

# Progressing gender equity in senior leadership: a systematic literature review

Michelle Gander

*Department of Sociology, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia, and*

Fleur Sharafizad

*School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aim to review and compile the latest research in women’s leadership internationally and across multiple sectors and industries to understand how to fast-track gender equality. As an outcome of this review, this paper presents an actionable universal framework for organisations to use to bolster their gender equity efforts.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A systematic literature review methodology resulted in 36 articles dedicated to research on women in senior leadership interventions across countries and organisational types. Thematic analysis identified a series of enablers and barriers that influence women’s progression into senior roles.

**Findings** – Research since 2020 has shown a significant shift from an individualised approach to improving women’s advancement to senior leadership roles, to a systematic one, acknowledging that there are entrenched behaviours resulting in a lack of equity.

**Research limitations/implications** – Systematic literature reviews, although reducing bias, must still be acknowledged to have inherent bias due to the inclusion and exclusion criteria used. There is a need for future research to provide more theoretical underpinnings to advance knowledge and for implementation and review of the proposed EQUAL framework developed from this study.

**Originality/value** – The authors highlight the continuing issues at play in organisations that act as barriers to women’s progress into senior leadership. This paper suggest that organisations may need to consider ways to move past a “business case” approach towards gender equity becoming embedded at all levels. Their proposed EQUAL framework provides a practical set of evidence-based activities to enhance this approach.

**Keywords** Gender equity, Leadership, Systematic literature review

**Paper type** Literature review

## Introduction

Achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the unfinished business of our time, and the greatest human rights challenge in our world.



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The UN Secretary-General, Mr Antonio Guterres [1].

To progress efforts towards gender equity, many countries around the globe have implemented strategies and initiatives to promote the number of women employed at senior levels but despite the multitude of gender equity strategies and initiatives, change is slow. According to the [World Economic Forum \(2022\)](#) it will take more than five generations, or 132 years, to reach global gender parity. Currently, gender equity initiatives and strategies appear to be implemented at either the national level, such as for example through the requirement to report on data such as the pay gap from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency in Australia [2], or industry specific level, for example, the introduction of the Athena SWAN framework [3] which promotes gender equity measures and awards charters in higher education, and organisations such as Chief Executive Women [4] which undertakes advocacy, research, targeted programs and awards scholarships. All of these efforts are yet to push the gender parity dial to equal in global north countries.

Progress in gender equity could potentially be increased if institutions applied initiatives based on already established research. For example, it has been shown that an over reliance on quantity, through voluntary or legislated targets or quotas, does not necessarily lead to systematic gender equity throughout an organisation ([Vinnicombe and Mavin, 2023](#)). The reason for this is that women appointed because of such directives are not given the same visibility, resources and recognition as men ([Mickey, 2022](#)). Many organisations continue to promote an individual approach, as if by merely training and “fixing” women they can solve the problem. This approach eradicates the need to commit to the hard work of overhauling cultures and systems ([Santiago and Bartesaghi, 2022](#)).

Additionally, over-optimism of how far we have come is consistently applied by both women and men ([Cortis et al., 2022](#)). Related to this is the concept of gender fatigue, where there is a loss of will to acknowledge, let alone oppose, gender discrimination ([Kelan, 2009](#)). It has also been acknowledged that the vast research in this space, written in academic language for an academic audience, is not always conducive to providing actionable outcomes that can be implemented in the real-world ([Guthridge et al., 2022](#)). This article aims to do two things. Firstly, it presents the findings of a systematic literature review into the latest research in women’s leadership internationally, across multiple sectors and industries to bring together the latest findings for progressing equality. Secondly, born from the review of the literature, it presents an actionable universal framework for organisations to use to bolster their gender equity efforts.

In this paper, the authors take the standpoint that gender interacts with but is different from sex, which refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics. As such, we consider gender as being constructed through repetitive performances of gestures, acts and desires evident on the exterior of the body ([Jenkins and Finneman, 2018](#)).

### **Women in leadership**

There is significant evidence that a diverse leadership team has a positive effect on company performance ([Evans and Maley, 2021](#)) with a global survey finding a positive correlation between profitability and the proportion of women in corporate leadership at director and board levels ([Noland, Moran and Kotschwar, 2016](#)). In Australia, at Board level, since gender reporting was introduced in 2010, there has been an increase in women directors from 8% to 40% ([AICD, 2023](#)). It has also been reported that organisations that commit to gender-balanced targets are almost three times as likely to achieve gender-balanced leadership teams ([Bain and Company, 2022](#)). Interestingly, although Australian women’s political representation remains low, the public sector has made headway in improving gender equity with 43.7% of senior executive roles (SES 3) being held by women ([APSC, 2019](#)).

The research highlighted above shows that it is not an individual agency issue that leads to a lack of representation of women at senior leadership levels, although the argument for meritocracy and self-efficacy is still made, often by women themselves (DeSimone, 2021). However, this individual agency perspective cannot now be reconciled with clearly entrenched and ongoing gender inequity. Organisations have successfully used meritocracy and self-efficacy arguments, but research shows that socio-cultural issues play a much more important role in determining who will make it to senior leadership roles (Gander, 2018). Data show that there are still significant barriers for women to reach senior leadership positions even in feminised industries such as education and healthcare. Even more significant barriers exist in industries dominated by men such as finance and the resource sector (Bishu and Headley, 2020). Research has highlighted various barriers specific to women's careers including: *thresholds*, obstacles located at the point of recruitment (Toren and Moore, 1998), the *sticky floor*, which refers to the concentration of women employed at lower classifications without opportunities to progress (Yap and Konrad, 2009), while *hurdles* (Toren and Moore, 1998), *funneling* (Peetz et al., 2014) and *bottlenecks* (Yap and Konrad, 2009) all refer to barriers women face around middle management, just before senior management positions. Similarly, the *glass ceiling* denotes the invisible, yet powerful, barrier that precludes women from reaching higher classifications (Powell and Butterfield, 2015) increasing in severity as one progresses through the employment hierarchy (Baxter and Wright, 2000). Furthermore, the *glass cliff* argues that women get appointed to positions of authority during times of crisis (Ryan and Haslam, 2005), the *glass escalator* denotes how men in feminised industries get career advantages not afforded to women (Williams, 1992), and, the *doxic sieve* highlights how women do not accumulate symbolic capital (Gander, 2018) in the same way as men leading to their *holding pattern* (Sharafizad et al., 2024).

In this paper we take the position that it may be beneficial for gender equity efforts that initiatives and outcomes be shared among industries, the not-for-profit sector, corporate sector and public sector organisations, so that synergy is aspired to, rather than each operating in siloes. As such, our aim in this paper is to identify themes across the literature and industries that can be drawn on to progress gender equity collectively. Such good practice initiatives could, when combined, potentially progress gender equity quicker and more holistically. As such, we propose an EQUAL framework that can be used by organisations to conceptualise the problem, evaluate actions and track impact.

### Approach

Systematic literature reviews (SLRs) can contribute to knowledge by synthesising and assessing scholarly work for a specific research question, over a period of time, to ensure transparent and complete reporting of data. They have been extensively used in management journals for decades (Paul et al., 2021). The use of SLRs has become popular in careers research recently due to their ability to build, explicate, develop or test theory (Onwuegbuzie and Frels, 2016). SLRs can help form a basis for developing practice, provide information on knowledge gaps and therefore inform future research. SLRs should be both reproducible with an audit trail (Onwuegbuzie and Frels, 2016) and be able to provide practice implications and offer future research directions.

### Method

The aim of this SLR is to examine the state of gender equity in leadership roles from research published from 2020 onwards. 2020 was chosen as the UN Secretary General called out the lack of progress in this area in a speech that year. We felt that due to the amount of literature published in this field, and the need to have current research to inform practice, this date was

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appropriate. We used the Preferred Reporting Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher *et al.*, 2009) and followed a modified set of principles based on Pickering and Byrne's (2014) quantitative approach. This approach was taken as PRISMA has as its focus the transparent reporting of data, to ensure an audit trail and, therefore, replication. The PRISMA checklist was used to ensure that all relevant steps in the process were undertaken (Moher *et al.*, 2009) A Cochrane technology platform, Covidence, was used to manage the review process (Veritas Health Innovation, 2019).

### *Search process*

A literature search was conducted by a research librarian specialising in systematic literature reviews. A pilot search was conducted in November 2022 in Web of Science Core Collection (via ISI Web of Science) using search terms including executive, management, leadership, equity, parity. The results were reviewed and updated by the authors and the final search undertaken two weeks later in Web of Science Core Collection (via ISI Web of Science), ProQuest ERIC, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Social Science Premium Collection, Scopus (Clarivate) and Econlit (via Ovid). The final search included terms such as: executive, management, leader, CEO, board member, vice chancellor, managing director, women, gender, advancement, parity, equity.

### *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Articles were included if they:

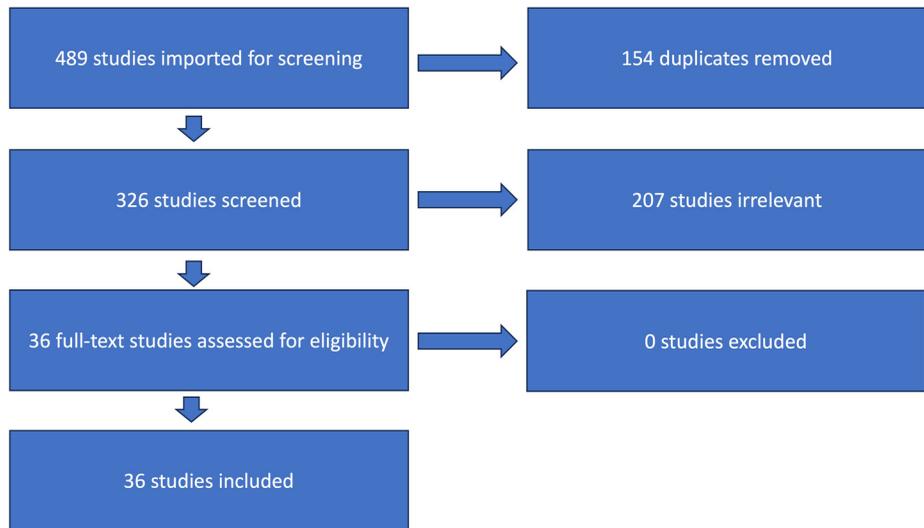
- investigated women in leadership including in the private sector, public sector, universities, or not-for-profit organisations;
- specifically examined the impact of gender equity interventions;
- were published between 2020 and 2023;
- consisted of published peer-reviewed journal articles only
- were written in English; and
- were not literature reviews, conceptual papers or meta-analyses.

Any uncertainties in assessing the eligibility of articles for the review were discussed between the two reviewers until consensus was reached (Figure 1).

### *Search results and analysis*

Four hundred and eighty-nine articles were uploaded to covidence. Covidence is a reliable and widely used web-based systematic review program. It automates some of the review process making it easier for joint reviewers to systematically work together. Covidence can import and screen citations, allow for full-text reviews, study selection, quality assessment, data extraction and data exporting (Babineau, 2014). Once the citations were uploaded, they were de-duplicated and the two reviewers screened the 326 resultant articles, marking those for inclusion and discussing those where a decision was not straight-forward. After review, 36 studies were included (see supplementary Table 1).

Using a coding framework developed by one of the authors in a previous SLR (Gander, 2019), the authors coded half of the papers each in Excel using this broad coding framework, including a quality analysis based on the Critical Assessment Skills Program (CASP [5], and then reviewed a sample of the other author's papers and codes to ensure consistency across all articles. After coding, both authors identified thematic patterns that emerged and that have been used below to discuss the findings from the articles. The result of this data analysis



**Source:** Based on Moher *et al.* (2009)

**Figure 1.** Flow chart of the systematic review process using the PRISMA method

resulted in four themes that highlighted the issues found in the research studies and proposed theoretical concepts for why these happened. The thematic analysis of the articles identified four recurring themes, 1) the business case for diversity, 2) recognising the problem, 2) policy initiatives, 3) quotas, 4) human resource management. Each of these themes is presented and expanded on below. Extracting the key concepts from all studies, regardless of methodology, was considered important to ensure that the findings of high-quality qualitative research were recognised and included whilst trying to preserve its context and complexity (Campbell *et al.*, 2003).

## Findings

### *The business case for diversity*

Much of the earlier literature has relied on the idea of the “business case”, that is, it makes good business sense, in terms of positive firm performance, to embrace diversity, although this is dependent on country, industry and institutional context (Zhang, 2020). However, the drawbacks of this approach were investigated by Georgeac and Rattan (2023) who showed that despite the seeming positivity, the business case approach functions as a cue for social identity threat that paradoxically undermines belonging across LGBTQ+ individuals, STEM women and African-Americans, thus hindering organisations’ diversity goals; however, the business case for diversity still holds sway in many organisations (Ely and Thomas, 2020).

Lack of gender equity is an issue for organisations as companies not pursuing a diverse workforce are in danger of experiencing lags in innovation and could be left behind (Ghauri *et al.*, 2021). Thus, there may be a need for policymakers to go beyond mere rule codification and work towards raising firms’ organisational social consciousness levels (Seierstad *et al.*, 2021). The more extant literature suggests that it might be that the instrumental case for

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diversity, that is, that diversity itself is taken seriously by the firm, that leads to increased firm performance and it is this argument that needs to be made (Vinnicombe and Mavin, 2023).

### *Recognising the problem*

The problem of gender bias often starts early, especially in countries with low gender equity and conservative cultures. Imm and Wahid (2020), studying women leaders in Malaysia, reported on the importance of women's early personal development relationships and experiences that contributed to their leadership identity construction, set by their parents and schoolteachers; their fathers were particularly important role models.

A study by Wynn (2020) in a Silicon Valley technology company found that executives failed to recognise the organisation as the primary cause or responsible party for inequalities, instead attributing inequality to individually held biases; human resource employees, in contrast, recognised the organisational drivers of inequality. Wynn (2020, p. 128) went proposes that these inequality ideologies held by executives are likely to impact organisational change efforts and that one way to effect impactful change therefore would be to provide executives with the "structural understanding and organizational framing to execute effective change".

Cortis *et al.* (2022) found that senior leaders were more likely than lower-ranked staff to defend the gender equity status quo. These senior leaders expressed support for existing arrangements and less need for change with male leaders firmly supporting the existing arrangements. To illustrate, in one study a senior sales director in IT was reported stating that women's promotions were a waste of time, because these women would, in critical situations, prioritise their family obligations to the detriment of their managerial responsibilities (Kukuruza *et al.*, 2022). Men in lower ranked positions also expressed more positive views about the status quo including the organisational gender climate. Women leaders were less likely to support the status quo but were simultaneously more likely to see the existing arrangement as acceptable than lower ranked women. This situation may suggest that privilege assimilates women into the dominate culture. System justification theory was used to suggest that individuals have a strong psychological motivation to see the social systems in which they are embedded as fair and just – which offers an explanation of why senior leaders are more likely to support the status quo as they gain power and privilege from the current system and ironically then are least likely to recognise and drive change. Wright (2021) noted that women who have become senior leaders in corporate Australia have conformed to social expectations of the elite in terms of professional, class and ethnic demographics, highlighting the missing women – those that are working class, from non-White backgrounds or from other minority groups. Locke *et al.* (2021) found that women who did achieve leadership roles in Danish and New Zealand universities chose to shape or reinforce neoliberal inequalities through the way in which they undertake their roles. However, while some reproduced existing structures, others made a difference for not just themselves, but also for others by changing the university landscape (Locke *et al.*, 2021).

In the Australian and New Zealand nephrology professional association, Francis *et al.* (2022) found that 88% of respondents believe inequalities exist in the nephrology (the medical study of kidneys) workforce. Compared with White men, other demographic groups were more likely to have experienced inequity, and the majority felt there was no one in the workforce they could turn to for assistance. The impact of discrimination was profound with respondents reporting restricted career advancement and psychological distress. Most discrimination came from peer nephrologists, particularly for gender and race discrimination. In neurosurgery in the US, Ganju *et al.* (2021) found although 50% of medical students are women only 16% go on to residency and only 6% become certified

neurosurgeons. They argue that this may be due to a lack of visible role models as only 11% of the most senior neurosurgical roles available were held by women, and only 8% of speakers on the national stage were women. Similarly, a growing recognition of disparities in women leadership across the Federation of Clinical Immunology Societies, where women were underrepresented in all educational, leadership and committee roles, was directly related to significant improvements in multiple areas since 2016 (Reed *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, the dominance of speakers who are men at conferences may also communicate a level of bias and opposition to attendance by women (Reed *et al.*, 2022). The authors of the paper propose that recognition of the problem, through education at the executive level and committees, can progress gender equality.

#### *Policy initiatives*

Organisational policy initiatives for gender equality have been incrementally implemented for decades through a gender mainstreaming approach. However, Aiston *et al.* (2020) found that, in Hong Kong, gender equality was not even flagged as part of universities' mission statements and that there were gaps between voicing a commitment to gender equality and practice. Policy responses were seen as problematising women, embedding traditional gender roles through for example "family-friendly" policies, and equity measures being seen as tick-box exercises instead of leading to cultural change.

Evans and Maley (2021) suggested that a comprehensive national strategic action plan for gender equality is needed to tackle these entrenched inequalities. Additionally, they also suggest that as what gets measured gets managed businesses should have targets and report on their gender equity measures and be held accountable in the same way that the Australian Public Service has been more successful in gender parity outcomes. However, Finkel *et al.* (2023) noted that even in the Danish public sector, a high gender equality country, only 36% of top management positions went to women even though 60% of the workforce are women.

In a context of low gender equality and low organisational social consciousness (OSC), firms may perceive that they have the option not to comply with equality measures despite the presence of punitive measures. Thus, there may be a need for policymakers to go beyond mere rule codification and work towards raising firms' OSC levels. Igiebor (2021) investigated gender equity in Nigerian universities and found that institutional resistance can be seen in the policy silence on sanctions for non-compliance. This lack of action acts as a mechanism for limiting increased numbers of women in leadership positions and the absence of a specific budget is also a way to oppose the policy and lead to lack of action. The exclusion of women-specific initiatives in gender equity policy ignores the complexities of women's lives, ultimately aiding in systematic inequality. This study showcased male dominance embedded in policy content which reproduces hegemonic masculinities that construct gender equity (Igiebor, 2021).

Carter and Garden (2020) reported that the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists established a gender working group due to under-representation of women in departmental leadership positions. They found that the views of senior leaders were supportive of gender equity measures, but there were still systemic barriers to support women in terms of family friendly policies related to logistics, governance, structures and attitudes especially related to working hours, parental leave and use of sick leave.

Piggott and Pike (2020) suggest linking gender-equitable governance to organisational values and performance to provide motivation for organisations to make genuine and sustainable changes. Indeed, purely relying on individual women in leadership roles making a difference is unrealistic, as is expecting individual women to "lean in" as per Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook COO, because this inadvertently suggests gender inequity is the result

of internal shortcomings of women (Phipps and Prieto, 2021). The example of Christine Lagarde leading the International Monetary Fund is used as a case study. Although the “Lagarde effect” did result in more labour force participation policies for women, her being appointed to the role of Managing Director of the IMF did not result in changes to the internal culture of that organisation (as measured by the numbers of women in senior roles; Blackmon, 2021; Carbone, 2022) found that even having a critical mass of women on the Board of Wells Fargo did not improve organisational culture; in fact it rewarded women who acted like men. Some researchers propose that women who reach top executive positions have vastly different preferences and characteristics than women in the general population and are more alike to men in the same positions (Adams and Funk, 2012). This assertion suggests that, rather than changing structures, women who can meet the expectations associated with operating and thriving in the existing systems, progress. Ultimately, the outcomes associated with this approach would be limited, and do not enable progression for women who cannot meet the associated expectations.

Glass and Cook (2020) found that women and people of colour faced disadvantages in terms of opportunity to achieve leadership positions and heightened scrutiny, resistance and bias once they obtained those roles. They used the theory of performative contortions to explain that individuals had to change themselves to be included at the top but that this was also insufficient to achieve inclusion. They challenged the diversity and inclusion initiatives in terms of their response to systemic issues being based on agency and control. Overall, these gender role implications can result in a lack of confidence in pursuing male-dominated jobs, such as, for example, plastic surgery (Moak *et al.*, 2020). This situation is likely to explain why, in a study examining work division in Australian political offices, work was divided along gender lines with men beginning and ending their careers in higher status roles than women (Taflaga and Kerby, 2020).

### Quotas

The debate surrounding the potential benefits of mandated and voluntary gender quotas is not novel. Generally, these quotas are successful in increasing the number of women on corporate boards (Maida and Weber, 2022). For example, a study set in South Korea, where gender quotas are voluntary, concluded that when the number of senior women managers is large, there is a reduction in the gender salary gap, and an increase in the number of full-time employees who are women (Song, 2022; Clark *et al.*, 2022) found that in relation to corporate Boards in Europe, punitive diversity targets have a stronger effect on placing women on boards than do self-regulatory initiatives. Firms with high OSC operating in countries with punitive quotas and high levels of gender equality show the highest level of gender representation on Boards, as is the case in, for example, Norway. Despite this, there is little evidence that the increased representation of women on the boards of public limited companies resulted in voluntary spill over as intended by the quota proponents (Seierstad *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, the 40% quota in Norway essentially serves as a ceiling with no companies reporting a higher representation on their board. It is important to note that in a study by Maida and Weber (2022) set in Italy, stepwise increases in gender quotas over three consecutive board renewals, demonstrate that a substantial increase of women on corporate boards only has a moderate and imprecisely estimated spillover effect on the representation of women in top executive or top earning positions. Campos-Garcia (2021) reported the fact that although there has been an increase in the number of women in non-executive director roles in Spain’s IBEX-35 listed companies due to the 30% target from the European Union, there has not been a significant change in the numbers of women in executive leadership positions (Campos-Garcia, 2021). In New Zealand, where there is no target for women on

boards, 75% of ANZX listed firm Board directors, and 63% of corporate executives, are men. So, although quotas make some difference to Board appointees, they do not translate to change within the organisation. [Carbone \(2022\)](#) and [Clark et al. \(2022\)](#) explained that although Board diversity is relatively easier to achieve it does not influence organisational diversity, where most of the reforms are needed for women's equal representation in senior leadership roles.

A study by [Verhoeven et al. \(2022\)](#) challenged the current focus on headcounts as a measure of statistical participation as this construct does not consider the distribution of influence or power. They argue that greater nuance is required regarding social equity interventions to better understand the persistent and continuing domination of men in the composition of boards. Therefore, in addition to a focus on increasing the number of women on boards, efforts should also focus on ensuring women have parity in terms of agency, or substantive gender diversity once women are appointed ([Nili, 2019](#)). Ultimately, the authors warn that the numbers should not become an end to themselves and that these numerical targets are only one step towards achieving gender equity ([Verhoeven et al., 2022](#)). [Song \(2022\)](#) found that when the glass ceiling is cracked at the senior management level and women are visible in the top management level of corporate management then both the gender pay gap decreases and more women are appointed into senior management roles. Countries that are characterised by a highly stereotypical and conservative gender culture may show high resistance to, and ineffective implementation of, gender quotas ([Maida and Weber, 2022](#)).

#### *Human resource management*

[Evans and Maley \(2021\)](#) in their study of Australian women working in the corporate sector, reported that women perceive various structural and cultural barriers to achieving parity in senior leadership roles and identify that the problem is systemic with built in biases and discrimination. This situation was mirrored in advertising ([Thompson-Whiteside, 2020](#)), academic surgery ([Welten et al., 2022](#)) and higher education ([O'Connor and Irvine, 2020](#)). The bias referred to was also demonstrated by [Miragaia et al. \(2022\)](#) who examined workers' perceptions of women's organisational leadership in sports services. Their findings, despite several policy interventions in the field, demonstrated a preference for managers who are men.

Even when women are appointed into executive roles, there is bias in the system. For example, [Dwivedi et al. \(2021\)](#) looked at corporate CEO hires and found that the way new female CEOs were announced did not differ from male CEOs, but incoming female CEOs garnered more negative reactions from securities agencies. [Dwivedi et al. \(2021\)](#) theorised that female CEOs were suffering from a penalty of success as well as stereotyping, resulting in shorter tenure. However, research by [Lawson et al. \(2022, p. 1\)](#) using natural language processing techniques to analyse 43,000 documents found that employing a female CEO and board members is associated with changes to the organisational language resulting in the "meaning of being a woman" becoming "more similar to the semantic meaning of agency". This is one concrete example of the way in which increasing female senior representation can result in wider changes.

[Ford et al. \(2021\)](#) found that two formal career development programs in academic medicine in the US seemed to provide a positive outcome for women in achieving academic leadership roles. Increased ratings of self-confidence indicated skill growth through the programs which continued for some time after completion. Additionally, these leaders showed a strong preference for serving the institution that sponsored them so that they could continue to contribute and support it. [Finkel et al. \(2023\)](#) on their study of Danish public

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sector employees found that women having a Master of Leadership benefitted their careers to more senior roles more so than men holding this degree.

[Glass and Cook \(2020\)](#) found that women and people of colour faced disadvantages in terms of opportunity to achieve leadership positions and heightened scrutiny, resistance and bias once they obtained those roles. They used the theory of performative contortions to explain that individuals had to change themselves to be included at the top but that this was also insufficient to achieve inclusion. They challenged the diversity and inclusion initiatives in terms of their response to systemic issues being based on agency and control.

### Discussion

This SLR brings together a wide variety of articles that identify the main barriers to fast-tracking gender equity in organisations. By evaluating up-to-date global research from for-profit, public and not-for-profit organisations we aim to create a useful framework tool for organisations to use in their gender equity journey. As [Wynn \(2020, p. 128\)](#) noted one way to effect impactful change would be to provide executives with the “structural understanding and organizational framing to execute effective change”. The key issues to have emerged from the themes above include that 1) it is critical for organisations to recognise the complexity of the problem, 2) senior leaders (men and women) support the status quo because the existing system has rewarded, 3) quotas/targets work – at the level they are implemented at, 4) equity in one area e.g. on the board does not necessarily translate into equity throughout the organisation, 5) there continues to be a preference for male managers, 6) quotas with punitive measures, especially related to budgets, are more effective than voluntary targets, 7) by reaching your target, there is a tendency to stop there 8) organisational norms need to change, 9) proactive human resource management is important and 10) organisations need to raise their organisational social consciousness.

To understand more deeply the findings from this review, we turn to Bourdieu’s theory of habitus as it offers a powerful critique of unconscious doxa. The “career game” is not based on merit but rather upon the unconscious and taken-for-granted attitudes that are the reproduction of inequalities and power relations and which act as barriers to success. As suggested in the literature review, gender equity cannot continue to be classed as an agency issue, it is systemic. The findings from this review can be explained by habitus, an unconscious process of “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” ([Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53](#)), which may offer an explanation of why so little has changed in this area even after so long. Bourdieu’s theory may offer an explanation, via the understanding of how habitus re/creates structures, for the fact that even now after many decades of work towards equal participation in the workforce at all levels, women are still underrepresented in senior leadership roles.

### Practical implications

Drawing these emergent themes together, the authors have created the EQUAL framework for improving organisational gender equity outcomes (see [Table 1](#)); as [Evans and Maley \(2021\)](#) noted, what gets measured gets managed. This framework establishes five requirements for organisations to undertake to create deep and long-lasting change. These requirements need to be undertaken holistically, as they build on each other, and there should be no “cherry picking” of the criteria, some of which are easier to implement than others. The scholarly literature shows us how complex and entrenched the gender inequity issue is, so only by undertaking all measures can organisations hope to create profound change. It should be noted that although this framework has been developed from the gender equity literature, these activities would also work for other diversity improvement measures. In some respects,

**Table 1.** EQUAL Framework for improving gender outcomes

Evaluation	Quotas	Understanding	Accountability	Learning and development
Analyse the relevant data (Evans and Maley, 2021) e.g. gender pay gap (Song, 2022), # of executives (Verhoeven <i>et al.</i> , 2022), # of board members, language and communication (Dwivedi <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	Set quota or target based on the outcomes of the Evaluation phase for all areas of the organisation; review and update on an ongoing basis (Clark <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Evans and Maley, 2021; Maida and Weber, 2022)	Create a story of where your organisation is starting from, and where you are aiming for (Cortis <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Wym, 2020)	Ensure targets are included in Board's review and reporting mechanism with sanctions for non-compliance (Igiebor, 2021)	Co-design L&D with a wide variety of women (Igiebor, 2021)
Undertake ongoing audits (Evans and Maley, 2021) e.g., recruitment, promotions, pay, committee membership	Co-design relevant policies with minority staff (Igiebor, 2021)	Communicate instrumental versus business case approach of gender equity to increase ethical behaviour and deepen impact (Clark <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Ely and Thomas, 2020; Georgeac and Rattan, 2023; Ghauri <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Piggott and Pike, 2020; Vinnicombe and Mavin, 2023)	Align gender-equitable governance to organisational values and performance (Piggott and Pike, 2020)	Roll out anti-sexist training for all staff (Cortis <i>et al.</i> , 2022)
Listen and learn from women's lived experiences (Francis <i>et al.</i> , 2022)		Highlight and celebrate women who can act as role models (Ganju <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	Provide budgets for gender equity initiatives (Igiebor, 2021)	Provide leadership training and development opportunities for women (Ford <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Glass and Cook, 2020)
				Support women in gaining higher level qualifications (Finkel <i>et al.</i> , 2023)

**Source:** Authors' own work

this framework seems deceptively simple, however, we believe that as a research-evidenced tool for senior teams to use, it will serve to progress elements of gender equity across geographical locations, industries and organisations. The framework is made up of five criteria: evaluation, understanding, quotas, accountability and learning and development. These criteria have been distilled from the themes and the emergent issues discussed above.

The Evaluation criterion requires an analysis of gender data as a starting point and organisations in many countries are already required to report on gender equity measures. For example, in Australia, organisations with more than 100 employees are required to report annually to the government through the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. However, this framework asks organisations to move on from this by also analysing how it communicates, the language it uses and to take stock of the number of women in positions of power and how women are involved in decision-making as the research shows that to embed deep change, women must be in positions of authority in numbers, not as lone representatives.

The Quota criterion requires targets to be set based on the outcomes of the Evaluation stage. Quotas and targets have been shown to work, to a degree, but that organisations must go beyond this to ensure gender parity. For example, the research showed that establishing voluntary and mandated quotas for boards of directors did successfully increase women in these non-executive positions to the target level but that the target then became a ceiling itself. Additionally, Board numbers did not necessarily have a filter down effect to organisational executive positions, therefore targets must be set at all levels in the organisation for deep structural change.

The Understanding criterion is arguably one of the most important, albeit difficult, aspects. Organisations must understand where they have come from, where they are now and then create and communicate a vision for the future. This work can be difficult and uncomfortable for senior leaders, both women and men, who generally underestimate the level of gender inequity at play and have faith in meritocracy based on their own individual lived experience. Therefore, to undo these perspectives and to undergo “truth telling” would be an important aspect of this equality work.

The Accountability criterion is critically important as we have seen what gets measured gets managed. Boards and top management teams and their equivalents must not only set and monitor targets but also provided support and resources to help managers undertake the requirements such as training and development, but also critically to put in place sanctions for non-compliance of targets.

Finally, the Learning and Development criterion recognises the importance of implementing and supporting ongoing career enabling initiatives which can provide support both organisationally and individually through the establishment of policies, which must be co-designed with women, budget for leadership training both internal and external, leadership courses and qualifications.

### **Limitations and future research**

Literature reviews are never complete, to do one well takes time and, along with publication timelines, once they appear online, they are already outdated. Additionally, even systematic reviews are never completely objective, from the choices made in the search, and in the inclusion and exclusion criteria; although the systematic procedure does seek to reduce this subjectivity (Pickering and Byrne, 2014). We acknowledge that as only articles in English were included in the final selection, we may have missed key literature, for example we excluded two articles in Spanish; this undoubtedly leads to bias.

In terms of future research directions, there are several areas where we feel that improvements could be made. First, implementing the EQUAL framework in one or more

organisations and monitoring results should be a key area of future research to establish its usefulness in progressing gender equity, second there appears to be a lack of strong theoretical contributions in many of the articles in this review, which considering the extent of the scholarly work in the area of gender equity, is concerning. It may be that researchers are more concerned with enhancing practice rather than contributing theoretically to the discipline area (Barbour, 2008). Third we acknowledge that most of these articles, although concerned with gender equity, are silent on other areas of inequity. It was surprising that most did not discuss race/ethnicity especially in relation to the US papers, although Ghuari *et al.* (2021) did discuss the need for an intersectionality approach.

### Conclusion

In writing this review in 2024, it is still difficult to understand that there are women being “first” in various enterprises around the world. For example, Australia appointed its first woman to lead its Reserve Bank since it was founded in 1960 [6]. In February 2020, Antonio Guterres’s speech (Guterres, 2020) called for more women in boardrooms (amongst other things) stating that when women enter those spaces, they bring new perspectives and improve decision-making. As we write this today, after researching gender equity for several years (24 years for one of the authors), we move between wanting to weep and wanting to help – daily we choose the latter.

This review makes two important contributions. By reviewing the research on women in senior leadership roles globally and across organisational type, we hope we have achieved our aim of distilling and summarising the main activities that have enabled organisations to make headway in gender equity and by creating a framework for organisations to use they can take perhaps the first, perhaps the 100th step, in evaluating and improving gender equity based on a holistic set of actions. We hope it provides a useful bridge between the scholarly literature and practical action.

### Notes

1. [www.un.org/en/global-issues/gender-equality#:~:text=The%20UN%20Secretary%2DGeneral%2C%20Mr,righ%20challenge%20in%20our%20world](http://www.un.org/en/global-issues/gender-equality#:~:text=The%20UN%20Secretary%2DGeneral%2C%20Mr,righ%20challenge%20in%20our%20world)
2. [www.wgea.gov.au](http://www.wgea.gov.au)
3. [www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan-charter)
4. [www.cew.org.au](http://www.cew.org.au)
5. <https://casp-uk.net>
6. [www.bbc.com/news/business-66197443](http://www.bbc.com/news/business-66197443)

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### Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

### Corresponding author

Michelle Gander can be contacted at: [m.gander@ecu.edu.au](mailto:m.gander@ecu.edu.au)