Influence of National Culture on Gender Equality in Swiss Small- and Medium-Sized Companies

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Abstract

Gender inequality remains a challenge for companies in Switzerland. This is particularly evident in women's representation in leadership positions. Building on the overarching hypothesis that traditional Swiss national culture restrains gender equality within organisations, this study adopts a qualitative approach to examine challenges and good practices related to gender equality in Swiss small- and medium-sized companies. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with board members, CEOs, and HR leaders. The findings support the overarching hypothesis and lead to propositions that refine this hypothesis. Challenges include the prevalence of part-time work among women, the potentially limited visibility of women in the workplace, and the exclusivity of male-dominated work environments. Good practices can be grouped into opportunities for flexible career paths, inclusive leadership practices supporting equal opportunities, and efforts to foster employer attractiveness for women. The study provides practice-oriented insights into gender equality in Switzerland, with lessons for organisations operating in similar contexts.

Keywords: diversity, gender equality, SME, sustainability, Switzerland

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality has become a key issue in management, as companies are increasingly expected to demonstrate not only economic performance but also social and ecological sustainability. Frameworks and reference points such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), along with national policies and regulations, guide corporate efforts toward gender equality. Moreover, research on the 'business case for diversity' indicates a positive relationship between gender diversity and corporate performance (Herring, 2009).

Despite the progress in recent years, the Global Gender Gap Report states that "no country has yet achieved full gender parity", and at the current pace, global equality will take approximately another 123 years (WEF, 2025, p. 5). In Switzerland, a similar pattern is observed: female labour force participation rose from 66% in 1991 to 77% in 2023, and women now outnumber men in tertiary education (FSO, 2023). Nevertheless, Switzerland ranks only slightly above the European average in the Global Gender Gap Report, with a pronounced gap in leadership positions, where it ranks 83rd worldwide (WEF, 2025). Against this background, we formulate the following research question:

What challenges do Swiss companies face regarding gender equality, and how do they address them?

Addressing this equality gap places particular demands on leadership and organisational learning, as companies must manage change across complex cultural settings and organisational boundaries.

To examine the research question and overarching hypothesis, we conducted the study in Swiss small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and larger companies with up to 1,000 employees. These organisations were selected because they are less regulated regarding gender equality than large corporations. Further, the "Swissness" of these companies is central, as it provides the relevant context for analysing how national culture shapes gender equality challenges and organisational responses. Practice-oriented insights from companies embedded in relatively traditional national cultures may also support learning and adaptation in other contexts.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Gender equality and gender equality management

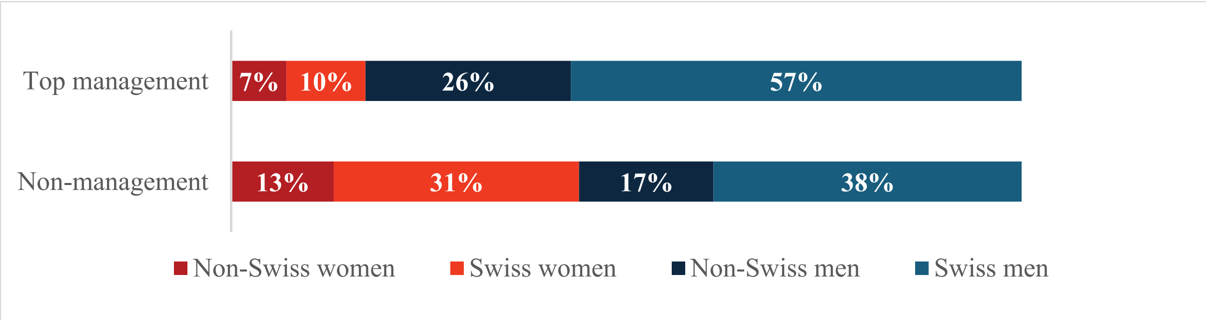
The term gender equality refers to men and women having "equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities, regardless of whether they are born female or male" (EIGE, n.d.). This does *not* imply sameness, but that the "interests, needs, and priorities […] are taken into consideration, thereby recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men" (EIGE, n.d.). Consequently, gender equality management is a key concern for many companies and an integral part of diversity practices, defined as the "implementation of one or more practices aimed at improving the workplace experiences and outcomes of groups that face disadvantage in society" (Leslie, 2019, p. 543).

Beyond social and ideological motives, research shows a positive relationship between diversity and inclusion practices, like gender equality, and organisational performance (Herring, 2009). A recent meta-study by Okatta et al. (2024) finds that employee engagement, creativity, innovation, and improved decision-making foster competitiveness and growth. Leadership commitment and accountability are identified as key enabling factors (Okatta et al., 2024).

Despite these positive expectations and sustained scholarly interest, gender equality initiatives have not consistently translated into positive effects in practice (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Lau et al., 2023). (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Lau et al., 2023). Although women in many countries have attained qualifications comparable to men, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions and continue to earn less (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018).

In Switzerland, women are about half as likely as men to attain leadership positions (WEF, 2025). Further, the Gender Intelligence Report (Petropakis et al., 2022) shows the so-far little-known but highly relevant fact that women's underrepresentation in leadership, particularly in top management, is more pronounced in companies with predominantly Swiss workforces than in more international ones. As shown in Figure 1, Swiss women are more likely than international women to drop out of the leadership pipeline as careers progress, despite their stronger representation at the non-management level. Accordingly, 68% of Swiss women leave the path from non-management to top management ((31%-10%)/31%), compared to only 46% of non-Swiss women ((13-7)/13). Furthermore, at the non-management level, 29.5% of women (13/(13+31)) and 30.9% of men (17/(17+38)) are non-Swiss. At the top management level, this share remains similar for men (31.3% non-Swiss) but rises to 41% non-Swiss for women. Figure 1 includes all companies examined by Petropakis et al. (2022).

Figure 1: Representation of gender and nationality by management level in companies in Switzerland



Own compilation based on Petropakis et al. (2022, p. 11).

Accordingly, this study advances the following overarching hypothesis:

Traditional Swiss national culture influences organisational practices and career trajectories in ways that restrain gender equality in Swiss companies, specifically in higher positions.

Push and pull factors of gender (in)equality

Kossek et al. (2017) describe two coexisting forces that influence women's career exits: *pull factors*, which lead women to opt out voluntarily, and *push factors*, which pressure them to leave. These two factors reinforce gender inequality in women's access to and participation in careers and indicate (un)equal intrinsic (e.g., family satisfaction) and extrinsic (e.g., pay) work and non-work outcomes compared to men (Kossek et al., 2017).

National culture plays a key role in shaping gender inequality, as traditional values and patriarchal structures can influence organisational dynamics (Naidu & Chand, 2017). Switzerland is typically portrayed as a context in which traditional family values persist, and change is approached cautiously, despite strong economic conditions and a highly skilled workforce (Böhlen & Hirschi, 2018; Villesèche & Sinani, 2017). In this setting, *national culture* can function as a *pull factor* when women prioritise work–family balance and voluntarily opt out of their careers, as well as a *push factor* when they are perceived by supervisors as less suitable for leadership roles (Kossek et al., 2017). In the Swiss context, such biases have been linked to discriminatory hiring (Becker et al., 2019) and decision-making processes that reinforce the glass ceiling effect (Burkhard, 2022) and push women out of leadership positions. Conversely, organisational practices can also serve as positive pull factors when workplaces proactively support women's careers (Kossek et al., 2017).

In sum, the literature offers a comprehensive account of barriers to gender equality. However, there is an increasing need to move toward examining organisational practices that actively promote equality

(Lau et al., 2023). This perspective is particularly relevant for SMEs, where research is still scarce, despite evidence that smaller companies with limited resources engage less systematically with gender equality (Böhlen & Hirschi, 2018; Woodhams & Lupton, 2006).

METHOD

To address our research question, we adopted an exploratory qualitative approach, which is well-suited to the in-depth examination of real-world phenomena such as gender equality in Swiss SMEs.

Sampling and interviewee selection

This study focuses on non-publicly listed Swiss SMEs and larger companies with up to 1,000 employees. They face less stringent transparency and reporting requirements and are generally subject to less public scrutiny than publicly listed corporations. In Switzerland, almost three-quarters of employees work in companies with fewer than 500 employees (SECO, 2025), making this a particularly relevant context for examining gender equality challenges and good practices.

Companies were purposively selected from the network of the nongovernmental organisation Advance, which commissioned the present study. This enabled us to access companies that were both reachable and demonstrably interested in the topic.

Table 1: Overview of interviews

Leadership position in the company	Male (M) / Female (F)	Company size	Industry	Anonymised interview code
CEO	M	70	Manufacturing industry (MEM)	1
Chairwomen	F	100	Manufacturing industry (MEM)	2
CEO	F	190	Manufacturing industry	3
CEO & Chairwomen	F	200	Manufacturing industry	4
Chairwomen	F	200	Manufacturing industry (MEM)	5
CEO	F	250	Trade and Services	6
CEO	M	250	Manufacturing industry (MEM)	7
CHRO	F	275	Trade and Services	8
Chairwomen	F	300	Manufacturing industry	9
Head of HR	F	300	Manufacturing industry (MEM)	10
Chairmen	M	350	Manufacturing industry (MEM)	11
CEO	M	350	Manufacturing industry (MEM)	12
Head of HR	M	400	Manufacturing industry (MEM)	13
CEO	F	750	Trade and Services	14

Own compilation.

The sampling strategy deliberately focused on companies in traditional industries, particularly manufacturing. As Table 1 shows, most interviewed companies operate in the mechanical, electrical, and metalworking (MEM) industry, a sector characterised by high male dominance due to women's underrepresentation in related education and professions. This industry is therefore a particularly interesting case for gender equality. As one of Switzerland's largest and most export-intensive industries, MEM makes gender equality not only a social issue but also an economic priority. Ongoing skills shortages further increase the strategic importance of advancing women for competitiveness.

In total, we conducted 14 semi-structured online interviews in German and French with top and high-level leaders of Swiss companies, i.e., members of the board of directors. The interviews were conducted between February and April 2025 and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes each.

The interviews comprised three thematic blocks. After the introduction, the first block addressed the company's gender equality goals and key practices, capturing its current state of gender equality. The second block focused on gender equality challenges (i.e., push and pull factors) from both the company and women's perspectives. This provided the main basis for later analysing the challenges' relation to the study's overarching hypothesis on the influence of Swiss national culture. The final block explored interviewees' novel ideas and good practices as potential solutions for the gender equality challenges they identified. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams, and quotes were translated into English as needed.

Data analysis

For data analysis, we followed Mayring's (2015) thematic analysis approach. Based on the thematic blocks of the interview guide, we first developed a codebook comprising three deductive main categories. These categories were then complemented with inductively derived sub-codes. The inductive sub-codes were identified during the analysis process using Atlas.ti and through close engagement with the empirical material. After comparing and consolidating similar inductive codes, the final codebook comprised a total of 36 codes.

To interpret the data, we followed two guiding principles. First, we analysed the codes by their frequency of use in Atlas.ti, which allowed us to identify and clearly understand the most prevalent gender equality issues in Swiss SMEs. Second, we closely considered issues in the data that had the potential to make a meaningful contribution to our research question (Gioia et al., 2012). We incorporated these into the analysis. Based on these findings, we developed propositions that further specify the results in relation to the overarching hypothesis and the identified solutions.

FINDINGS

Overview of implemented practices

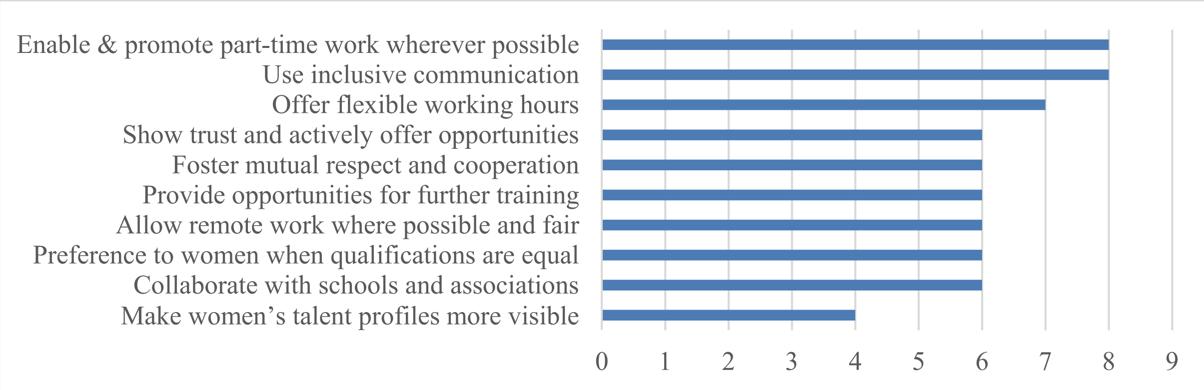
Most of the interviewed companies highlight gender equality as an important topic within their organisations, although they rarely formulate explicit goals or strategies for it. Our interviews suggest that while gender equality may be approached strategically (for instance, in the MEM industry as a response to skilled labour shortages), it is largely understood as a leadership responsibility grounded in organisational values.

> *The CEO needs to be genuinely committed [...], so that gender equality can be cascaded down to all other leaders... [...] so that it becomes anchored in people's mindsets and lived out in everyday practice.* (Interview 10)

This genuine commitment of the top management is particularly important in smaller companies. Compared to big companies, they often have fewer financial resources, for example, for setting up formal gender equality offices. Instead, gender equality roles typically fall to human resources (HR) or chief executive officers (CEO).

With regard to concrete organisational practices, almost all interviewees emphasised the importance of complying with legally mandated requirements (e.g., non-discrimination and equal pay), alongside a range of additional practices, most frequently including promoting part-time work and flexible working hours for everyone whenever possible, as well as inclusive web communication. Figure 2 provides an overview of the most frequently mentioned practices in the interviews.

Figure 2: Frequencies of gender equality practices mentioned in the interviews



Own compilation.

Gender equality challenges

According to the interviewees, the belief that women are responsible for family life while men are the main earners remains prevalent in many families. As one interviewee noted, many Swiss SMEs and their employees "are located in rural areas […] and in these contexts, traditional gender roles are still very pronounced" (Interview 13). From this, two main themes emerged as key factors undermining gender equality in Swiss companies.

First, many women—especially those with children—work part-time, driven by structural hurdles such as limited access to flexible and affordable daycare. While many companies recognise this push factor and offer part-time options, they also highlight consequences, including higher complexity and coordination costs. One interviewee noted that offering part-time options for all roles required hiring an additional HR person. In addition, interviewees note that the lower the employment rate, the more reluctant companies are to offer and financially support further training opportunities for their employees.

> *If the reduced workload is already only 50%, […] how can someone still invest 30% of their working time in a major training programme? That is a challenge we face. We do make compromises, but in my view, [part-time work] always represents a setback in the careers of women.* (Interview 14)

Although many companies offer part-time work, leadership positions are still predominantly full-time. Hence, women and men with childcare or other care duties aspiring to a leadership position need to be able to arrange their schedules to manage heavy workloads. As interviewees highlight, this requires that the partner (typically the men) is willing to support the required role shift. In sum, we propose:

Proposition 1a: Traditional gender roles can push women into part-time jobs with fewer professional development opportunities.

A second implication of traditional gender roles is their influence on how women are perceived and perceive themselves, with interviewees describing women as tending to be shyer and less assertive in self-promotion than men in the business world.

There are many women with excellent education […] and [they] perform extremely well. But you can sense a difference in Switzerland. I believe this is closely linked to the ability to express oneself verbally, to self-confidence […] and […] the ability to assert oneself. (Interview 9)

Thus, women—and men with similar characteristics—are more likely to remain invisible or be overlooked when internal opportunities arise. Some interviewees noted that women do not always seek career opportunities and may voluntarily opt out due to a desire to care for their families. However, we argue that this individual pull factor is embedded in a national context that creates barriers to female careers through cultural expectations and structural hurdles that act as push factors. For example, traditional gender roles may imply that women, during key career-building years, face "a second life reality that often falls disproportionately on the shoulders of women, who very frequently carry the responsibility for the family and the mental load of family life" (Interview 9). Hence, they have less energy and time to invest in their careers, which may add to their relative invisibility. We propose:

Proposition 1b: Traditional gender roles decrease the visibility of women in the work environment.

Finally, interviewees from male-dominated industries (e.g., MEM) stated that their main concern is "to bring more women into the industry" (Interview 11). The findings suggest that women's participation in male-dominated industries is shaped by both push and pull factors. Educational choices are often framed as individual preferences, yet these may be influenced by cultural norms that discourage girls from entering male-dominated fields. Similarly, later in their careers, the rough tone and exclusionary dynamics of such work environments may act as push factors, deterring women from applying. As one interviewee noted: "When I [as a technical company] advertise a position for an administrative assistant, […] I may receive only about half as many applications as a similar position would get if advertised by an insurance company" (Interview 13). Consequently, the fewer women in a company, the fewer role models there are to encourage others to join. Hence, we propose:

Proposition 1c: Traditional gender roles can perpetuate male-dominated work environments.

In conclusion, traditional gender roles shape organisational structures and cultures, and without active intervention, they risk reinforcing a self-perpetuating cycle of gender inequality.

Insights into good practices

Our interviews also offer insights into good practices for addressing the gender equality challenges discussed in the previous subchapter. One approach for overcoming structural challenges—such as the prevalence of part-time work among women—is to offer flexible career paths not based on hierarchical advancement. This is particularly attractive for smaller companies, which typically have smaller teams, flatter hierarchies, and fewer traditional career paths than large corporations. The following statement illustrates this:

[Supporting careers] also means recognising the potential of our people and reflecting on what the next step could be for them. Career paths do not always have to be linear; someone might move from marketing into product management […]. There are many possible paths, and this requires a certain degree of creativity. (Interview 5)

Other interviewees suggested international rotations, where feasible, or leveraging the part-time potential of board roles to support women who wish to further develop their careers after the family phase. Crucially, such flexible career paths must be matched with equivalent financial recognition to constitute a genuine alternative to traditional hierarchical promotions. Therefore, we posit:

Proposition 2a: Offering flexible career paths helps bind and develop talents in smaller companies.

Other good practices identified in the interviews centre on inclusive leadership, understood as a leader's people orientation "that is based on equality and grounded in respect and a certain openness to cooperation [across and beyond organisational hierarchies]" (Interview 2). Interviewees note that while women are often expected to express interest in career advancement, they are also perceived as more reserved. Inclusive leadership, therefore, involves leaders proactively addressing employees' career interests in regular meetings. As one interviewee explained:

> *When [an internal] position is vacant, […] then there are always people who […] apply on their own initiative; and then we also take the list [of those who had previously expressed an interest in principle] into account. […] What I find very interesting is that quite often it is precisely those people who show interest when you approach them again directly.* (Interview 7)

Similarly, other interviewees reported that they are actively offering opportunities to try new tasks and grow into greater responsibility, even when individuals may think, "Oh, am I actually allowed to do that?" (Interview 6). They also emphasised the importance of providing "safe spaces where women do not have to measure themselves against men" (Interview 6). Leadership training and mentoring opportunities are seen as promising ways for women to exchange experiences and learn from one another. Therefore, we formulate:

Proposition 2b: Inclusive leadership can empower women to obtain equal opportunities.

Finally, a third avenue for fostering gender equality focuses on the challenge that companies with male-dominated environments face in attracting more women. One approach is to collaborate with schools, for example, through visits that allow children and young people to experience technical or mechanical occupations firsthand. Interviewees emphasise that traditional role perceptions form early at school, where teachers may be unaware of their own biases. As one interviewee noted, "when schools […] say, 'we will send the boys' […] we make it very clear: 'No, you also need to send the girls'" (Interview 7). Based on their experience, organising girls-only groups can also create safe spaces in which girls feel 'allowed' to engage with male-dominated occupations.

Moreover, it is crucial that women leaders—especially in male-dominated environments— serve as role models within and beyond the company. Internally, this involves making both their professional *and* parental roles visible, for example, by using flexible work arrangements, working remotely, or attending important school events. Externally, sharing good practices through industry-specific media provides an opportunity to serve as a role model for other companies. Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 2c: The cooperation with educational institutions and female role models can be a means for enhancing industry and employer attractiveness for women.

In sum, the findings suggest that, even in the face of ongoing challenges, a genuine willingness to engage with the issue enables companies to develop innovative and context-specific gender equality practices.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our results support the overarching hypothesis that traditional Swiss national culture shapes organisational practices and career trajectories in ways that restrain gender equality in Swiss SMEs and beyond (i.e. up to 1,000 employees).

In line with this hypothesis, we developed three propositions outlining how traditional gender roles challenge gender equality. Propositions 1a–1c show how culturally embedded expectations shape women's career choices, reduce their organisational visibility, and perpetuate male-dominated work environments. Together, these insights indicate that these challenges operate as interrelated push and pull factors, supporting earlier research on their interconnectedness (Kossek et al., 2017). Propositions 2a–2c highlight that targeted organisational practices, such as alternative career paths, inclusive leadership, and efforts to enhance employer attractiveness, can mitigate these dynamics, responding to calls for more practice-oriented research on gender equality solutions (Lau et al., 2023).

By offering equal opportunities while fostering workplace cultures and structures that address the demands traditional gender roles place on women, Swiss companies can play a pivotal role in mitigating push and pull factors of gender inequality in organisations embedded in traditional national cultures.

The research question asks about companies' challenges and practices for more gender equality. As we have seen, the challenges are also linked to national culture. The empirical practices identified in this study to address this are appropriate and pragmatic. This is also because they simply offer opportunities and thus do not fundamentally challenge existing cultural attitudes. Attitudes are neither good nor bad per se and are respected by these good practices.

We acknowledge that the generalisability of our findings is limited by the study's qualitative design and purposive sample. Future research could use quantitative methods to test the developed propositions, while further qualitative studies may examine in more depth how flexible career paths, inclusive leadership, and employer attractiveness can be designed across industries and company sizes.

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