transformation, and leadership accountability must be combined in order to create organizations where all members have equal opportunities to succeed and lead. The recommendations outlined in this chapter are intended to move beyond surface-level solutions and toward lasting, core change. Implementing these strategies will not only advance gender equality but also enhance organizational performance, innovation, and resilience in an increasingly diverse and dynamic global economy.

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to explore how gender bias continues to shape workplace dynamics and organizational culture, despite decades of progress toward gender equality. Drawing on theoretical frameworks, metaphorical models, and global data, the research has highlighted how both structural barriers and cultural norms interact to maintain persistent inequalities. This final chapter summarizes the key findings, reflects on their broader implications, and reaffirms the urgent need for systemic change.

This thesis explored the enduring impact of gender bias on workplace dynamics and organizational culture. By drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Gender Stratification Theory and Role Congruity Theory, as well as metaphorical concepts like the glass ceiling and sticky floors, the research revealed how gender inequality is maintained through a complex interplay of structural barriers and cultural norms. The analysis was further supported by empirical data from the Global Gender Gap Report (2024), which underscored the slow and uneven progress toward achieving gender parity in the workforce.

Key findings indicate that women continue to face significant challenges in attaining leadership roles, receiving fair evaluations, and balancing professional and personal responsibilities. These issues are compounded by organizational cultures that favor masculine leadership traits and by informal networks that exclude women from strategic opportunities. The persistence of these barriers demonstrates that gender bias is deeply systemic, woven into both formal structures and everyday interactions.

The broader implications of these findings extend beyond individual career trajectories. Gender bias undermines organizational effectiveness by limiting access to diverse perspectives, weakening team cohesion, and reducing overall innovation. Moreover, organizations that fail to create inclusive environments risk damaging their reputation and losing out on top talent. Addressing gender inequality is thus not merely a moral imperative, but a strategic necessity for organizations seeking resilience and long-term success in a rapidly evolving global economy.

In light of these insights, this thesis calls for urgent and comprehensive action. Organizations must commit to meaningful policy reform, cultural transformation, and leadership accountability. Efforts must be sustained, intersectional, and embedded into the core of organizational strategy, rather than treated as isolated initiatives. Only by addressing both visible structures and invisible norms can true gender equality be achieved. The time for surface-level solutions has passed; lasting change demands courage, commitment, and collective action across every level of society and industry.

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