JOURNAL OF ACCOUNTING RESEARCH, UTILITY FINANCE AND DIGITAL ASSETS (JARUDA) | 2962-973X
Website : https://jaruda.org/index_php/go/index | Volume 5 No. 3 (2027)

Empowering Women In The Workplace: The Role Of Strategic Human Resource Management In Inclusive Organizational Growth

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Received: 01/09/2026 | **Revised:** 10/09/2026 | **Accepted:** 26/09/2026 | **Published:** 24/11/2026

Abstract

Women's workplace empowerment has become an indispensable dimension of organizational legitimacy, human-capital optimization, and sustainable growth. Yet persistent disparities in employment access, managerial progression, compensation, care responsibilities, and executive influence expose the limitations of conventional diversity interventions. This article examines how strategic human resource management (SHRM) can transform gender inclusion from an aspirational corporate value into an operationally measurable institutional capability. Adopting a critical, integrative review of academic scholarship and secondary evidence from the World Economic Forum, World Bank, International Labour Organization, and McKinsey–LeanIn.Org, it evaluates gender-responsive recruitment, equitable reward architectures, career sponsorship, flexible work, leadership accountability, and people analytics. Recent findings demonstrate that global gender parity remains incomplete and that organizational advancement pathways reproduce gendered exclusion. The article proposes an integrated framework connecting structural diagnosis, policy redesign, managerial accountability, and outcome evaluation. It concludes that sustained empowerment requires redistributing organizational opportunity, authority, recognition, and resources—not merely increasing numerical representation.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment; Strategic Human Resource Management; Gender Equity; Inclusive Growth; Intersectionality; Talent Analytics; Pay Equity; Leadership Pipeline.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary organization is increasingly evaluated not only by its financial performance but also by the fairness of the institutions through which opportunity is allocated. Women's empowerment consequently constitutes a substantive concern of strategic governance rather than a peripheral exercise in corporate social responsibility. It encompasses occupational agency, material security, voice, advancement, and meaningful participation in decisions governing work. Strategic human resource management (SHRM) is uniquely positioned to institutionalize these dimensions because it shapes recruitment, performance assessment, remuneration, learning, succession, and employment relations [1, 2]. This study asks how gender-responsive SHRM may dismantle structural obstacles while contributing to inclusive organizational development. It argues that empowerment becomes durable when equity goals are embedded in core business systems and verified through disaggregated performance indicators, not when they depend on episodic awareness programmes. Representation, equality, equity, and empowerment are related but non-identical constructs. Representation addresses women's numerical presence; formal equality establishes ostensibly equivalent rules; equity interrogates unequal starting conditions and discriminatory effects; empowerment denotes effective agency over occupational trajectories and institutional decisions. A workforce may achieve representational balance while retaining unequal access to strategic assignments, sponsorship, or authority. Accordingly, the relevant evaluative question is not simply how many women an organization employs, but whether women possess comparable resources and decision-making power. The resource-based view of the firm conceptualizes valuable and difficult-to-imitate human capabilities as potential sources of sustained advantage [1]. SHRM extends this reasoning by aligning staffing, incentives, development, and employment practices with organizational objectives [2]. Applied critically, this framework suggests that excluding

women from advancement represents both an injustice and a misallocation of institutional talent. However, claims that diversity invariably produces superior profits must be avoided: observed associations may reflect industry, governance, selection, and other confounding influences.

GENDERED ORGANIZATIONS AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Acker's account of gendered organizations reveals how ostensibly neutral job structures may presume workers unencumbered by disproportionate caregiving obligations [3]. Ely and Meyerson similarly contend that substantive organizational change requires maintaining explicit attention to gendered power relations rather than translating systemic problems into individual deficiencies [4]. This perspective challenges "fix the women" interventions that privilege confidence-building over promotion-rule reform. Intersectionality further cautions against representing women as a homogeneous category. Race, caste, disability, class, migration status, sexuality, age, and geographic location can interact with gender to structure unequal employment experiences [5]. A credible SHRM architecture therefore disaggregates results without compromising confidentiality and examines whether ostensibly universal policies distribute benefits unevenly. The World Economic Forum reports that the overall global gender gap was 69.2% closed in 2026 across 145 economies; its Economic Participation and Opportunity dimension stood at 61.7%, while projected overall parity remained approximately 120 years distant at the prevailing long-run rate [6]. These composite index results should not be interpreted as women receiving 69.2% of men's wages or as a direct estimate of workplace discrimination. The World Bank's 2026 assessment found that women possess roughly two-thirds of the economic legal rights enjoyed by men, and that laws promoting women's economic opportunities are, on average, only about half enforced [7]. Legal entitlements and their practical implementation are therefore separate policy challenges. In the International Labour Organization's 2023 global estimates, 708 million women, compared with 40 million men, were outside the labour force because of unpaid care responsibilities [8]. At the firm level, the 2025 McKinsey–LeanIn.Org study of corporate America reported women in 29% of C-suite roles and 93 women promoted to first-level manager for every 100 men; its published comparison for women of color was 74 per 100 men [9]. These are sample-specific pipeline measures, not globally representative promotion probabilities.

Table 1. Selected indicators (different populations, definitions, and reference years; not directly comparable).

Indicator	Reported finding	Source
Global parity index, 2026	69.2% closed	[6]
Economic opportunity index, 2026	61.7% closed	[6]
Women excluded by unpaid care, 2023	708 million	[8]
Women in surveyed U.S. C-suites, 2025	29%	[9]

Recruitment constitutes the first institutional gateway through which occupational inequalities are reproduced or corrected. Gender-neutral vacancy advertisements, explicit job-relevant selection criteria, standardized interviews, accessible application systems, and mixed assessment panels can reduce discretionary evaluation. Organizations should review applicant-to-interview and interview-to-offer ratios, adjusted for role family and seniority, to identify disparities requiring investigation. Such indicators flag possible inequities; they do not independently establish discriminatory intent. Competency-based hiring may be particularly consequential when informal networks, prestige markers, or interrupted employment histories obscure actual capability. Selection procedures should distinguish genuinely essential experience from arbitrary continuity expectations and should recognize transferable skills acquired through formal work, entrepreneurship, volunteering, and career transitions. Flexible working options ought to be specified at advertisement stage where operationally feasible, rather than negotiated through opaque managerial discretion.

EQUITABLE COMPENSATION AND PERFORMANCE ARCHITECTURE

Compensation equity requires more than nominally equal pay policies. HR departments should evaluate base salary, bonuses, equity awards, starting offers, performance scores, and promotion-linked increases within comparable work categories. A robust audit controls for legitimate job factors while separately examining whether occupational segregation and unequal access to premium assignments reproduce disparity. Statistical adjustment is analytically useful, but overadjustment for variables already shaped by discrimination may conceal inequity. Performance management must likewise move beyond subjective judgments of "executive presence," cultural fit, and presumed mobility. Behaviorally anchored criteria, calibration committees, documented evidence, and appeal

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procedures can constrain unexamined bias. Equity reviews should test whether identical behaviors are described differently across employees and whether invisible organizational labor—such as mentoring, committee service, and inclusion work—is acknowledged instead of disproportionately assigned to women without reward.

STRATEGIC TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND SUCCESSION

Leadership pipelines must be governed as distributive systems. Organizations should publish promotion expectations, nominate diverse pools for stretch assignments, and provide high-quality sponsorship rather than relying exclusively on optional mentoring. Sponsors use positional influence to secure visibility, resources, and advancement opportunities; mentors principally provide advice. Auditing access to both is essential to ensuring that informal affiliation does not determine who becomes "leadership material."

THE BROKEN RUNG AND ORGANIZATIONAL PROGRESSION

The managerial transition is a critical inflection point because early inequalities compound throughout the leadership hierarchy. The McKinsey–LeanIn.Org findings show a marked narrowing between women's entry-level representation and their executive share; the first-step promotion differential identifies a concrete arena for intervention [9]. Organizations should compare eligible populations with actual promotions, isolate differences by business unit, and assess whether nominations disproportionately arise from already powerful networks. A promotion gap is a diagnostic outcome, not proof of any single mechanism. Effective succession planning pairs transparent readiness standards with access to profit-and-loss responsibility, cross-functional rotations, executive exposure, and high-visibility transformation projects. HR should verify that women are not concentrated in lower-authority staff functions while revenue-generating positions remain male-dominated. Leadership-development success is best assessed through subsequent appointment, authority, retention, and pay progression rather than programme attendance alone.

CARE INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT

Unpaid care is a structural constraint on workforce participation and continuity. The ILO estimate of 708 million women outside the labour force because of care responsibilities underscores why employee empowerment cannot be reduced to individual motivation [8]. Affordable childcare, adequate parental leave, predictable schedules, returnship programmes, lactation support, and genuine caregiver flexibility can reduce the penalties associated with reproductive and family responsibilities. Policy access must extend, where feasible and lawful, to shift-based, contingent, and lower-paid workers. Flexible work can become a double-edged instrument if employees who use it are excluded from challenging assignments or judged insufficiently committed. Organizations should therefore monitor the "flexibility stigma," maintain consistent performance standards, and evaluate whether hybrid participation affects visibility, promotion, or remuneration. Men's equitable access to caregiving leave also matters: normalizing shared care responsibilities can attenuate assumptions that only women will interrupt their careers.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, DIGNITY, AND EMPLOYEE VOICE

A genuinely inclusive workplace guarantees freedom from harassment, retaliation, stereotyping, and humiliating treatment. Confidential reporting channels, independent investigation, protection against retaliation, and consistent disciplinary action are indispensable. Human resources should evaluate employee trust in procedures alongside complaint prevalence; low complaint volume cannot automatically be taken as evidence of safety because fear and disbelief can suppress reporting.

INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP AS A GOVERNANCE CAPABILITY

Inclusive leadership requires managers to distribute information, recognize expertise, invite dissent, and credit contributions equitably. Yet leadership rhetoric is insufficient when structural incentives reward short-term output while ignoring developmental fairness. Gender-related targets should therefore be integrated into executive scorecards with context-sensitive accountability, while avoiding mechanistic quotas detached from applicable law or the organization's qualified talent pool. Boards and executive committees can institutionalize oversight through periodic reviews of hiring, promotion, attrition, grievances, and remuneration. Policy credibility increases when leaders explain both progress and unresolved disparities. Equity governance should protect privacy, enable independent escalation, and maintain employee participation in redesigning procedures. The aim is accountability for systems and conduct, not the stigmatization of particular employees.

DIGITAL HRM, PEOPLE ANALYTICS, AND ALGORITHMIC FAIRNESS

Digital hiring platforms, algorithm-assisted screening, talent dashboards, and predictive attrition models offer opportunities for systematic equity monitoring. Their deployment, however, creates risks of proxy

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discrimination, opaque scoring, biased training data, and intrusive surveillance. A responsible SHRM strategy demands documentation of model purpose, human oversight, validation across relevant demographic groups, contestability of automated decisions, and data minimization. Analytics must be anchored in a defensible measurement model. For example, a useful promotion-equity indicator compares promotions with the pool of eligible employees, stratified by grade and function; raw promotion counts alone are misleading. Further indicators include adjusted pay differentials, assignment-access rates, parental-leave return rates, regretted attrition, inclusion scores, and grievance resolution times. Every metric should have a designated owner, denominator, review frequency, and corrective escalation threshold.

INTERSECTIONAL INCLUSION AND GLOBAL CONTEXT

Global enterprises must reconcile universal principles of dignity with varying employment laws, informal labor markets, household arrangements, and cultural contexts. Measures that benefit highly educated office professionals may exclude domestic workers, manufacturing staff, platform workers, or women in precarious employment. Intersectional review foregrounds the groups least likely to benefit from conventional programmes [5]. In particular, organizational equity should be assessed across job security, accessibility, income, geographic location, and participation in decision-making. A credible framework comprises five interlocking institutional phases. First, diagnose disparities through confidential workforce audits and participatory consultation. Second, redesign the processes controlling entry, pay, performance, career mobility, flexible work, and protection from harassment. Third, allocate executive accountability, financial resources, and professional ownership to implementation. Fourth, monitor outcomes through intersectionally disaggregated metrics with appropriate safeguards. Fifth, institutionalize iterative learning, including independent evaluation of unintended consequences.

These stages form a continuous governance cycle, not a finite diversity campaign. Organizations should establish baseline indicators before implementing reforms, identify realistic and legally appropriate objectives, and measure change longitudinally. They should also compare policy take-up with tangible employment outcomes. For example, high mentoring participation without improved access to line-management positions may indicate activity without structural transformation.

INCLUSIVE ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH: MECHANISMS AND LIMITS

Women's empowerment can support growth through expanded talent utilization, improved retention, broader problem-framing, and stronger institutional legitimacy. It may also cultivate trust and engagement by signaling procedural justice. Nevertheless, organizational performance is multidimensional, and gender-diversity correlations cannot automatically be treated as causal proof of profitability. A scientifically responsible argument identifies mechanisms, tests alternative explanations, and distinguishes economic benefits from the independent ethical obligation to secure equal opportunity. The strategic value of SHRM lies in complementarity: equitable hiring loses impact if promotion remains opaque; paid leave is weakened by caregiver stigma; pay audits are insufficient if women lack access to high-value roles. Thus, sustainable organizational growth depends less on isolated initiatives than on coherent institutional architectures designed to distribute opportunity fairly across the employee life cycle.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Organizations should prioritize transparent progression criteria, auditable remuneration structures, high-quality sponsorship, accessible caregiving provisions, trusted anti-harassment mechanisms, manager accountability, and periodic impact assessments. Governments and sectoral bodies can reinforce these measures by strengthening enforcement, affordable care infrastructure, pay transparency, and protections for precarious workers. Strategic alliances among employers, employee representatives, educators, and policymakers can improve the continuity between women's education, labor-force participation, and leadership representation. A phased implementation strategy increases the likelihood that gender-responsive HR reform becomes institutionally embedded. During the first ninety days, the HR function should assemble a cross-functional governance group, document existing recruitment and promotion processes, audit available workforce metrics, and consult employees confidentially. This diagnostic stage should identify definitional inconsistencies—for example, whether promotion rates use all employees or only promotion-eligible staff as the denominator—and distinguish legal obligations from voluntary improvement initiatives. Over the subsequent six months, leadership should pilot standardized selection rubrics, explicit succession criteria, pay-equity reviews, and sponsorship programmes in selected business units. Each pilot requires a documented theory of change, a measurement baseline, clear responsibility, employee feedback channels, and a procedure for assessing unintended consequences. Where workforce data are sufficiently robust, comparisons should distinguish changes attributable to workforce composition from within-grade differences in treatment.

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In the following annual cycle, organizations should integrate successful interventions into managerial performance objectives and operating budgets. Reviews may track women's participation in revenue-accountable roles, promotion rates among eligible staff, compensation differences within comparable positions, use and career effects of flexible work, and departures following family leave. Reporting should communicate progress responsibly: aggregate improvements can coexist with regression among more marginalized employee groups, and small subgroup counts may require suppression to safeguard privacy. The framework should be governed by procedural fairness as well as numerical progress. Employees need accessible appeal pathways, managers need practical training on assessment consistency, and independent oversight should examine whether reforms unintentionally create new barriers. Importantly, metrics should function as prompts for investigation and institutional learning, not as automatic judgments about individuals. This adaptive implementation model makes inclusion a sustained managerial discipline capable of surviving leadership changes, economic contraction, and shifts in corporate priorities.

DISCUSSION: FROM SYMBOLIC COMPLIANCE TO STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION

The evidence reveals a pronounced disjunction between formal recognition of gender equality and its practical realization. Although aggregate parity indicators have improved, 2026 data continue to reveal significant shortcomings in economic opportunity and institutional enforcement [6, 7]. Corporate promotion data similarly illustrate how talent pipelines can narrow long before executive selection occurs [9]. These patterns suggest that an inclusion strategy focused solely on senior appointments is structurally incomplete. This review also emphasizes a conceptual distinction between empowerment as institutional access and empowerment as realized agency. Policies may formally exist without being used, and participation may increase without corresponding authority. A consequential SHRM agenda must investigate whose careers are being advanced, whose labor remains undervalued, and whose voice influences organizational decisions. Evaluation should be attentive to both distributive outcomes and everyday experiences of dignity.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The present article relies exclusively on secondary sources that differ in geographic scope, sampling, measurement, and reporting year. The World Economic Forum's national parity index, the World Bank's legal assessments, the ILO's labor-force estimates, and McKinsey's employer survey should not be combined into a single causal or statistical model. Future studies should employ longitudinal employer-level datasets, intersectional wage-decomposition methods, quasi-experimental designs evaluating specific HR interventions, and qualitative interviews that capture employee agency and informal organizational norms.

CONCLUSION

Women's workplace empowerment must be understood as a strategic reconfiguration of organizational opportunity, resources, recognition, and power. The persistence of gaps in economic participation, employment continuity, first-line promotion, and senior leadership demonstrates that nominal policy equality remains insufficient. Strategic Human Resource Management offers an institutional mechanism for translating equity principles into transparent recruitment, defensible compensation, equitable developmental opportunities, care-supportive employment, responsive employee relations, and accountable leadership.

The central contribution of this article is to position gender inclusion as a continuously governed organizational capability rather than a discretionary programme. Sustainable progress depends on integrating equity into the architecture of employment decisions, measuring substantive outcomes, and correcting structures that systematically disadvantage women. Inclusive organizational growth is most credible when women are not merely present in the workforce but exercise genuine influence over its future.

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