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Tiziana Gaito^{*1}, Claude Meier²

^{*} Corresponding Author

¹ HWZ University of Applied Managerial Studies Zurich, Switzerland.

² HWZ University of Applied Managerial Studies Zurich, Switzerland.

Gender Equality in Tradition-Driven Swiss Companies: Challenges and Organisational Responses

Abstract

Gender inequality remains a challenge for many companies in Switzerland. This is particularly evident in women's representation in leadership positions. We start with the basic assumption that a traditional domestic cultural context is a major factor restraining gender equality in organisations. To examine challenges and good practices related to gender equality under this assumption, this study focuses on tradition-driven Swiss companies by using a qualitative approach. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with board members, CEOs, and HR leaders. This prompts the formulation of propositions concerning challenges and organisational responses in the context of traditional domestic culture. 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.

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1. 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 such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), along with national policies and regulations, guide organisational 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 (World Economic Forum, 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 (Federal Statistical Office, 2023). In this regard, the country ranks relatively high globally (17th out of 148) and above average in Europe (12th out of 40). However, pronounced gaps remain in pay and leadership positions, where Switzerland ranks 97th and 83rd globally, respectively (World Economic Forum, 2025). These differences suggest that elements of traditional domestic culture can pose obstacles to gender equality in organisations (Petropaki et al., 2022). Against this background, we formulate the following research question:

What challenges do tradition-driven 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, we conducted the study in Swiss companies with up to 750 employees. These organisations were selected because their workforces tend to be more oriented towards traditional domestic culture than those of large corporations, which usually employ a more mobile, international workforce and are subject to stricter gender equality regulations. We assume that the traditional cultural orientation of these companies provides the necessary context for analysing gender equality challenges and organisational responses. Insights from companies operating in more traditional domestic cultures may also support organisational learning in other countries and contexts.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Gender equality and gender equality management

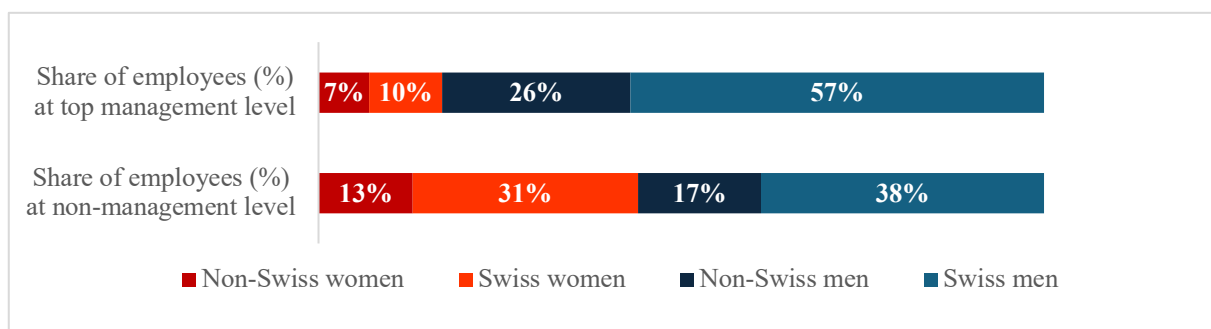
The term gender equality refers to men and women having “equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities, regardless of whether they are born female or male” (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.). This does *not* imply sameness, but that the “interests, needs, and priorities [...] are taken into consideration, thereby recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men” (European Institute for Gender Equality, 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). 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 (World Economic Forum, 2025). Further, the Gender Intelligence Report (Petropaki 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 among Swiss women than among non-Swiss women. Graph 1 indicates that Swiss women are more likely than non-Swiss 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.



Graph 1: Own compilation based on the data presented in Petropaki et al. (2022, p. 11), illustrating the percentage distribution of Swiss and non-Swiss women and men in top management and non-management positions in companies in Switzerland.

Although the Gender Intelligence Report does not make cross-country comparisons, its findings suggest that elements of traditional domestic culture and their extent of influence may play a role in shaping gender equality within Swiss organisations, helping to explain the differences in upward mobility between domestic and international women. Consequently, gender inequality may be more prevalent in companies with a predominantly domestic and, therefore, more traditional workforce in Switzerland, as well as in other countries with similar cultural characteristics (Petropaki et al., 2022).

The role of traditional cultural elements as push and pull factors of gender (in)equality

Kossek et al. (2017) describe two interrelated 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). Prior research indicates that traditional culture plays a key role in shaping gender inequality, as traditional values and patriarchal structures can influence organisational dynamics (Naidu & Chand, 2017). We argue that traditional gender roles play an important part in shaping Switzerland's domestic culture. Switzerland is typically portrayed as a country 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). For example, in 2023, 24% of respondents still believed that men

should primarily provide the family income, while 35% believed that women were better suited to caring for young children (Federal Statistical Office, 2025). Although gender equality is generally valued in society and traditional gender role attitudes have declined over time, this data indicates that such norms still influence gender inequality, particularly after women give birth to their first child (Bornatici et al., 2021).

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. In this setting, *traditional gender role expectations* 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 women are perceived by supervisors as less suitable for leadership roles. At the same time, organisational practices can serve as positive pull factors when workplaces proactively support women’s careers (Kossek et al., 2017).

Hence, this study is rooted in the basic assumption that a company's culture poses greater challenges to gender equality and equal career progression when it is more closely aligned with the traditional culture of the country in which it operates. Furthermore, we posit that tradition-driven Swiss companies are disproportionately affected by challenges related to gender equality, given that their workforces tend to be more domestically oriented than those of larger entities like (international) corporations. As Switzerland ranks above the European average in the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2025), yet still exhibits notable gender disparities in leadership roles, it is reasonable to assume that these challenges are particularly pronounced in tradition-driven Swiss companies.

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). Consequently, the responses of tradition-driven Swiss companies to tackle the issue, which is particularly prevalent among them, promise to be good, relevant practices. This is why we selected these companies as our empirical context (see Chapter 3). Moreover, existing research on gender equality has predominantly focused on larger corporations and enterprises, leaving companies with distinct features comparatively underexplored. This is particularly relevant given that some companies have limited resources and therefore engage less systematically with gender equality (Böhlen & Hirschi, 2018; Woodhams & Lupton, 2006).

3. Methodology and Data

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

Sampling of interviewees and interview guide

This study focuses on non-publicly listed Swiss companies with up to 750 employees (see Table 1). 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 (State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, 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

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. At the same time, this industry has a comparatively low glass ceiling index (Petropaki et al., 2022). This industry is therefore a particularly interesting case to explore the challenges of and organisational responses to gender inequality. 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 interview guide 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 basic assumption concerning the role of traditional elements of domestic 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 the data analysis, we drew on Mayring's (2015) approach to qualitative content analysis. Based on the thematic blocks of the interview guide, the main researcher initially developed a codebook comprising three deductive main categories, representing the overarching themes of the analysis. These main categories were subsequently differentiated through inductively derived sub-codes. These sub-codes were identified during the analysis process using atlas.ti and through close engagement with the empirical material. To enhance coding reliability, two researchers were involved in the coding process, and emerging inductive sub-codes were regularly discussed to ensure a shared understanding (guided by Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, Koole, &

Kappelman, 2006). Similar sub-codes were subsequently compared and consolidated, resulting in a final coding scheme comprising three deductive main categories and 36 inductively derived sub-codes.

The main researcher then systematically analysed and interpreted the coded data material in relation to the research question. Particular attention was given to codes that occurred frequently in the data and/or were considered particularly relevant to answering the research question. This enabled the identification and further interpretation of the most prevalent and research-relevant gender equality issues in tradition-driven Swiss companies. Based on these findings, we developed propositions that further specify the results in relation to the basic assumption and the identified solutions.

4. Results

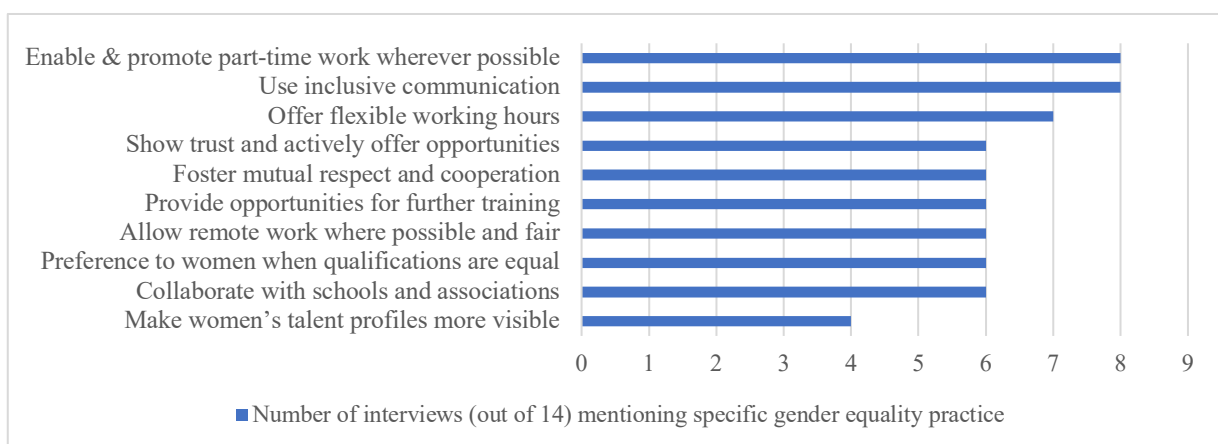
Overview of implemented practices

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. Graph 2 provides an overview of the most frequently mentioned practices in the interviews.



Graph 2: Own compilation based on data analysis, illustrating gender equality practices identified in the interviews and showing the number of interviews (out of 14) in which each coded practice was mentioned.

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 numerous families. As one interviewee noted, many tradition-driven Swiss

companies 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, numerous women—especially those with children—work part-time, driven by structural hurdles, such as limited access to flexible, 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 across all roles would require 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 various 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 shy 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 to care for their families. However, we argue that this individual pull factor is embedded in a country’s domestic 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 to overcoming structural challenges—such as the prevalence of part-time work among women—is to offer flexible career paths that are 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 various 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 noticeable 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.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Our results provide insights into the challenges of gender (in)equality and the organisational responses to it in tradition-driven Swiss companies. We selected these companies based on the assumption that more traditional domestic cultural elements, particularly traditional gender roles, restrain gender equality and equal career progression. Based on the empirical data gathered and analysed, 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). These organisational practices are part of a process of organisational learning. In the first step of the process, the practices are usually simply ideas that are contributed by individual internal leaders or employees or even come from outside (e.g. from the visit of external workshops). If, in the subsequent step, a company decides to implement such ideas organisationally—and thus in the form of new practices—new knowledge enters the company and gets absorbed. The new knowledge is then combined with existing internal knowledge. Finally, this combination leads to an increase of the organisational knowledge base (Schmid, 2015). In the specific case of practices related to gender equality, it is reasonable to expect that organisational learning will lead to more cultural openness in companies. The new knowledge gained through the organisational practices mentioned in the propositions 2a-2b and beyond, can be shared and developed through e.g. the cooperation with educational institutions and/or female role models (proposition 2c). Female role models may be a strong catalyst for developing the capabilities needed to achieve (more) gender equality within a company. Other ways to encourage appropriate practices and organisational learning in this context include leadership

training, raising awareness, and peer-to-peer exchanges between companies. The latter can be conducted within issue-specific networks and associations.

Overall, our empirical investigation provided valuable insights into our research question, which examined the challenges and practices of tradition-driven Swiss companies in achieving greater gender equality. The insights revealed that these good practices can play a pivotal role in mitigating the push and pull factors of gender inequality in organisations that are more influenced by traditional domestic cultures. These practices promote organisational learning and thus the absorption and creation of new knowledge regarding gender equality. They also increase cultural openness. It is also notable that cultural attitudes are not inherently good or bad and are respected by these good practices.

The generalisability of our findings beyond the Swiss context is limited by the qualitative design. Additionally, purposive sampling via the Advance network may overrepresent organisations already engaged in gender equality. Future research could apply quantitative methods to test the proposed relationships, while further qualitative studies could explore how flexible career paths, inclusive leadership, and employer attractiveness can be implemented across industries and company sizes. Moreover, we encourage validation of the findings in countries with both similar and differing cultural contexts.

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