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Crying more than the bereaved: women's lived experiences of equality and polychronous gender diversity management in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Although gender diversity management (GDM) practices in the so-called Global North have seen success, gender equality remains elusive, especially in culturally complex Global South regions such as the Middle East, in which these practices often overlook local disparities. This study examines women's lived experiences of diversity and equality in two public-sector higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, employing Amartya Sen's capabilities approach to explore the alignment between organisational policies and women's substantive freedoms to achieve valued outcomes. Based on semi-structured interviews with 34 women, the findings reveal three context-specific gaps in Saudi Arabia's GDM practices: (1) a disconnect between organisational policies and women's lived realities, (2) inequitable access to opportunities and favouritism towards women with privileged networks, and (3) superficial policy advocacy and implementation that fails to challenge systemic barriers. To address these challenges, this study introduces polychronous GDM, a framework that operationalises the capabilities approach by advocating flexible, phased human resource management (HRM) interventions responsive to immediate and evolving inequalities while sensitive to local sociocultural and institutional contexts. Situated within international debates on gender equality, this study advances the strategic HRM literature by critiquing one-size-fits-all GDM and the power dynamics perpetuating workplace inequalities, proposing polychronous GDM as a transformative, context-sensitive framework for advancing gender equality in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

Capabilities approach; diversity; equality; global south; lived experiences; polychronous gender diversity management

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Introduction

Organisations are increasingly adopting equality and fairness practices to foster inclusive workplaces, ensuring equal participation and treatment for all employees, particularly women (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011; Syed et al., 2010; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012; Umeh et al., 2023). Gender diversity management (GDM), a core component of strategic human resource management (HRM), includes initiatives such as gender-sensitive recruitment, gender-blind selection, and anti-discrimination programmes aimed at tackling structural inequalities (Fine et al., 2020; Georgiadou & Syed, 2021; Smolović Jones et al., 2021). Frequently shaped by legal mandates and supra-governmental policies promoting equality (UNDP, 2020), these initiatives have advanced gender parity in higher-income countries. However, the applicability of such practices in emerging countries, where sociocultural dynamics are distinct and deeply entrenched, remains underexplored (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2023; Dasgupta & Sánchez-Mejorada, 2018).

This study addresses this critical gap by examining the applicability and effectiveness of GDM practices in culturally complex emerging countries, using Saudi Arabia as a case study. Saudi Arabia exemplifies the broader challenges faced by many Global South countries. Despite its high Human Development Index (HDI), which signals significant economic opportunities for women, its low Gender Inequality Index (GII) reflects persistent structural barriers to empowerment (UNDP, 2020). Socioeconomic divides, rural–urban disparities, and sector-specific constraints exacerbate these challenges (Umeh et al., 2023). Through the lens of Amartya Sen's capabilities approach (CA), the research investigates how women's lived experiences and material realities inform the development and adaptation of GDM practices. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the central research question: *How can the CA inform the implementation of GDM practices considering the diverse inequality experiences women face?* Focusing on two public-sector higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, this study provides insights into the intersectional complexities of the country's sociocultural landscape and offers practical implications for advancing gender diversity.

Across the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in Saudi Arabia, gender equality efforts encounter significant resistance from entrenched sociocultural and religious norms, limited institutional capacity, and organisational inertia (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2023; Ganji et al., 2023; Górska et al., 2022). Western-centred GDM frameworks, often ill-suited to local contexts, exacerbate these challenges by overlooking critical cultural, institutional, and organisational specificities (Alhejji et al., 2018; Koburtay et al., 2020). For example, gender-segregated workplaces and

patriarchal family expectations frequently undermine practices that thrive in more liberal sociopolitical environments (Schlumberger, 2021; Syed et al., 2010). This disconnect between global frameworks and local realities highlights the urgent need for context-sensitive approaches to gender diversity. The CA offers a compelling framework to tackle these challenges. Unlike compliance-driven models, it prioritises substantive freedoms—the real opportunities individuals have to achieve lives they value—thereby shifting focus to the lived experiences of individuals and systemic barriers embedded in institutional structures (Sen, 1993). Emphasising inclusivity and adaptability, the CA provides a nuanced lens for revealing and challenging the multi-faceted nature of gender inequality (Alkire et al., 2015; Nussbaum, 1999).

Building on the CA, this study advances *polychronous gender diversity management* (PGDM) as a contextually grounded elaboration of existing diversity and gender-planning frameworks (Kabeer, 2010; Moser, 2012; Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Syed & Özbilgin, 2019). PGDM extends earlier models that recognised temporal flexibility and multi-level responsiveness by capturing how women's lived experiences reveal polychronous equality practices, where short-term procedural remedies, medium-term adaptive reforms, and long-term structural transformations coexist (Ganji et al., 2023; Koburtay et al., 2020). Rather than proposing a new theory, PGDM integrates the temporal adaptability of existing models with the CA's focus on agency and conversion factors (Alkire et al., 2015; Sen, 1999). It demonstrates how equality strategies evolve in response to shifting institutional and sociocultural constraints, offering a regionally informed, temporally layered understanding of GDM aligned with both global HRM principles and local realities (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012; Umeh et al., 2023).

This study makes four contributions to the literature. First, it critiques the one-size-fits-all approach of traditional strategic HRM practices, demonstrating their limited applicability in addressing the heterogeneous experiences of women in Global South organisations (Aldossari et al., 2023; Hennekam et al., 2017). It builds on existing research in the Global South (Ganji et al., 2023; Koburtay et al., 2020; Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011; Syed et al., 2010; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012; Umeh et al., 2023) by emphasising women's experiential insights to explore the tensions between organisational and institutional policies and international fairness norms.

Second, the study extends conventional understandings of inequality by exploring covert dimensions of power at the intersections of gender, organisational hierarchies, and cultural norms (Allagui & Al-Najjar, 2018). It offers a deeper perspective of systemic inequalities, particularly intergender and intragender dynamics, that constrain gender equality in

the workplace (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011; Georgiadou & Syed, 2021; Smolović Jones et al., 2021).

Third, it bridges the gap between policy and practice in GDM by proposing phased and tailored interventions that prioritise behavioural and cultural transformation (Ayentimi et al., 2020; Hennekam et al., 2017). These interventions address immediate issues such as representation gaps and long-term systemic changes such as reshaping organisational culture and dismantling biases (Allagui & Al-Najjar, 2018).

Finally, this study extends existing diversity management frameworks by advancing PGDM as an empirically grounded, temporally adaptive model that operationalises Sen's CA in the Saudi institutional context. Unlike traditional GDM frameworks, PGDM integrates short-term corrective measures with sustained efforts to tackle temporal and evolving dimensions of inequality (Alkire et al., 2015; Nussbaum, 1999; Sen, 1993). Thus, it aligns global HRM principles (e.g. the HDI and GII) with localised realities, providing an adaptable, context-sensitive approach to fostering equality and inclusion.

Theoretical framework

Sen's CA

The CA offers a framework for understanding inequality and its causes, presenting a universally applicable, culturally sensitive, and contextually adaptable perspective for evaluating individuals' potential functioning, desires, and intrinsic values (Pressman & Summerfield, 2008). Sen argues that processes and human relationships significantly influence well-being, advocating for basic necessities such as nourishment, healthcare, literacy, communication, community engagement, and dignity (Sen, 1999). At the heart of the CA lies the distinction between *functionings*—what individuals actually achieve—and *capabilities*—the real opportunities they have reason to value. Capabilities represent the substantive freedoms to pursue valued goals, yet these may be constrained by social, cultural, or institutional factors that limit the conversion of resources into achieved functionings (Sen, 1985). This distinction is pivotal for evaluating well-being and equality, particularly in organisational settings in which equal access to opportunities often fails to translate into equitable outcomes because of structural and contextual barriers.

The CA highlights four key concepts relevant to gender equality, diversity management, and HRM. The central idea is *conversion factors*: contextual elements that shape how individuals transform resources into meaningful outcomes (Robeyns, 2016). For instance, women's access to flexible working arrangements often depends on leaders' attitudes and societal norms (Johnson & Smith, 2016). In emerging countries, flexible

work policies frequently fail to achieve equitable outcomes because of cultural expectations of women's domestic roles (Hennekam et al., 2017). Hence, the CA bridges policy intent and lived realities, emphasising how factors such as labour markets, legislation, management practices, and societal values shape equality outcomes.

The CA also emphasises processes and human relationships (termed *interwovenness*), suggesting that achieving gender equality involves recognising the multiple actors within GDM practices, including men and women in leadership, peers, familial actors, and social networks (Alhejji et al., 2018). For example, mentoring initiatives that involve senior male leaders as allies for women have shown positive results when such efforts are coupled with accountability measures and cultural shifts (Johnson & Smith, 2016; Nussbaum, 1999). These processes are dynamic and interactive, requiring collaborative efforts between individuals and organisational structures to foster inclusive environments that enhance collective well-being.

Furthermore, the CA highlights human diversity, challenging the *fallacy of sharedness:* the mistaken belief in the homogeneity of women's needs and experiences. Sen (1999) asserts that tailored, context-sensitive solutions are essential, as women's diverse identities and circumstances demand equitable policies. Uniform diversity policies often overlook cultural and contextual differences, limiting their effectiveness (Hennekam et al., 2017). In many parts of the Middle East, where extended families are central to caregiving and support, policies focused on nuclear family models may exclude those responsible for multi-generational support and care. Likewise, in African and East and South Asian contexts, policies rooted in Western individualism may clash with community-oriented cultures, reducing their relevance (Umeh et al., 2024). Advancing gender equality requires rejecting one-size-fits-all approaches and addressing distinct barriers without assuming shared needs.

Finally, the CA emphasises *agency* (Sen, 1999), which, as understood within the CA, entails the ability of individuals to pursue goals they have reason to value. Within organisational contexts, this concept provides a lens for exploring how women navigate, challenge, or support GDM initiatives. For instance, collective agency within women's networks has been instrumental in driving organisational policy changes such as revising promotion criteria to reduce biases (Seierstad et al., 2021). This reinforces the argument that agency is not only a marker of individual empowerment but also a driver of systemic change.

Studies have highlighted various aspects of the CA. For example, Nussbaum (1999) emphasises a list of what she views as the ten core human functioning capabilities for the achievement of flourishing, highlighting overlooked gendered needs in traditional development.

Alkire et al. (2015) introduce the Multidimensional Poverty Index for assessing well-being beyond income. Robeyns (2016) advances capability evaluations, proposing 'limitarianism' to curb extreme inequalities and promote equality-focused interventions.

However, the CA has drawn criticism for its limited list of capabilities (Pressman & Summerfield, 2008) and insufficient engagement with cultural variations in defining well-being (Naz, 2020; Robeyns, 2016). Some argue that it inadequately reflects the diverse cultural conceptions of a good life (Binder, 2019). However, through the CA, Sen (1999) critiques social and institutional factors, including cultural practices, that perpetuate unfreedom and inequality and calls for reforms that expand real freedoms, dismantle discriminatory barriers, and spur institutional change to overcome cultural constraints on capabilities. Therefore, the CA's emphasis on adaptability and context—and, subsequently, context-sensitive policies—makes it invaluable for addressing inequalities in organisations. Aligning diversity management with localised workforce needs, it mitigates the perception of imposed global standards (Alkire et al., 2015). Its foundational role in indices such as the HDI and GII (ulHaq, 1996) reinforces its relevance for advancing gender inequalities.

Reframing the disparities in GDM between the global North and South

Diversity management fosters equitable workplaces valuing differences across gender, race/ethnicity, class, and ability (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). A key element is GDM, which challenges structural and cultural barriers to equality. Central to GDM is intersectionality, which examines how overlapping identities such as gender, race, and class exacerbate inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991). Addressing these intersecting barriers requires culturally adaptive frameworks, as sociopolitical norms shape GDM practices in both the Global North and the Global South (Noon, 2018). Here, we use 'Global North' and 'Global South' to highlight institutional and cultural disparities, not as definitive or rigid categories. These socioeconomic constructs emphasise regional inequalities without conflating geography or culture (Umeh et al., 2023), underscoring the need for tailored diversity frameworks attuned to specific sociohistorical contexts. Indeed, as Connell (2005) argues, these binaries should be applied cautiously, avoiding reductive framings in global diversity management. The diffusion of diversity and equality frameworks from the Global North to the Global South has drawn sustained critique in the postcolonial period. Western-centred models of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and HRM, while normatively progressive, often reproduce epistemic and structural hierarchies by universalising Euro-American concepts (Connell, 2007; Nkomo, 2011). Therefore, rather than treating

the Global North and South as fixed binaries, this study views them as relational constructs reflecting unequal flows of ideas, capital, and legitimacy within global HRM scholarship and practice (Umeh et al., 2023).

Within the Global South, experiences of inequality are far from uniform. Matrilineal inheritance systems in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, enhance women's economic agency, while patrilineal traditions in West Africa and the Middle East restrict it (Ayentimi et al., 2020; Bangura & Larbi, 2006). In South Asia, caste and class intersect with gender to produce distinctive hierarchies, whereas in Latin America, political volatility and informal economies create unique capability constraints (Dasgupta & Sánchez-Mejorada, 2018). Recognising such diversity prevents essentialising the Global South and underscores the need for polychronous, context-sensitive approaches that integrate intersectional and postcolonial insights into HRM theory and practice.

While GDM frameworks have achieved notable advancements in the Global North, their transferability to the Global South is limited by contextual mismatches (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2023; Dasgupta & Sánchez-Mejorada, 2018). These approaches often fail to address the sociocultural and institutional specificities in diverse contexts (Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011). Recent studies emphasise the importance of aligning diversity strategies with cultural and religious norms in regions such as the Middle East (Ganji et al., 2023; Koburtay et al., 2020) and Africa (Umeh et al., 2023), reinforcing the need for robust legal and institutional mechanisms to drive progress in the Global South.

Progress in GDM in the Global North has been driven by several legal frameworks and initiatives. In the United Kingdom, the Equality Act (2010), Davies (2011), and Hampton-Alexander Review (2021) boosted FTSE 100 female board representation from 12.5% in 2011 to over 36% by 2020 (FTSE Women Leaders, n.d.). Norway's corporate board quota law raised female membership from 7% in 2002 to over 40% by 2021) (Statistics Norway, 2021). Despite this legal and institutional progress, however, ethnic minority women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership, exposing the systemic gaps in GDM frameworks. On FTSE 100 boards in the United Kingdom, women of ethnic minority backgrounds held only 1.5% of positions in 2020 (FTSE Women Leaders, n.d.), dropping to under 1% by 2024 (WB Directors, 2024). Norway's corporate board quota law elevated female membership to over 40% by 2021, yet minority women remain scarcely represented, highlighting a gender-focused approach that neglects intersectional inequalities (Statistics Norway, 2021).

Furthermore, allyship practices often fail to address the disparities faced by ethnic minority women. Johnson and Smith (2018) highlight

that male allies face perceptions of reduced competence or resistance, limiting their advocacy effectiveness. Promundo's (2019) report finds a disconnect, with 77% of men claiming to support gender equality compared with only 41% of women believing them to do so, with even lower trust from ethnic minority women. These findings underline the inadequacy of universalist approaches, calling for culturally specific, intersectionally informed allyship (Ganji et al., 2023; Syed & Özbilgin, 2019).

By contrast, the Global South presents unique challenges because of its weaker institutions, entrenched cultural norms, and socioeconomic disparities (Umeh et al., 2023). Cultural expectations often weaken or undermine the effectiveness of organisational policies. For example, as noted above, Middle Eastern cultural norms around domestic responsibilities can limit the practical benefits of flexible work policies (Hennekam et al., 2017). Similarly, in South Asia, societal preferences for male breadwinners often exclude women from decision-making processes, curtailing their professional growth (Dasgupta & Sánchez-Mejorada, 2018). These examples underscore the importance of recognising how conversion factors—women's ability to transform resources and opportunities into meaningful outcomes (Sen, 1999)—are constrained by societal norms.

Regional variations within the Global South further illustrate the complexities of implementing GDM. In Sub-Saharan Africa, matriarchal inheritance systems in some regions empower women economically, facilitating leadership roles (Bangura & Larbi, 2006). Conversely, patrilineal systems in parts of West Africa and the Middle East restrict women's economic and professional agency, even when gender-equitable policies exist (Ayentimi et al., 2020; Ganji et al., 2023). These contrasts highlight that cultural norms are not monolithic, necessitating tailored approaches to GDM (Mor Barak, 2016). Sociohistorical and structural factors further complicate GDM efforts in the Global South. For example, patrilineal inheritance systems in South Africa, the absence of professional civil services in Latin America, and politically expedient but unsustainable initiatives in Tanzania and Nigeria undermine progress (Ayentimi et al., 2020; Bangura & Larbi, 2006). In the Middle East, conflicts between international gender equality norms and deeply entrenched cultural values hinder policy effectiveness (Ganji et al., 2023; Georgiadou & Syed, 2021). These examples highlight the need to address institutional fragilities and cultural resistance for meaningful progress in GDM.

Operationalising Sen's CA: polychronicity in GDM

Polychronicity in diversity management has emerged as a practical approach for operationalising the principles of the CA. Polychronicity refers to the simultaneous alignment of global principles with local

practices across overlapping timelines, ensuring adaptability and sustainability in tackling diversity challenges (Dasgupta & Sánchez-Mejorada, 2018; Syed & Özbilgin, 2019; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). While polychronicity has been explored in contexts such as cultural studies and organisational behaviour (Kaufman-Scarborough & Lindquist, 1999; König & Waller, 2010), its application in strategic HRM, specifically within GDM, remains underdeveloped in the literature.

Empirical evidence highlights PGDM's effectiveness when operationalised using the principles of the CA. Rwanda's gender quotas (Powley, 2006) increased women's representation in government to 61% of parliamentary seats by 2021 by addressing conversion factors such as societal norms. Malaysia's mentorship programmes (Adams & Kirchmaier, 2016) fostered interwovenness through cultural alignment and phased implementation. In Ghana and South Africa, leadership initiatives combined systemic reforms with agency-driven empowerment (Ayentimi et al., 2020), while Nigeria's African Women's Entrepreneurship Program (Aderemi et al., 2008) challenged financial and cultural barriers, promoting sustainable inclusion. Thus, PGDM's iterative, context-sensitive strategies may address the limitations of universalist GDM frameworks, which emphasise numerical goals such as quota systems that often reinforce stereotypes and provoke resistance rather than fostering meaningful inclusion (Ganji et al., 2023; Koburtay et al., 2020). Offering a more holistic alternative, PGDM integrates local norms and values without compromising systemic reform.

Gender inequality in Saudi Arabia

The case of Saudi Arabia exemplifies the challenges of applying Western-centred GDM frameworks in culturally specific contexts. Despite economic advancement, the country's resource dependency, gender-segregated labour market, and religious norms align it with the Global South framework, complicating the transfer of Global North strategies (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2023). Disparities highlighted by such indicators as the HDI and GII reveal the limitations of homogenised frameworks and reinforce Sen's (1999) emphasis on addressing conversion factors. For example, in Saudi Arabia, women represent only 22.4% of the workforce compared with 47.2% in the United Kingdom (WorldBank, 2021). Despite progress in women's rights, Saudi women's labour market participation remains lower than that of other Middle Eastern countries such as Qatar (57%), Kuwait (53%), Bahrain (46%), and the UAE (41%) (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2023). Reflecting its low gender equality, Saudi Arabia ranks 147th out of 156 countries in *The Global Gender Gap Report* (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Saudi Labour Law ostensibly ensures equal workplace rights for men and women. However, labour market realities are shaped by informal institutions, evolving traditions, and religious interpretations, including Islamic Sharia law (Ahmed, 1992; Sfar, 2024). Islamic feminism has influenced cultural norms, particularly in education and healthcare, where women's representation is higher (Benería & Floro, 2006). Despite progress, patriarchy persists, with men dominating senior roles and political leadership (Schlumberger, 2021). In 2023, women held only 20% of parliamentary seats (WorldBank, 2023). On the contrary, educational attainment in Saudi Arabia has seen significant progress. As of 2023, 75% of women aged 25 and above (81% for men) had completed secondary education (Trading Economics, 2023) compared with 64.8% in 2019 (OECD, 2019). Moreover, in 2018, 41% of women had attained tertiary education (OECD, 2019), surpassing men (37%) in enrolment, where the female-to-male ratio in higher education stands at 1.11 (The Global Economy, 2022). Nonetheless, limited employment options exist for women with degrees, particularly those without social networks (Harvard Kennedy School EPoD, 2019).

In Saudi Arabia, familial roles profoundly shape women's opportunities (Schlumberger, 2021). Paternal roles support daughters' education while balancing traditional values (Alhejji et al., 2018; Koburtay et al., 2020). Patriarchal roles enforce hierarchical norms, limiting women's agency, matriarchal roles may empower women but often reinforce patriarchy (Ganji et al., 2023), while maternal roles centre on caregiving, excluding decision-making authority (Sfar, 2024).[1] These intersecting dynamics reveal how familial roles interact with societal structures, creating both constraints and possibilities for women's agency in patriarchal contexts such as Saudi Arabia (Hennekam et al., 2017). They also reflect the broader interplay between cultural norms and systemic barriers, as evidenced by the limited employment options available to Saudi women despite near-universal literacy rates.

Nonetheless, the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030 has significantly advanced women's labour force participation (Ramady, 2018); Saudisation (policies aimed at increasing the employment of Saudi nationals in the private sector) and service sector growth have expanded opportunities, increasing female private-sector employment by over 10% between 2019 and 2020 compared with 5% in the public sector (Tamayo et al., 2021). Government programmes, including training and employer incentives, show progress but face societal and workplace hurdles as legal frameworks, such as the 2006 Labour Code, prohibit gender discrimination but include culturally restrictive clauses limiting their impact (SAGIA, 2006). Reforms such as lifting driving bans and promoting women into leadership highlight modernisation efforts amid traditional tensions to inclusion (Schlumberger, 2021).

Methodology

Sample and data collection

To examine women's experiences of diversity and equality in the workplace practices and answer the research question, qualitative data were gathered from female employees in two public-sector higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia (Table 1), referred to as Organisation Echo and Organisation Zeta to maintain their anonymity. The higher education sector was selected because of its relatively high gender representation; women comprised 43% of academic staff in 2022 compared with 1.4% in finance and 6.4% in healthcare (Abueish, 2023; WorldBank, 2022). This

Table 1. Participants demographics.[4,5]

	Participant	Marital Status	Educational Qualification/Rank	Country of Higher Education	Position
ORGANISATION ECHO					
1	Amal	Single	Masters	UK	Lecturer
2	Samar	Married	PhD	USA	Assistant Professor
3	Nada	Married	PhD	USA	Head of Department
4	Tysneem	Single	PhD	Sudan	Associate Professor/ Coordinator
5	Abeer	Single	PhD	Egypt	Assoc.Professor
6	Nadeen	Married	PhD	UK	Assoc.Professor/ Coordinator
7	Gadah	Married	PhD	UK	Assoc. Professor/ Coordinator
8	Aminh	Married	Master	UK	Lecturer
9	Maryam	Married	PhD	Egypt	Lecturer
10	Noor	Married	PhD	USA	Asst. Professor
11	Mariam	Married	PhD	Egypt	Asst. Professor
12	Sarah	Married	PhD	Malaysia	Lecturer
13	Ghadeer	Single	PhD	Egypt	Asst. Professor
14	Nahla	Single	PhD	UK	Asst. Professor
15	Sana	Married	PhD	USA	Asst. Professor
16	Ameerah	Married	PhD	UK	Asst. Professor
ORGANISATION ZETA					
1	Dalal	Married	PhD	UK	Lecturer
2	Wadha	Married	Master	KSA	Lecturer
3	Jwan	Married	PhD	UK	Lecturer
4	Dana	Married	Master	Jordan	Lecturer
5	Rania	Married	PhD	FRANCE	Assoc. Professor
6	Sara	Married	PhD	India	Head of Department
7	Jeyda	Single	Master/[PhD Candidate]	UK	Lecturer
8	Razan	Single	PhD	France	Asst. Professor
9	Ama	Single	Master	USA	Lecturer
10	Rehab	Married	PhD	Egypt	Asst. Professor
11	Najwa	Married	PhD	Egypt	Assoc. Professor/ Coordinator
12	Khadeja	Married	Master	KSA	Assoc. Professor/ Coordinator
13	Fatemah	Married	Master	UK	Lecturer
14	Afnan	Married	Master	UK	Lecturer
15	Safar	Married	Professor	UK	Lecturer
16	Noha	Married	PhD	KSA	Lecturer
17	Manal	Married	PhD	USA	Lecturer
18	Zahra	Married	PhD	UK	Asst. Professor

disparity, combined with Saudi Vision 2030s focus on educational reform and women's empowerment, provided a critical context for examining evolving diversity practices amid entrenched cultural barriers.

The sample comprised 34 female participants (16 from Echo and 18 from Zeta), including two senior leaders and three managers in each organisation (Table 1). Ethical protocols were strictly followed, with the participants provided information sheets, consent forms, and the option to withdraw at any time. Semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately an hour, were conducted in Arabic and recorded for translation, transcription, and analysis. These interviews explored professional, organisational, and societal dynamics. The participants represented diverse educational, marital, parental, class, and tribal backgrounds. Many had studied abroad, returning with perspectives shaped by global workplace cultures. While positioned as potential agents of change, they often faced resistance linked to perceived privilege from their education and status (Aldossari et al., 2023). This diversity enriched insights into GDM practices and workplace challenges, offering a nuanced understanding of intersecting identities within organisational contexts.

Although specific class and tribal details are omitted from Table 1 to protect the participants' identities, these dimensions were analytically integrated into the coding and interpretation process. Guided by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), the analysis examined how education, marital status, class, and tribal affiliation intersected to shape women's agency and workplace opportunities. This ensured that while confidentiality constrained disclosure, it did not hamper reaching analytical depth, allowing a nuanced understanding of intragroup variation and the relational interplay between structural inequality and individual agency in gender-segregated organisations.

Purposive sampling was used to select female employees on permanent contracts for at least two years; these criteria were set to ensure that potential participants were familiar with the organisational context (Farquhar, 2012). Snowball sampling, when participants recommend colleagues for inclusion in the sample, although critiqued for potentially replicating similar responses, can access participants in culturally sensitive environments in which the 'stranger/interviewer norm'—treating the interviewer as an outsider—can limit engagement (Weinreb et al., 2018). The researcher's gender further facilitated access in segregated workplaces, enriching the data.

Contextual adaptations accommodated the participants' preferences for interview settings. While some were comfortable in formal interview rooms, others found them intimidating, fearing mandatory participation. The researcher's engagement in informal interactions at workplace events, seminars, and social gatherings built trust (Table 2) and reduced negative

Table 2. Sample questions in the interview guide.

Describe your current position and its associated responsibilities.
Have you experienced instances of gender equality in your professional journey? If yes, could you share your personal experience?
Have you observed or witnessed gender discrimination during your career? If so, could you provide details?
Does your organisation have gender diversity and equality practices, and if so, could you give examples of effective practices in your organisation?
What factors do you believe lead to successful gender equality practices?
What challenges have you faced implementing or promoting gender diversity at work?
Does your organisation balance gender diversity and equality with local culture? How or why not?
How can gender diversity and equality strategies meet societal and legal requirements?

perceptions of the researcher's positionality as an outsider (Weinreb et al., 2018) shaped by her Western education and perceived organisational status. Some interviews (Table 2) took place in these informal spaces highlighting their overlooked role in advancing diversity and inclusion objectives (Georgiadou & Syed, 2021).

The researcher's positionality was integral to the study. As an educated Saudi woman with Western academic training but shared gender identity with the participants, she occupied a liminal position, simultaneously insider and outsider (Berger, 2015). This duality shaped access and interpretation: gender facilitated entry into women-only spaces, while her partial outsider status encouraged candid reflections that may not have surfaced in peer interviews (Umeh et al., 2023). Reflexive journaling throughout the fieldwork traced how perceptions of privilege, trust, and cultural distance influenced interactions and analysis. These reflections informed the iterative questioning, coding, and meaning-making, enhancing interpretive authenticity and ethical sensitivity within a highly gendered context.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed from Arabic into English, professionally translated, and validated for accuracy. Thematic analysis, including inductive and deductive reasoning (Proudfoot, 2023), was adopted following Braun and Clarke (2022). In the inductive stage, themes emerged from the data, while the CA provided a theoretical lens in the deductive stage. Axial coding, guided by the CA, integrated the theoretical constructs into the analysis (Table 3). This iterative process balanced data-driven insights with theoretical grounding, ensuring the participants' lived experiences were central. The analysis incorporated CA concepts such as context, the fallacy of sharedness, interwovenness, and agency to offer a nuanced understanding of gender diversity and workplace inequalities.

The initial thematic analysis allowed themes to emerge organically from the participants' narratives, capturing the richness of their lived experiences without imposing pre-existing categories. The axial coding

Table 3. Thematic table.

Codes	Code Definition	Sub -Themes	Sample Verbatims
CORE THEME: Contradictions in Gender-Inclusive HRM Practices			
Qualification-based selection	Where candidates were not selected due to lack of qualifications but claimed discrimination based on ethnicity.	***Simultaneous opportunity and limitation***	*In the recruitment we had some time ago, two female candidates were not selected as they were not qualified. They proceeded with a discrimination claim based on their ethnicity. We suddenly got a letter from the Prince. We had to hire them. It depends on your tribe; you can call the shots (NADA).*
Ethnic Discrimination Claims	Instances where discrimination claims were made based on ethnic background, potentially influencing recruitment decisions.		*When I started working at the University, I discovered that half of the female staff have relatives here. I noticed they shared the same surnames or were from similar tribes. This [favouritism] was worse than I expected [AMAL]*
Influence of External Factors on Hiring	The impact of external influences, such as a letter from higher authorities, on the hiring process.		*These audible voices do not depend on their qualifications or their work efficiency but on who is backing them. Some in top management, like the president and Deans, are from the same family. They have made the voices of their female relatives powerful [SAMAR]*
Tribal Affiliation and Decision-Making	The role of tribal affiliation in decision-making processes, with implications for hiring practices and influence		
Favouritism Based on Family Ties	Observations of favouritism are driven by familial connections, particularly when individuals share surnames or belong to the same tribe.		
Power of Backing and Influence	The acknowledgement that influential backing, regardless of qualifications, can significantly affect decisions and amplify individuals' voices.		
Top Management Family Connections	The influence of familial ties within top management highlights the power dynamics that result from these connections.		

(*Continued*)

Table 3. Continued.

Codes	Code Definition	Sub -Themes	Sample Verbatims
Gender Disparities in Professional Development	The existence of gender disparities in the type and relevance of professional development opportunities offered, with men receiving more career-enhancing skills.	***Limiting opportunities within opportunity structures***	*They offer us a few, like using PowerPoint, Blackboard, and internet search through Google. But how relevant are these for professional development? Men are offered more career-enhancing skills to be promoted over and above us (NOHA).*
Unequal Opportunities and Promotion	Instances of women being denied opportunities for training and development, leading to feelings of inequality in comparison to their male counterparts.		*I was denied an opportunity to attend a training course, and my place was given to a male lecturer who was younger and less experienced. Later, I discovered that my other female colleagues had experienced a similar fate [NAJWA]*
Gendered Allocation of Training Opportunities	The observation that training opportunities are sometimes allocated based on gender, favouring male colleagues over female ones.		*After preparing to travel to Malaysia for the workshop, I was informed that my trip was not approved. I discovered another female staff member with close ties to the University management took my position. Some female staff benefit like men but are not equal to others [women] [MANAL].*
Privileged Female Staff Members	Instances where certain female staff members, with close ties to management, receive benefits similar to male counterparts.		
Limited Impact of Training on Advancement	Perceptions that certain training programs lack the ability to create meaningful change in terms of promotions, salary increases, and overall career advancement.		
Discontent with Training and Certification	Dissatisfaction with training offered by the academic development department due to its perceived lack of impact on career progression and financial rewards.		
Gendered Impact on Career and Financial Outcomes	The realisation that gender-related factors can significantly affect career progression, financial rewards, and overall circumstances despite training efforts.		

(*Continued*)

Table 3. Continued.

Codes	Code Definition	Sub -Themes	Sample Verbatims
CORE THEME: The Duality of Allyship			
Family Community and Influence	The role of one's community and family in determining the impact and weight of women's voices and opportunities	***Family as allies***	*It is not every woman [that benefits]. You must come from a certain community and family. The voices of these women have weight, especially if they have a family member in the faculty [TYSNEEM].*
Family Support for Education	Instances of familial support for education, where family members play a crucial role in encouraging and facilitating educational pursuits.		*I remember an uncle asking my father how he could allow me to live in a mixed environment. He told them [relatives my uncle was speaking for] that he still supports my intention to go abroad for my PhD. (NADEEN).*
Paternal Allyship	Instances where fathers act as allies by supporting their daughters' educational and career aspirations, sometimes against societal norms.		
Matriarchal Allyship	The influence of mothers in shaping their daughters' choices, advocating for both traditional roles and educational empowerment.		*He [father] said that, ordinarily, my uncles disagreed with him, but if I assured him I would get a degree, he would support me throughout the study. He was not educated, but he raised a female Professor [ABEER]*
Interfamily Dynamics	Instances of disagreements and negotiations within families, particularly in cases where education challenges traditional gender roles.		
Empowerment Through Education	The recognition of education as a tool for women's empowerment, as emphasised by both parents in some cases.		
Socioeconomic Influence	The impact of differing socioeconomic backgrounds within families, and how this can influence values, expectations, and opportunities for education and career.		

(*Continued*)

Table 3. Continued.

Codes	Code Definition	Sub -Themes	Sample Verbatims
Respectful Male Allies	Positive experiences of men, including those in management roles, demonstrating respect and prioritising women's needs and development.	***Allyship through transformative masculinities***	*To be fair, men, including those in the management [line managers], are very respectful. Priority is given to women. They show great understanding. [REHAB]*
Barriers in Access to Male Mentors	Challenges faced by female staff in accessing male mentors due to gender dynamics and limited interaction opportunities.		*My Dean has been very supportive. My experience might differ, I cannot generalise. The fact that men manage the university's administration makes it difficult for female staff to access them [male mentors], which decreases their chances, as men have unlimited access [KHADEJA]*
Resistance to Gender Equality Initiatives	Instances where male staff members resist gender equality initiatives, leading to changes in meeting formats and discussions.		*The last time the president of the University had a meeting with the female staff, there was an outcry. There was an uproar among the male staff members. Such meetings are not held anymore [FATEMAH]*
Challenges to Advocacy	The reluctance of female coordinators to advocate for the needs of female staff, often due to concerns about displeasing male senior managers.		
Female Complicity in Discrimination	Recognition that some female colleagues, including managers, may not actively support gender equality initiatives and may perpetuate discriminatory practices.		
Preference for Male Supervision	A preference for working with male supervisors due to perceived differences in working style and mistrust among female colleagues.		
Positive Influence of Male Mentors	Positive impacts of male mentors in supporting career development, facilitating opportunities such as pursuing advanced degrees and publishing research.		

(*Continued*)

Table 3. Continued.

Codes	Code Definition	Sub -Themes	Sample Verbatims
Obstacles in Opportunities	Encountering obstacles in accessing opportunities, such as international training programs, due to bureaucratic hurdles enabled by male administrators.	***Superficial allyship: Passive, performative, and disengaged***	*The Dean asked me to apply for an international training program. I did. The application was tossed back and forth by male administrators. When I reported this to the Dean, he said that I had to follow the procedure in place. I ended up not attending the training [AMINH]*
Lack of Communication and Feedback	The absence of effective communication and feedback from male administrators, leading to challenges in understanding and making informed decisions.		*He only speaks to you and receives no feedback. He does not know what is happening while making judgments and does not know if I have understood him. The meetings are so quick as he believes the Vice Dean should have done the groundwork before he meets you [AFNAN]*
Quick Judgments and Minimal Involvement	Male managers making quick judgments without sufficient involvement or understanding of the situation, often relying on lower-level staff for groundwork.		*He told me that he supported my attempts to develop myself, but I would not get any promotion during my study time. If I still wanted to continue my masters, I would do so without organisational support. I was officially demoted to an assistant lecturer to 'enable me' to study and work [SAFAR]*
Lack of Organisational Support for Education	Experiencing a lack of organisational support for educational pursuits, resulting in individuals pursuing advanced degrees without official backing.		
Demotion for Education and Work Balance	Official demotion to a lower position to "enable" an individual to balance study and work responsibilities, suggesting that personal development comes at a cost.		
Superficial Support and Misaligned Actions	Instances where administrators claim to support development efforts but their actions, such as limiting promotions, demonstrate a lack of genuine commitment.		

refined these themes and mapped them onto the CA's four concepts above (Robeyns, 2016; Sen, 1993). Context encompassed the sociocultural and institutional factors shaping experiences such as cultural barriers, policy disconnects, and sector-specific challenges. For instance, patriarchal norms and tribal affiliations influenced access to leadership roles and professional development opportunities. The fallacy of sharedness acknowledged diversity within the participant group, avoiding assumptions of homogeneity.

Linguistic nuances between 'المساواة' (al-musāwāh, equality) and 'الإنصاف' (al-insāf, equity) highlighted contrasting perceptions.[2] Managers favoured equity for its alignment with fairness, often framing it as tailored support: *'Equity means giving each team member what they need to succeed, not treating everyone the same.'* Conversely, employees prioritised equality, emphasising justice and universal access: *'Equality is treating us all the same; unequal support feels unfair.'* Interwovenness revealed relational dynamics with family, peers, and leaders, shaping workplace experiences. Finally, agency highlighted the participants' proactive strategies undertaken to navigate constraints and influence GDM practices, illustrating their dual roles as drivers or constrainers of GDM.

Based on the CA, shared narratives were acknowledged without requiring unanimity, allowing paradoxes and differences in the participants' perspectives to be recognised (fallacy of sharedness). Each participant's experiences were analysed as distinct reflections of their individual perspectives to assess the extent of their agentic behaviours (agency) while also being situated within their interactions with other actors and systems (interwovenness). Thus, while recognising the influence of community, family, culture, or tribe/ethnicity, where appropriate, the idea of subsuming the participants' stories under such collective entities was rejected as potentially stifling agency. This intersectional approach was supported by ongoing reflexivity about the researcher's interpretive position, ensuring that emergent themes reflected the participants' lived realities rather than researcher assumptions.

Through iterative movement between inductive theme generation and deductive interpretation informed by Sen's CA, the analysis evolved into the conceptual articulation of PGDM. Developed abductively, the model emerged from the patterns in the women's narratives, including the concurrent opportunities and constraints, bounded agency, and interdependent allyship, and was refined through theoretical dialogue with contextualist and temporal HRM frameworks (Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Syed & Özbilgin, 2019). This iterative process produced PGDM not as a prescriptive typology but as a processual heuristic capturing the multi-temporal and context-sensitive nature of equality practices within evolving institutional conditions.

Findings

In both organisations, women's experiences of gender inequality were shaped by interconnected interpersonal, structural, cultural, and organisational factors. The findings exposed the fallacy of sharedness—the flawed belief that gender-inclusive policies benefit all women equally. Women's responses to human resources/diversity management practices were influenced by intragender dynamics, allyship, and systemic barriers, including tribalism, familial favouritism, and class discrimination, which undermined pre-entry equality gains. Gender-inclusive mentoring failed, as female mentees distrusted female mentors and faced challenges accessing supportive male mentors. Allyship emerged as dualistic: authentic allyship advanced careers, while superficial allyship reinforced exclusion. In the following, these insights are explored through two key themes, *contradictions in gender-inclusive HRM practices* and the *duality of allyship* as well as their sub-themes.

Contradictions in gender-inclusive HRM practices

Simultaneous opportunity and limitation

Gender-sensitive recruitment policies in Echo sought to address systemic barriers by prioritising women from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the implementation of these policies exposed significant limitations. Tribal affiliations, familial favouritism, and class hierarchies intertwined to create dual realities: opportunities for some women and exclusion for others. This duality underscores how inclusive policies can simultaneously perpetuate structural inequalities when applied within hierarchical organisational and cultural systems.

Fatima captures this tension succinctly:

> *'They [management] assume all women benefit from the same opportunities. That is not true. Some of us are overlooked no matter how hard we work.'* [FATIMA]

Fatima's testimony highlights a recurring issue in gender-inclusive HRM practices: the assumption of homogeneity in women's experiences. This fallacy of sharedness overlooks the diverse sociocultural and organisational contexts that shape access to opportunities. In practice, recruitment policies often fail to reach women who lack privileged networks, reinforcing existing hierarchies. Fatima's experience resonates with findings in other contexts such as South Asia, where caste and kinship systems similarly stratify access to professional opportunities (Hennekam et al., 2017). These parallels underscore that the barriers identified in Echo are part of a broader pattern in patriarchal societies. Fatima's experience also exemplifies a conversion factor through which tribal

affiliation and class privilege mediate access to opportunity. Even when HRM policies appear inclusive, these social hierarchies constrain women's actual capability to benefit from them. This demonstrates how policy resources are transformed, or blocked, by context-specific relations, reflecting Sen's (1999) emphasis on conversion factors in shaping substantive freedoms.

Nada reflects on the role of tribal networks in shaping recruitment decisions:

> *'In the past, two female candidates were not selected, as they were unqualified. They proceeded with a discrimination claim based on their ethnicity. We suddenly received a letter from the Prince.*[3] *We had to hire them. It depends on your tribe; you can call the shots.'* [NADA]

Nada's experience reveals how external tribal influence overrides merit-based decision-making, distorting organisational processes and eroding trust in institutional fairness. Such external pressures not only disadvantage women outside these networks but also foster resentment among employees who perceive the system as unfair. Tribal affiliations in this context mirror the dynamics observed in other hierarchical societies in which social ties can override institutional objectives, further undermining meritocratic principles.

Internally, familial favouritism exacerbates these challenges, amplifying certain voices while marginalising others. Samar elaborates:

> *'These audible voices rely on backing rather than their qualifications or efficiency. Some in top management, like the president and deans, are related. They have made the voices of their female relatives powerful.'* [SAMAR]

Samar's account illustrates how relational power shapes organisational culture, creating informal hierarchies that disproportionately benefit women with familial ties to leadership. By prioritising relational networks over merit, these systems erode the transformative potential of HRM practices. This dynamic fosters a culture of exclusion, where merit becomes secondary to personal connections, undermining employee morale and creating divisions within the workforce.

Amal's narrative reinforces this pattern:

> *'Upon joining the university, I discovered that half of the female staff members have relatives here. I noticed that they share the same surnames and belong to similar tribes. This [favouritism] was worse than I expected.'* [AMAL]

Amal's reflection reveals the pervasive influence of tribalism and familial favouritism within HRM practices. While gender-sensitive recruitment policies aim to address barriers, their implementation often entrenches existing power dynamics. These experiences point to a systemic failure to align HRM practices with the principles of equality and meritocracy. The

parallels between these findings and global research on nepotism and favouritism suggest that such patterns are not isolated but indicative of broader organisational failings.

Limiting opportunities within opportunity structures

Beyond recruitment, training and development initiatives in Zeta ostensibly aimed to enhance women's professional growth. However, these programmes frequently reflected systemic biases, marginalising certain groups of women while disproportionately benefitting men. The allocation of training opportunities, coupled with the content of these programmes, reinforced entrenched gendered stratifications within the organisation.

Noha's reflection underscores the inadequacy of training content:

> *'They offer training in PowerPoint, Blackboard, and Google search. But how relevant are these for professional development? Men receive more career-enhancing skills to be promoted above us.'* [NOHA]

Noha's testimony highlights a critical flaw in the design and allocation of training programmes: the gendered division of content. Women were often relegated to rudimentary sessions that failed to align with career progression pathways, while men received training that enhanced their leadership and technical skills. This imbalance reflects a broader failure to provide substantive freedoms for women, perpetuating professional disparities. Similar findings have been observed in the Global North, where women are often excluded from leadership-oriented training, limiting their career trajectories (Górska et al., 2022). Noha's reflection reveals how organisational training can act as a negative conversion factor: although formal resources exist, gendered assumptions render them low-value capabilities. Such bias constrains agency, limiting women's ability to pursue recognised or rewarding career paths. Her experience shows that opportunity structures alone are insufficient when their quality and relevance are shaped by inequality.

The allocation of training opportunities further entrenched these disparities. Najwa recounts:

> *'I was denied the opportunity to attend a training course and they gave my spot to a younger, less experienced male lecturer. Later, I discovered that other female colleagues had experienced similar situations.'* [NAJWA]

Najwa's testimony reveals how personal connections and organisational hierarchies influence access to training opportunities. Decisions driven by relational favouritism rather than merit not only perpetuate gender inequalities but also create divisions among women. These practices

erode trust in HRM systems and limit collective agency, leaving marginalised women without the resources they need to succeed.

Manal adds another dimension:

> *'After preparing to travel to Malaysia for a workshop, I was informed that my trip was not approved. I discovered that another female staff member with close ties to the university management took my position. Some women benefit like men but are not equal to others [women].'* [MANAL]

Manal's experience highlights the intersection of intragender disparities and organisational favouritism. While some women benefit from these systems, others face systemic exclusion, creating a fragmented landscape of opportunity. The stratification of access underscores the importance of recognising intersectional differences within women's experiences, as privilege often mediates access to resources, leaving many women at a systemic disadvantage.

The cumulative impact of these systemic barriers was evident in the erosion of women's motivation and agency. The participants described feelings of frustration and disillusionment, stemming from the disconnect between their efforts and outcomes. These sentiments were compounded by the systemic undervaluation of women's contributions, leaving many employees disengaged.

Jeyda reflects on her disengagement:

> *'I recently stopped attending training by the academic development department. It is only a certification that does not add value, increase my salary, or improve my circumstances. I do not get promoted. I do not get rewarded financially.'* [JEYDA]

Jeyda's testimony underscores the futility felt by many women in participating in training programmes that fail to yield tangible career benefits. When training does not lead to recognition, advancement, or improved conditions, it becomes a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive tool for empowerment. This disconnect between organisational promises and lived realities undermines trust in HRM systems and fosters disengagement. Jeyda's decision to disengage reflects constrained or 'bounded' agency (Sen, 1999) within a system offering formal options but few substantive freedoms. Her withdrawal represents a rational response to eroded conversion opportunities; an act of resistance through non-participation when the available choices no longer expand real capabilities.

Another participant echoes this sentiment:

> *'Even when you complete the training, it does not lead anywhere. Promotions and rewards are given based on favouritism, not performance.'* [MARYAM]

These reflections highlight how systemic inequalities prevent women from achieving valued professional outcomes. The absence of clear

pathways for career progression, combined with superficial inclusivity, erodes motivation and agency. This dynamic aligns with global findings on employee disengagement, emphasising the need for HRM practices that align with employee aspirations and promote fairness.

The interwoven barriers of tribal affiliations, familial favouritism, and class hierarchies reflect a critical principle of PGDM: that diversity management operates within temporally and contextually specific systems of power. PGDM provides a framework to understand how simultaneous opportunities and limitations arise from applying gender-sensitive policies within hierarchical and patriarchal systems. For instance, the fallacy of sharedness uncovered here demonstrates that failing to engage with polychronous intersections—where multiple factors overlap across time—can reinforce rather than dismantle inequalities. Collectively, these accounts show that gender-inclusive HRM in Saudi universities generates both opportunities and constraints, as conversion factors rooted in tribalism, class, and familial power mediate access to resources. Women's agency, though evident in negotiation and adaptation, remains structurally bound, reinforcing the CA insight that equality depends not only on resources but also on transforming the conditions that convert them into real freedoms.

Duality of allyship

The findings highlight the complex interplay of allyship within Echo and Zeta, demonstrating how stakeholder actions, including those of male family members, senior men, female managers, women, and peers, both advanced and constrained women's professional trajectories. This interplay reflects a spectrum of allyship, from active support to superficial gestures, revealing the nuanced ways in which allyship shapes women's experiences. The responses emphasise that allyship is highly contingent on contextual, relational, and structural factors. This duality of allyship—ranging from authentic to superficial—underscores the interwovenness (Sen, 1993) of organisational, societal, and cultural influences shaping women's experiences. Authentic allyship was evident in familial and some male managerial support, whereas superficial allyship manifested in passive, performative, and disengaged behaviours, further entrenching inequalities.

Family as allies

In Echo, familial networks often bypassed formal barriers, offering informal support for women's professional advancement. However, this support was often conditional and framed within patriarchal expectations, highlighting the paradoxical role of familial allyship. For example,

paternal allyship, while empowering in specific instances, remained bounded by traditional patriarchal expectations. Nadeen's experience illustrates this tension:

> *'I remember an uncle asking my father how he could allow me to live in a mixed environment. He told them [relatives my uncle was speaking for] that he still supports my intention to go abroad for my PhD.'* [NADEEN]

This account reveals the conditional nature of paternal allyship, wherein support is offered but framed within or in negotiations with patriarchal parameters. Similarly, Abeer's narrative reflects how paternal support is pivotal but often underscores women's reliance on male authority figures:

> *'He [father] said that, ordinarily, my uncles disagreed with him, but that if I assured him I would get a degree, he would support me throughout my studies. He was not educated, but he raised a female professor.'* [ABEER]

Such accounts highlight the paradox of familial allyship; while it provides women with avenues to overcome societal limitations, it simultaneously reinforces their dependency on male approval and authority.

Matriarchal allyship further exemplifies this duality. While matriarchs could go beyond maternal roles to advocate for women's education and professional development, they often did so within the confines of traditional patriarchal gender norms. Ameerah recounts her mother's influence:

> *'My mother is vocal because her family is rich. She insisted that my sisters and I obtain a good education for a culturally acceptable job. Yes, my father always made the final decisions, but he never challenged her when she constantly said that education is a woman's weapon in life.'* [AMEERAH]

Here, matriarchal allyship and advocacy promote education but simultaneously perpetuate the expectation that women's professional paths must align with societal perceptions of a *culturally acceptable* job. This reinforces systemic gender inequality, even as it seeks to navigate it.

Allyship through transformative masculinities

In Zeta, male supervisors and colleagues occasionally demonstrated transformative allyship by actively supporting women's professional growth. Such allyship was neither universal nor without limitations, often constrained by structural barriers, but provided women with resources and mentorship to navigate systemic barriers. For instance, Rehab reflects on the positive role of male colleagues:

> *'To be fair, men, including those in the management [line managers], are very respectful. Priority is given to women. They show great understanding.'* [REHAB]

Rehab's account suggests a more inclusive form of male allyship, where men in leadership positions actively foster an equitable work environment. However, the experiences of other participants reveal significant inconsistencies in such support. Khadeja highlights structural barriers that limit women's access to male mentors:

> *'My dean has been very supportive. My experiences may differ [from others]; I cannot generalise them. The fact that men manage the university's administration makes it difficult for female staff to access them [male mentors], which decreases their chances, as men have unlimited access.'* [KHADEJA]

Khadeja's narrative underscores the systemic challenges that undermine transformative allyship. While male mentors may be supportive, organisational structures often restrict women's ability to engage with them effectively, thereby limiting the impact of such support.

Superficial allyship: passive, performative, and disengaged

Despite instances of genuine allyship, superficial forms were more prevalent, particularly in Echo. Passive allyship, characterised by inaction and neutrality, often left women without meaningful support. Aminh's experience exemplifies this:

> *'The dean asked me to apply for an international training programme. I did. The application was tossed back and forth by male administrators. When I reported this to the dean, he said that I had to follow the procedure in place. I ended up not attending the training.'* [AMINH]

Here, the dean's passive approach reflects a reluctance to challenge procedural barriers, effectively negating the initial support offered. This lack of active involvement perpetuates systemic inequalities, leaving women such as Aminh to navigate organisational hurdles alone.

Performative allyship, driven by the need for validation rather than genuine commitment, also emerged as a recurring theme. Afnan's testimony highlights the insincerity of such gestures:

> *'He only speaks to you and does not accept feedback. He does not know what is happening while making judgements and does not know if I have understood him. The meetings are so quick, as he believes the Vice Dean should have done the groundwork before he meets you.'* [AFNAN]

Performative acts such as superficial meetings and tokenistic acknowledgments create an illusion of allyship while failing to address underlying issues. This insincerity not only undermines women's trust in HRM practices but also reinforces existing hierarchies.

Disengaged allyship further reflects the systemic failure to support women effectively. Safar's experience demonstrates how disengagement translates into tangible disadvantages:

> *'He told me that he supported my attempts to develop myself but that I would not get any promotions during my studies. If I still wanted to continue my Masters [degree], I would have to do so without organisational support. I was officially demoted to an assistant lecturer to "enable me" to study and work.'* [SAFAR]

In this case, the 'supportive' expression of support—offering the opportunity to study—was counteracted by punitive measures such as a demotion in rank, illustrating a lack of genuine commitment to women's advancement.

The responses also reveal how women navigate and respond to the complexities of allyship, demonstrating agency even in constrained circumstances. While some participants actively sought out supportive relationships, others expressed distrust towards female supervisors or peers, highlighting intragender tensions. Dalal's account reflects the challenges of advocating for women's needs through allyship within hierarchical systems:

> *'Our coordinator has a weak personality. Whenever I communicate the needs of the female staff for progress [in their career], she ignores me. She does not want to displease the men [senior managers] or be seen as a troublemaker. But I know they [men] will help.'* [DALAL]

Here, Dalal's frustration underscores the complicity of female managers in maintaining systemic inequalities. They often prioritise their own positions over advocating for their subordinates.

Jwan adds another perspective, highlighting distrust rooted in interpersonal dynamics:

> *'I have not enjoyed working with our coordinator. I still prefer working with a man. This problem began when she wanted me to work daily, even on holidays. Women are different and jealousy is a problem.'* [JWAN]

Such accounts reveal the nuanced ways in which women perceive and interact with one another within organisational hierarchies. While male managers are often viewed as neutral or supportive, female supervisors may be seen as gatekeepers, further complicating the dynamics of allyship. Authentic allyship functions as a positive social conversion factor, expanding women's agency by legitimising their participation within patriarchal settings. Conversely, passive or performative allyship constrains capability formation by reproducing dependence and institutional compliance. These patterns show that allyship itself is a mechanism of capability conversion: at once enabling and constraining. This highlights the relational and processual nature of equality within the CA framework.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into how GDM practices, informed by the CA, can reveal and challenge workplace inequalities through context-sensitive and adaptive strategies. The study highlights critical challenges and opportunities, drawing attention to the interplay among systemic barriers, individual agency, and sociocultural contexts in advancing gender equality. These findings expose the limitations of traditional GDM practices while offering innovative pathways for embedding inclusivity into organisational processes.

The model of PGDM emerged from an abductive synthesis of the data and the CA's conceptual architecture. Whereas previous contextualist models (e.g. Syed & Özbilgin, 2019) emphasise multi-level responsiveness and Nishii and Özbilgin (2007) foreground temporal alignment, PGDM extends these frameworks by embedding capability conversion as the central analytical mechanism. It thereby reconceptualises diversity management not as adaptation over time but as an evolving process of *capability formation* within intersecting institutional and cultural constraints.

The proposed framework of PGDM translates the CA's analytical dimensions into a practical HRM architecture (Robeyns, 2016; Umeh et al., 2023). Whereas the CA conceptualises *conversion factors*, *agency*, *interwovenness*, and the *fallacy of sharedness* as conditions shaping individuals' substantive freedoms (Nussbaum, 1999; Sen, 1985), PGDM operationalises these conditions through a temporal logic that aligns short-term corrective, medium-term adaptive, and long-term transformative actions (Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). The *polychronous* character of the model thus reflects multiple, overlapping time horizons: (1) immediate corrective interventions to remove procedural and policy barriers, (2) adaptive adjustments that recalibrate organisational norms and capacity in response to evolving inequalities, and (3) transformative reforms that embed equality into institutional culture and policy. This sequencing embodies the CA's attention to processes and conversion, illustrating how capabilities expand and solidify over time (Alkire et al., 2015). In addition, PGDM situates these phases within a *global–local synchrony*: equality strategies must resonate with local institutional and sociocultural arrangements while aligning with global equality indices such as the HDI and GII (UNDP, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2021). Thus, PGDM translates its philosophical commitments into actionable HRM practice that remains globally resonant (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011; Syed et al., 2010), by embedding the CA's normative orientation in a time-layered and context-sensitive structure.

One key finding reveals that systemic barriers often undermine the pre-entry gains achieved through gender-sensitive HRM practices. While

effective in improving representation, recruitment policies designed to diversify the workforce frequently fail to account for structural challenges such as tribal affiliations, familial favouritism, and class hierarchies. These dynamics illustrate the fallacy of sharedness—the flawed assumption that gender-inclusive policies benefit all women equally. Instead, such policies often privilege women with stronger social or familial networks, excluding others. This aligns with critiques of universalist frameworks that fail to account for local sociocultural complexities (Syed et al., 2010; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012).

Similar patterns have been observed in hierarchical societies in which entrenched norms disproportionately shape access to opportunities (Al-Asfour et al., 2017). For instance, while recruitment initiatives address numerical representation goals, they often neglect qualitative imperatives that ensure equitable access to opportunities across all social strata. Women with privileged networks navigate organisational systems more effectively, while others face significant exclusion, reinforcing existing hierarchies and perpetuating inequalities. Addressing these disparities necessitates moving beyond surface-level inclusion strategies and embedding measures considering intersectional and cultural complexities into their design. These findings also align with research indicating that hierarchical and patriarchal systems amplify systemic inequalities (Ganji et al., 2023; Koburtay et al., 2020).

Another critical finding highlights the duality of allyship, which operates along a spectrum ranging from authentic to superficial. Authentic allyship demonstrates the transformative potential of meaningful advocacy, particularly when senior male managers actively champion gender-inclusive policies and address structural inequalities. Such advocacy creates pathways for women's professional advancement and aligns with the CA's emphasis on enhancing individual agency and substantive freedoms (Robeyns, 2016; Sen, 1993). By contrast, superficial allyship characterised by tokenistic gestures and performative advocacy perpetuates existing disparities and fails to tackle systemic barriers (Cihangir et al., 2014; Johnson & Smith, 2018), leaving them unchallenged and intact. For instance, symbolic gestures such as endorsing women's participation in leadership training programmes without addressing structural limitations exacerbate inequalities rather than resolving them. Hence, while the role of allyship in mediating access to resources and opportunities is crucial, its effectiveness depends on its authenticity and sustained engagement rather than superficial actions (Promundo, 2019).

Organisations must adopt strategies that incorporate advocacy as a core component of GDM to institutionalise authentic allyship. These strategies should include allyship training, accountability mechanisms, and environments encouraging active engagement with systemic barriers

(Johnson & Smith, 2018). Embedding allyship within broader organisational frameworks such as PGDM ensures that advocacy efforts are sustained and contextually relevant, avoiding the pitfalls of superficial interventions. These findings align with broader trends in the allyship literature, highlighting the dual nature of allyship as both an enabler and an inhibitor of inclusion (Alhejji et al., 2018; Promundo, 2019).

The findings also reveal persistent inequalities in training and mentoring opportunities, which limit women's professional development and erode motivation and agency. Although organisations often implement training programmes ostensibly aimed at fostering career growth, these initiatives frequently fail to provide substantive benefits for women (Alhejji et al., 2018). Men, by contrast, are more often granted access to career-enhancing skills and leadership training, further entrenching gender disparities (Johnson & Smith, 2016). Similarly, mentoring programmes often fail to address intragroup distinctions, perpetuating the fallacy of sharedness. Female managers in this study frequently prioritised male approval for career advancement, inadvertently reinforcing systemic inequalities. Many female subordinates (including those educated abroad) preferred male mentors, citing their greater trust and support, which underscores the nuanced role of relational factors in shaping access to opportunities and the need for mentoring programmes to account for diverse lived experiences. These observations also resonate with interwovenness within the CA, emphasising the interconnectedness of the relational and systemic dimensions of workplace inequalities (Alhejji et al., 2018).

Such dynamics highlight the inadequacy of traditional GDM practices in addressing intersectional and cultural complexities (Crenshaw, 1991; Górska et al., 2022). The findings further show that organisational inequalities are embedded within the broader postcolonial and institutional hierarchies that shape how diversity frameworks travel across contexts (Nkomo, 2011). By revealing how globally endorsed GDM models intersect with local cultural logics, the study underscores that equality cannot be imported wholesale but must be *translated* through situated understandings of power, culture, and history. This translation process, captured within PGDM's context-sensitive design, enables HRM practice to remain adaptive without reproducing global hierarchies of knowledge and authority.

Addressing these systemic barriers requires adopting context-sensitive approaches to training and mentoring that align with the CA's focus on conversion factors—sociocultural and institutional elements that mediate access to and benefits from opportunities. Phased and iterative mentoring programmes, prioritising inclusivity alongside organisational capacity building, represent one pathway for tackling these issues effectively. The

emphasis of PGDM on aligning training content with women's career progression needs provides a practical solution, ensuring that diversity strategies address not only representation gaps (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012) but also the qualitative dimensions of inclusion (Syed et al., 2010; Umeh et al., 2023).

A further conceptual innovation in this study advancing PGDM is the introduction of agentic embodiment, which extends the CA's principles of *agency* and *context*. Agentic embodiment encapsulates the intersection between individual actions and systemic structures, including sociocultural norms, organisational practices, and institutional constraints. The women in this study demonstrated resourceful agency by leveraging familial support and even support from male administrators or managers to advance their careers, while others encountered intragender mistreatment, which constrained their agency. Furthermore, although often lauded as an effective inclusion strategy (Alhejji et al., 2018; Johnson & Smith, 2016), mentoring practices advanced through female mentors (managers) to female reports in this study appeared to reinforce rather than constrain existing inequalities, suggesting that if not implemented with attention to agency and context or agentic embodiment, GDM efforts may become merely symbolic but superficial, performative, and tokenistic. In framing agentic embodiment within the CA to highlight PGDM, this study emphasises the need for strategies that address both intergender and intragender dynamics and their intersections (Nussbaum, 1999; Umeh et al., 2024).

Overall, these findings expose the limitations of conventional GDM practices, which often adopt surface-level solutions without addressing deeper systemic barriers and suggest that organisations must move beyond compliance-driven diversity initiatives to embed equality-driven strategies within their core practices. For instance, training and mentoring programmes must align with the career progression needs of diverse employee groups, ensuring that these initiatives are inclusive and contextually relevant. Similarly, fostering authentic allyship requires a shift in organisational culture to prioritise accountability and sustained engagement over tokenistic gestures. Thus, PGDM bridges the philosophical depth of the CA with the pragmatic demands of HRM, offering a temporal, relational, and contextually grounded model for advancing equality in complex institutional environments.

Theoretical and empirical contributions to HRM scholarship

This study provides a theoretically robust and practically oriented contribution to HRM scholarship by integrating the principles of the CA with diversity management practices, addressing significant gaps in the design, implementation, and theoretical framing of these interventions. Without

adopting such context-sensitive and inclusive approaches, HRM interventions risk devolving into superficial efforts—what Tatli and Özbilgin (2012) term 'performative equality': actions that symbolically exceed their substantive commitment but what this paper describes as actions akin to *crying more than the bereaved*.

Collectively, the findings and resulting development of the PGDM model advance HRM theory and practice in five interrelated ways. These contributions are apparent at the empirical, theoretical, applied, and integrative levels, reflecting both the grounded emergence of PGDM from lived experiences and its conceptual differentiation from earlier contextualist and temporal frameworks (e.g. Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Syed & Özbilgin, 2019). Together, they clarify how equality management can be reframed as a process of capability conversion unfolding across multiple temporal horizons, thus providing a more transparent account of how PGDM extends the CA within strategic HRM.

First, this study empirically validates the contextual limits of one-size-fits-all strategic HRM and diversity management frameworks in the Global South. It reinforces the need for embedded, locally responsive HRM strategies that align with the lived realities of women's work. It also highlights the critical role of established equality and diversity indices such as the HDI and GII as diagnostic tools for assessing organisational practices and outcomes as well as for identifying misalignments between policy intentions and outcomes (UNDP, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2021). Using these tools to design phased HRM interventions ensures that organisations' diversity management strategies address the unique sociocultural and institutional realities in which they operate. This study demonstrates how integrating the HDI and GII within the PGDM framework can bridge critical gaps by aligning intervention and enhancing organisational responsiveness. Grounded in the CA, these strategies extend its emphasis on substantive freedoms into organisational practice and advance equality-oriented approaches that enhance freedoms and outcomes for women in diverse contexts, complementing the work of Tatli and Özbilgin (2012), who emphasise the need for culturally adaptive diversity strategies.

Second, the study deepens the theoretical understanding of power and intersectionality by situating women's workplace experiences within sociocultural and institutional capability constraints, revealing how covert and intragender hierarchies shape equality outcomes. It introduces PGDM as a transformative, context-sensitive framework for revealing and challenging workplace inequalities. Unlike universalist diversity management models that often overlook cultural and institutional nuances (Syed & Özbilgin, 2019), PGDM operationalises the CA by identifying and addressing the conversion factors, organisational culture, policy design,

and sociocultural norms that influence the translation of opportunities into tangible outcomes, particularly in postcolonial and institutionally complex contexts (Alkire et al., 2015; Robeyns, 2016). This phased and iterative approach ensures that women across all organisational levels benefit equitably from HRM practices, particularly in hierarchical and patriarchal contexts. PGDM's emphasis on incremental, context-specific interventions bridges theoretical principles with practical applications, responding to calls for culturally responsive diversity frameworks (Noon, 2018; Syed et al., 2010). This adaptability makes PGDM a scalable and effective tool for embedding equality within HRM systems.

Third, the study elaborates on a phased intervention logic that mirrors the CA's temporal dimensions—short-term corrective, medium-term adaptive, and long-term transformative—offering a practice-oriented structure for contextually grounded reform within HRM systems. It broadens the scope of diversity management by centring on the experiences of women in lower-level organisational roles (e.g. assistant professors and lecturers), a demographic often marginalised in gender diversity studies (Mor Barak, 2016). Through an in-depth analysis of structural barriers such as discriminatory policies, exclusionary mentoring practices, and covert power dynamics, it underscores how systemic inequalities disproportionately affect women at the base of organisational structures. Thus, PGDM offers targeted interventions that account for the socioeconomic and cultural constraints often prevalent in Global South contexts, such as those evidenced by low GII scores and limited workforce participation (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2021). This contribution underscores the need to move beyond surface-level solutions to tackle deeply embedded inequalities.

Fourth, it introduces PGDM as an inductively grounded, processual framework that operationalises Sen's CA through the mechanism of capability conversion. PGDM distinguishes itself from prior contextualist and adaptive HRM models by embedding temporality, agency, and institutional adaptation as interdependent elements of equality management. It also critiques the limitations of conventional GDM practices, exposing how their rigid universalist frameworks often fail to address systemic barriers to women's career progression. For example, while gender-sensitive recruitment policies increase representation, they frequently neglect post-entry systemic obstacles (Georgiadou & Syed, 2021). Similarly, superficiality, poor resourcing, and performative advocacy often undermine allyship initiatives, which fail to enact genuine systemic change (Cihangir et al., 2014; Johnson & Smith, 2018). PGDM addresses these shortcomings through a phased, context-sensitive approach that translates policy goals into assessable workplace outcomes, fostering meaningful and sustainable change.

Finally, the study underscores the transformative potential of PGDM for advancing workplace equality, particularly in the Global South. Prioritising phased implementation, systemic interventions, and context sensitivity, PGDM challenges deeply embedded inequalities, covert power dynamics, and the fallacy of sharedness that often undermine conventional diversity initiatives. This approach ensures that diversity management practices achieve substantive outcomes rather than symbolic gestures. Addressing these entrenched disparities, the study informs practical HRM interventions and makes a critical theoretical contribution to the diversity management literature. Conceptually, PGDM reframes GDM as a polychronous process of capability conversion that links individual agency, organisational adaptation, and cultural transformation across overlapping temporal horizons. Its originality lies not in rejecting prior contextual models but in specifying *how* equality strategies evolve under capability constraints.

Limitations and future research

Involving a broader range of women across organisational hierarchies could yield further insights into how GDM practices are promoted or subverted at various levels. Moreover, the necessary anonymisation of participants and organisations precluded the association of specific practices or responses with particular class or tribal backgrounds. Future research should address these gaps through longitudinal and comparative studies across North–South contexts and within the South as well as by refining the scalability and adaptability of PGDM in mitigating persistent inequalities. Moreover, exploring the role of male allies as potential drivers or barriers in GDM is a promising avenue for future investigation. However, this study underscores that without a more strategic approach, diversity frameworks risk perpetuating the very inequalities they aim to resolve by being merely performative and tokenistic and, for women, particularly in the Global South, this may indeed amount to *crying more than the bereaved*.

Notes

1. The terms 'paternal' and 'patriarchal' as well as 'maternal' and 'matriarchal' are used to reflect distinct relational and systemic roles. 'Paternal' refers to individual fatherly support in women's education or careers, while 'patriarchal' refers to broader societal structures in which male authority predominates. Similarly, 'matriarchal' highlights women's authoritative roles within extended family or community systems, contrasting with 'maternal', which denotes nurturing and caregiving (Schlumberger, 2021; Sfar, 2024).

2. The researcher maintained reflexivity by acknowledging that her experience as a woman might subtly shape her interpretation of gendered nuances, an awareness that enriched her analysis of contrasting perceptions among managers and employees while keeping the findings rooted in the participants' voices.
3. This statement references an intervention by a figure associated with royalty, highlighting the perceived influence of tribal and ethnic affiliations intersecting with class or status within decision-making processes.
4. All participant names are pseudonyms.
5. To maintain confidentiality and protect participants' anonymity, class/tribe data has been omitted.

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