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Which organisational context factors help women to obtain and retain leadership positions in the 21st century? A systematic review and research agenda for human resource management

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Abstract

Obtaining and retaining women in leadership positions is an ongoing challenge for scholars and practitioners in Human Resource Management (HRM). Research on the role of organisational context factors in supporting women who either are already in leadership roles or aspire to obtain them is fragmented and spread across multiple disciplines. In this systematic literature review, we identified 87 articles related to organisational context factors and female leadership. We mapped these articles onto the stages of the employee lifecycle: (1) Recruitment and Selection, (2) Learning and Development, (3) Performance Appraisal, and (4) Reward and Retention. Additionally, we introduced the category (5) Organisational Setting to encompass overarching context factors such as industry. For each article, we assessed the underlying assumptions concerning the gender-neutrality or gender-sensitivity in the practical implications. Our analysis revealed that some stages of the employee lifecycle received more attention than others and

Abbreviations: ELC, employee lifecycle; HRM, human resource management; SLR, systematic literature review.

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that the derived practical implications often go far beyond what can be concluded based on the study findings. We discuss theoretical implications and outline future research opportunities, such as the potential for HRM scholars to integrate an intersectionality lens into research along the employee lifecycle. We end with practical implications for HRM practitioners who wish to implement evidence-based insights from our review.

KEYWORDS

gender, leadership, organisational context factor, systematic literature review, women

Practitioner notes**What is currently known?**

- Women continue to be under-represented in leadership roles.
- Research on organisational context factors that support women in obtaining and retaining leadership positions is fragmented and spread across multiple subdisciplines of management research.

What this paper adds?

- We classify the literature on organisational context factors and female leadership into the employee lifecycle (ELC) stages and offer insights into actions that human resource management (HRM) departments can take to successfully recruit, develop, evaluate, and retain female talent.
- We identify a mismatch between what is tested empirically in extant research and what is recommended based on those findings.
- We delineate future research directions for HRM scholars, including (1) illuminating currently under-represented ELC stages, (2) conducting intervention studies comparing the effectiveness of gender-neutral and gender-sensitive organisational measures, and (3) examining the benefits of adopting an intersectionality perspective.

The implications for practitioners

- Practitioners can utilise our evidence-based overview of HRM practices and policies to obtain and retain female talent.
- Practitioners can find inspiration for collaborative interventions with scholars, aimed at identifying innovative strategies to attract and retain women in leadership roles.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Enhancing the representation of women in leadership positions remains a challenge for contemporary human resource management (HRM) scholars and practitioners (e.g., Seierstad et al., 2021; Ugarte & Rubery, 2021). This challenge persists because women are under-represented in leadership positions across most companies and industries worldwide (AllBright, 2023; Thomas et al., 2023). HRM practices play a critical role in tackling this

issue. Increasing the share of women in these positions is not only a matter of equality but also a potential lever for gaining a competitive advantage. To illustrate, gender diversity (among other diversity markers) within the workforce (Dai et al., 2019; Østergaard et al., 2011), and on organisational boards (Khushk et al., 2023; Makkonen, 2022) is positively associated with enhanced innovation performance. Moreover, a higher representation of women on boards is positively linked to improved firm performance (Joecks et al., 2023; Sieweke et al., 2023).

To explain female leaders' under-representation in leadership roles, person-focused research has emphasised gender differences in individual characteristics or behaviours (Badura et al., 2018; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly & Karau, 1991; Netchaeva et al., 2022; Shen & Joseph, 2021). However, the problem may also be aggravated by organisational structures. Accordingly, scholars have started to pay more attention to organisational context factors, which are defined as 'variables associated with the organisation that could potentially affect behaviour occurring within the organisation' (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006, p. 561). These factors include 'individuals, structures, occurrences, and surroundings' (Umeh et al., 2023, p. 151) and are likely shaped by HRM (Dickens, 1998). Specifically, HRM departments may introduce contextual measures that target (1) the *individual* in the organisation (e.g., training programmes for leaders), (2) the *organisational culture* (e.g., the values, beliefs, and practices that share the organisational climate, cf. Schein, 2010), or (3) the *structure* of the organisation (e.g., formal regulations and conditions such as the distribution of decision-making roles). These measures can further be classified as gender-neutral (i.e., gender-blind) approaches (e.g., opt-out instead of opt-in mechanism for all employees eligible for leadership roles or on-site childcare; Erkal et al., 2022; Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018) or gender-sensitive (i.e., gender-aware) approaches (e.g., role models or training programmes for female employees; Hentschel et al., 2021; Pichler et al., 2008).

So far, research on context factors that support women in obtaining and retaining leadership positions remains dispersed across multiple subdisciplines of management research. While this is not inherently problematic, two challenges characterise the literature. First, there is a strong research emphasis on studying how female talent can be supported in ascending to (higher) leadership positions (Greer & Virick, 2008). However, this focus overlooks that the lifecycle of individuals in organisations encompasses a broader spectrum of experiences along the different stages of the employee lifecycle (ELC). The ELC is commonly divided into four stages: the recruitment and selection of a candidate, employee learning and development within the organisation, employee evaluation, and employee retention and possibly departure from the organisation (Gladka et al., 2022; Gürler et al., 2022). A systematic literature review (SLR) of organisational context factors in relation to women obtaining and retaining leadership positions across the ELC could help HRM scholars to determine which stages of the ELC have been thoroughly covered in research as well as which domains lack empirical underpinnings.

Second, such an SLR may also help address another prevalent issue in the HRM literature—the research-practice gap. The term refers to the disconnect between scholarly research and management practices (Banks et al., 2021; Tkachenko et al., 2017). Among others, this issue includes ensuring that the recommendations in research papers accurately reflect the findings and do not extend beyond what the data conclusively support (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010; Eby & Fecteau, 2022; Lawler, 2007). In the context of gender, where research has shown that the consequences of certain recommendations can differ from intuitive expectations (Gartzia & Van Knippenberg, 2016), it is particularly relevant that scholars endorse only measures that have some evidence supporting their effectiveness.

In light of the two challenges outlined, we formulated the following guiding research questions: Which organisational context factors have been studied in relation to women obtaining and retaining leadership positions throughout the ELC? What underlying gender-neutral and gender-sensitive assumptions manifest in the practical implications derived from extant studies, and how are they aligned with the foci of the studies in question?

We aimed to answer these questions with a qualitative SLR (Cho, 2022; Siddaway et al., 2019) of empirical studies on leadership, gender, and organisational context factors. We conducted a (qualitative) SLR because it entails a 'transparent process' (Tranfield et al., 2003, p. 209), showing how we obtained an integrated overview of

the literature organised around our guiding research questions. The systematic nature of our review mitigated some of the inherent challenges characterising other review methods, like narrative reviews, which are often criticised for potential biases in article selection and interpretation (Rynes & Bartunek, 2017; Tranfield et al., 2003). Indeed, the growing adoption of SLRs in management research (e.g., Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Rojon et al., 2011; Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003) can be attributed to their capacity to enable researchers to pose one or several research questions, acquire evidence rigorously, appraise the relevance of the evidence, and aggregate evidence-based practices (Barends & Briner, 2014; Grant & Booth, 2009). To profit from these advantages, we assessed studies pertinent to our research focus, published in 15 top-tier management journals between 2000 and 2022. We complemented this screening with a keyword-focused online search across the Web of Science, PsycArticles, and Google Scholar.

Our review offers three contributions. First, in response to the call for a more balanced research approach that extends beyond the predominant focus on employees entering new positions (Klotz et al., 2021), we use the ELC (Searle & Skinner, 2011) to structure our review of the HRM literature on women, leadership, and organisational context factors. The obtained overview allows for deriving future research directions specifying (1) which levels and stages of the ELC could receive more recognition in relation to female leadership and organisational context factors, (2) how knowledge can be advanced by more rigorously examining the efficacy of gender-neutral versus gender-sensitive HRM approaches, and (3) why the intersectionality perspective offers great promises for future research. Secondly, we analyse the underlying assumptions of the research design and the derived recommendations in the included articles. Specifically, we examine whether the HRM practices studied or suggested target all employees (i.e., gender-neutral) or specific gender groups (i.e., gender-sensitive) throughout the ELC. Thirdly, we offer a contribution for HRM practitioners by providing a detailed summary of evidence-based recommendations derived directly from the empirical findings of the articles we reviewed. This thorough compilation aids practitioners in applying the insights from our review to create and enhance gender-inclusive environments in their workplaces, thereby offering an actionable and concrete approach to HRM practices.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Gender and leadership

Climbing the corporate ladder is often more challenging for women than for men (Ciancetta & Roch, 2021; Ohlott et al., 1994). This phenomenon, also referred to as the 'glass ceiling', was first described in 1984 (Taparia & Lenka, 2022) and has received attention in research and practice alike (e.g., Gooty et al., 2023; Mun & Jung, 2018; Ng & Sears, 2017; Powell & Butterfield, 2015). Reviews of this comprehensive stream of research have covered the policy-related, psychological, and socio-cultural barriers encountered by women in their pursuit of leadership roles (Clevenger & Singh, 2013; Kapoor et al., 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Yet, even after achieving leadership positions, women continue to face challenges. This is, for example, due to the imbalanced gender composition in organisational contexts, where the number of women in leadership is still significantly lower than that of men (World Economic Forum, 2023). Consequently, women in leadership roles frequently encounter tokenism; they are approached primarily as representatives of their gender group, or as 'symbols rather than individuals' (Kanter, 1977, p. 38). This experience of tokenism is positively linked to a perceived psychological climate of inequity, which in turn is associated with higher job stress and turnover intentions among women (King et al., 2010). Considering that an imbalanced gender composition is part of the organisational context and that extant research points to female leaders encountering challenges even after breaking the glass ceiling, an issue of relevance when studying gender and leadership are the systematic organisational context factors that help women both obtain and retain leadership positions throughout the ELC.

2.2 | Employee life cycle

HRM supports an employee through their life within an organisation, from the first point of contact to the last. This process has been described in the ELC, wherein it is referred to as the 'HRM cycle', 'employment life cycle', or 'human capital cycle' (Gladka et al., 2022). As a stage-based model, the ELC provides a conceptual framework for organising the role and tasks of an HRM department at every stage of an employee's life in an organisation (Gürler et al., 2022).

Whereas scholars differ in their perspectives on the number of stages that an employee experiences over their organisational life (e.g., App et al., 2012; Cattermole, 2019; Cohen, 2010; Nagendra, 2014; Shyam & Ramachandra Gowda, 2016; Smither, 2003), there is consensus in viewing the ELC as a response to scholarly critiques of the disproportionate research focus on getting the right people into the organisation. The concern at hand is that this emphasis on recruitment and selection frequently results in the underestimation of other critical stages in an employee's journey within an organisation (Klotz et al., 2021). For example, scholars have used the ELC to discuss the costs of employee turnover (Smither, 2003) or the influence of social media on HR practices throughout the ELC (Nagendra, 2014). The ELC not only is a helpful tool for organising research but also serves as an asset for organisations by providing a structure to holistically manage employees (Young, 2004).

Searle and Skinner (2011) outlined four stages that describe the steps relevant to employees building their careers in an organisation: (1) Recruitment and Selection, (2) Learning and Development, (3) Performance Appraisal, and (4) Reward and Retention. We made three adaptations to the model. First, we extended the fourth stage to include articles on employee retention (and not only on rewards). Second, we changed the name of 'Training and Development' to 'Learning and Development' to more accurately represent the goal of such initiatives –namely, enhancing employees' knowledge through learning. Third, we added a fifth stage, Organisational Setting, which describes overarching factors such as a company's gender composition and industry affiliation, because such general organisational context factors influence the acquisition and retention of female leaders across all ELC stages. For example, research on how the gender composition of an organisation influences women's chances of attaining leadership positions (Ali et al., 2021) falls into the stage of Organisational Setting.

Notably, the ELC should not be interpreted as a strictly linear progression from recruitment to exit; instead, it is more accurately depicted as an often-overlapping process, with stages that can overlap and vary in duration (Gürler et al., 2022). To illustrate, although the first ELC stage ends with the onboarding of a candidate, Learning and Development and Performance Appraisal are more difficult to separate. This overlap may make it challenging for practitioners to identify the appropriate timing of HRM practices, but it is less relevant to HRM research, in which scholars focus on specific challenges or practices that can clearly be assigned to one of the ELC stages.

2.3 | Gender-neutrality versus gender-sensitivity

HRM diversity practices throughout the ELC can either target all employees or a specific group of employees. In age-diversity research, scholars describe this distinction as between age-inclusive and age-specific HRM practices. Age-inclusive HRM practices target all employees, irrespective of age (e.g., Rudolph & Zacher, 2021), and age-specific HRM practices target specific (vulnerable) age groups, such as older workers (Fasbender & Gerpott, 2021).

This conceptual differentiation has also been applied in the context of gender (Blithe, 2019; Gooty et al., 2023; Kroese, 2022; Lau et al., 2023; Martin & Phillips, 2017, 2019). In research on diversity management and HRM, gender-neutral practices are activities that do not address specific gender groups but instead are designed to be inclusive by omitting considerations of or elements related to gender (Blithe, 2019; Martin & Phillips, 2017). For example, an HRM department introducing parental leave for all employees, irrespective of sex, exemplifies a gender-neutral practice. The rationale behind gender-neutral practices is to create fair opportunities for all individuals (Ali, 2016). Advocates of this approach emphasise that practices that do not put gender (differences) front

and centre help shape an environment wherein the conflict between stereotypically communal attributes associated with women and the agentic traits frequently deemed necessary in the business world are less salient (Martin & Phillips, 2017). Consequently, women may face fewer prescriptive stereotypes and experience reduced instances of negative self-evaluations as well as increased feelings of belonging (Enwereuzor, 2021; Martin & Phillips, 2017).

In contrast, gender-sensitive practices are designed to address the unique needs of specific gender groups. An example of a gender-sensitive HRM practice is the implementation of development programmes specifically for women, aimed at providing support and resources to facilitate their successful pursuit of a leadership career (e.g., Debebe et al., 2016). Furthermore, workshops that target all employees are considered gender-sensitive if their primary objective is to raise awareness about the specific biases that women encounter in the workplace. Gender-sensitive approaches to training aim to account for the different needs and resources of participants as, for example, in online learning, or in situations where the gender composition of training groups could have potentially detrimental effects (Kroese, 2022). Proponents of this approach emphasise that implementing such practices is necessary for fostering equal opportunities for men and women in organisations (Hentschel et al., 2021). The underlying rationale is that gender must be considered when developing and designing HRM practices to ensure that gender-specific needs and characteristics are sufficiently addressed (Jonsen et al., 2010).

Although authors often implicitly ascribe these assumptions—that is, they implicitly position their research as studying gender-neutral or gender-sensitive practices—the assumptions are implied at several stages of scholarly publications. For instance, the chosen research design (e.g., studying only women), the research focus on specific measures (e.g., female leadership training programmes), or the derived recommendations for practice (e.g., mentoring for female leaders) inherently align with one of the two logics. Identifying and articulating such implicit assumptions is a value-neutral method of inquiry (also referred to as the ‘problematising lens’; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, 2020) that helps map the underlying streams in a research field of interest.

Providing context to our motivation and methodological choices, we next describe our SLR procedure in more depth, thereby also touching upon the problematising approach as part of outlining our broader analytical strategy.

3 | LITERATURE SEARCH AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

To structure our review, we followed Callahan's 6 Ws: ‘Who, When, Where, HoW, What, and Why’ (2014).

3.1 | Who and when?

The first and second authors of this paper and three research assistants conducted the literature search for publications between 2000 and 2022 (June). We chose this timeframe for three reasons. First, the turn of the century represents a widely recognised demarcation point in literature reviews, as evidenced by similar approaches in recent scholarly work (Argyropoulou & Spyridakis, 2022; Guchait et al., 2023). For instance, in reviews of the gender neutrality of employee training programmes and on gender-equality practices in organisations—topics closely aligned with ours—Kroese (2022) and Lau et al. (2023), respectively, reviewed literature starting from the year 2000. The focus on this period is particularly pertinent in leadership, wherein scholars regard the start of the 21st century as a new era (Allio, 2023; Day et al., 2021; Ngayo Fotso, 2021), which was accompanied by changes in HRM practices (Scullion et al., 2007). Second, the 21st century has seen a significant surge in both political and societal discourse on gender inequality, coupled with a growing recognition of the urgency to address these disparities, as exemplified by the UN Security Council Resolution 1325. This heightened awareness of gender issues is mirrored in academic pursuits pertinent to the workplace, including role congruity theory proposed by Eagly and Karau (2002). Originating in the early 21st century, this theory continues to be a prominent reference in

contemporary studies, as demonstrated, for example, by recent scholarly endeavours (e.g., Reichel et al., 2020; Scheibmayr & Reichel, 2023). Lastly, recent years have witnessed significant strides by women in establishing their success in the workplace, marked by a decreasing gender education gap (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008) and stronger representation of women in the labour market (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2018).

3.2 | Where?

First, we screened 15 major management journals to identify articles that fit the scope of our review. These journals were *HRM Journal* (UK), *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Human Relations*, *HRM Journal* (USA), *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of Organisational Behaviour*, *Organisational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*, *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Organisation Science*, *Organization Studies*, and *Personnel Psychology*. Following common practice in reviews (Jacobsen et al., 2022; Koburtay et al., 2019; Langhof & Güldenbergh, 2020; Mishra et al., 2022), we used the journal rankings from the *Academic Journal Guide 2021* ('CABS ranking') as an inclusion criterion for selecting journals to consider in our search. Specifically, we included journals from the management literature that are rated as '4' or '4*' in the CABS ranking—that is, as 'world-leading' journals (Wyse, 2017) in terms of 'originality, significance and rigour' (McKinnon, 2017, p. 434). Second, to identify additional relevant articles, we expanded our search by conducting online searches through the databases Web of Science, PsycArticles, and Google Scholar.

3.3 | How?

For the journals, we screened the titles, abstracts, and keywords of articles on gender, leadership, and organisational context. For the online search, we developed a search string that included previous conceptualisations of organisational context factors (Oc, 2018; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006), in combination with keywords related to leadership and gender: "leader*" AND "gender" OR "female" OR "women" OR "woman" AND "context" OR "culture" OR "climate" OR "goal" OR "purpose" OR "people" OR "composition" OR "process" OR "state" OR "condition" OR "structure" OR "time". We screened the first 500 hits for each of the three online databases. If at least 30 consecutive articles were deemed irrelevant for our review paper before reaching 500 hits, we halted the search at 500. However, if relevant articles persisted, we extended our screening process beyond this initial count to ensure comprehensive coverage and prevent the oversight of pertinent literature. This approach led to the screening of 549 articles from the Web of Science, 500 articles from PsycArticles, and 500 articles from Google Scholar. The screening was conducted by two authors and three assistants who underwent training, which involved (1) familiarising them with the objectives (i.e., guiding research questions) of the SLR, (2) outlining the inclusion/exclusion criteria, (3) providing examples of articles that aligned and did not align with the scope of the review, and (4) convening in regular meetings to resolve any ambiguities.

3.4 | What?

Given our focus on empirical evidence, we included only qualitative and quantitative peer-reviewed publications, resulting in a final sample of 87 articles (Figure 1).

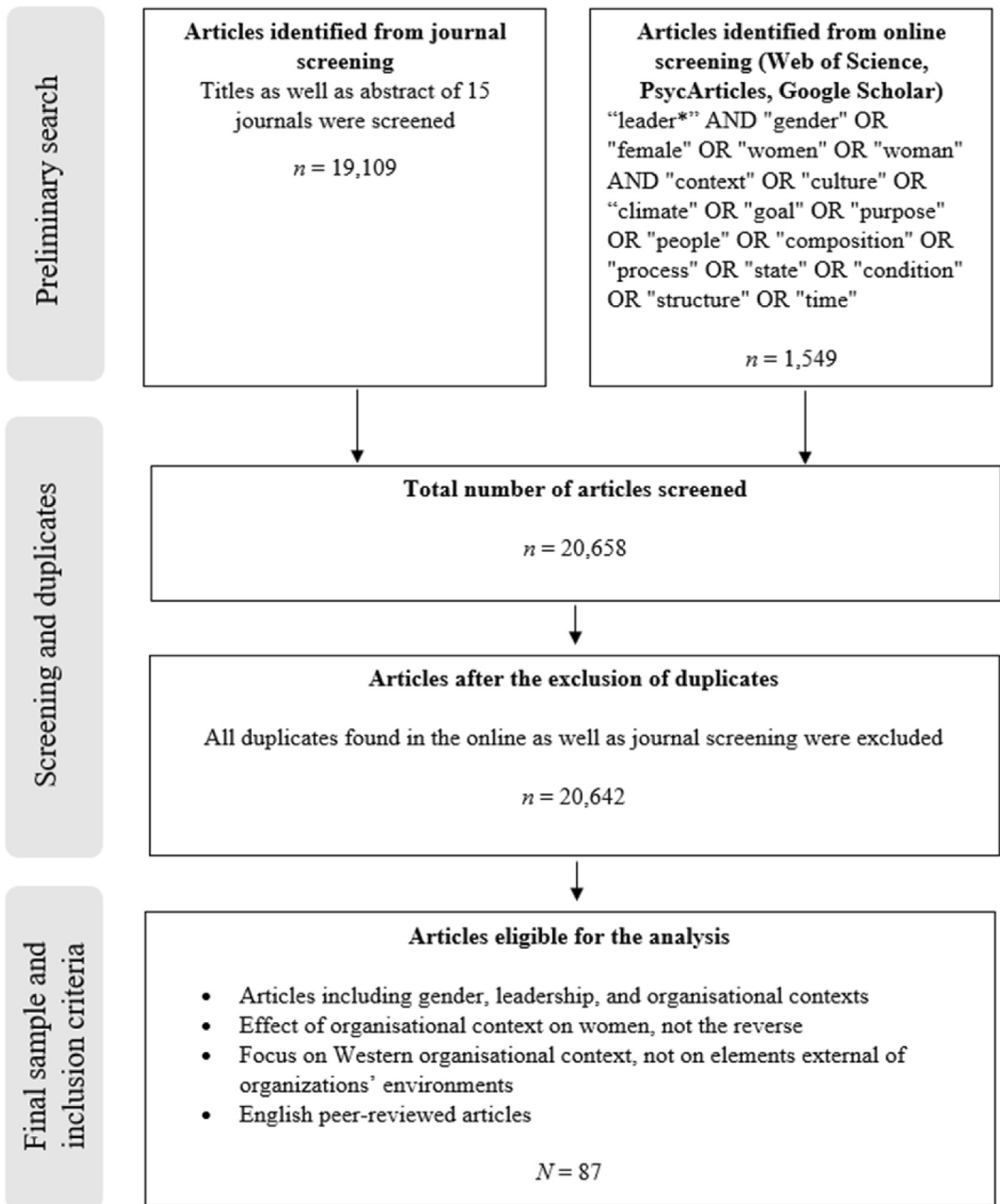


FIGURE 1 Flowchart: Summary of article selection process.

3.5 | Why?

We aimed to assist HRM scholars in developing scientific insights into the potential of gender-neutral and gender-sensitive context factors relevant to different ELC stages. This decision necessitated that all articles included in our SLR met the following inclusion criteria: (1) Articles needed to encompass the broader

themes of gender, leadership, and organisational context factors; (2) the articles had to assess the effect of organisational context factors on women, not the reverse; (3) the focus of the articles had to be on Western organisational contexts, which entailed that we excluded factors external to an organisation's environment (e.g., politics, societal culture); and (4) the articles had to be peer-reviewed scientific articles published in English.

3.6 | Analytical approach

Next, we conducted four analytical steps. Firstly, we followed the SPIDER approach (Cooke et al., 2012) to code the articles in terms of their research type, sample size, data-collection method, and outcome variables (Appendix, OSF: https://osf.io/uazgx/?view_only=a34173e04ca046de88584afbd4e5eeaf). Secondly, we mapped the articles onto the five ELC stages (Figure 2; Appendix). Thirdly, for each article, we evaluated the primary focus of the authors to determine whether it pertained to the individual, the cultural, or the structural level of the organisation. Specifically, we coded whether authors focused on measures targeting (1) the individual in the organisation (e.g., training programmes for leaders), (2) the organisational culture (e.g., as manifested in the values, beliefs, and practices in the organisational climate, cf. Schein, 2010), or (3) the structure of the organisation, as reflected in formal regulations and conditions (e.g., distribution of decision-making roles). Examples of the individual level include mentorship (e.g., Ramaswami et al., 2010) or reactions to individuals' misbehaviours (e.g., Bono et al., 2017). Examples of the cultural level include the consideration of gender biases (e.g., Badura et al., 2018), the integration of women into networks (e.g., Brands et al., 2015), and organisational claims as social-impact framing (e.g., Lee & Huang, 2018). Examples of the structural level include female quotas (e.g., Gould et al., 2018) and workforce compositions (e.g., Hatmaker & Hassan, 2023). Fourth, applying a 'problematisation lens' to uncover underlying assumptions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, 2020), we used the labels 'gender-neutral' and 'gender-sensitive' to classify the research design for each article (Appendix). Specifically, we classified the gender-neutral and gender-sensitive practical implications provided in the articles throughout the ELC (Table 1), thereby further differentiating between measures that target the individual, the organisational culture, and the organisational structure.

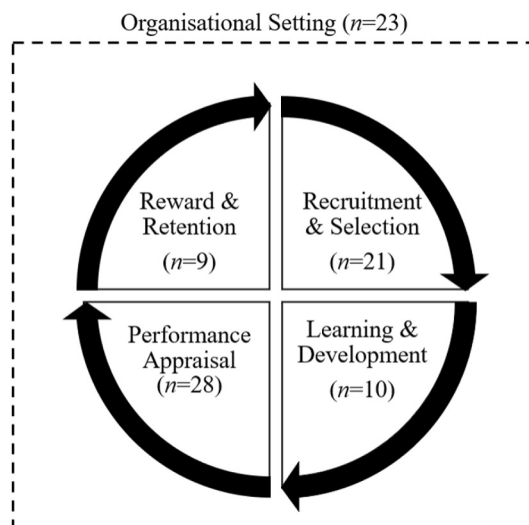


FIGURE 2 Overview of article distribution along the employee lifecycle.

TABLE 1 Categorisation of articles into the focus of their research question, practical implications, and their underlying assumptions (gender-neutral vs. gender-sensitive) throughout the employee lifecycle stages.

| | | Recruitment and selection (n = 21) | | Learning and development (n = 10) | | Performance appraisal (n = 28) | | Reward and retention (n = 9) | | Organisational setting (n = 23) | |
|-------------------------------|------------|------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| Level | | Gender-neutral | Gender-sensitive | Gender-neutral | Gender-sensitive | Gender-neutral | Gender-sensitive | Gender-neutral | Gender-sensitive | Gender-neutral | Gender-sensitive |
| Research question: Focus | Individual | n = 1 | | n = 4 | | n = 11 | | n = 0 | | n = 0 | |
| | Cultural | n = 6 | | n = 3 | | n = 9 | | n = 0 | | n = 2 | |
| | Structural | n = 14 | | n = 3 | | n = 8 | | n = 9 | | n = 21 | |
| Practical implications: Focus | Individual | n = 1 | n = 13 | n = 1 | n = 1 | n = 6 | n = 17 | n = 1 | n = 3 | n = 0 | n = 12 |
| | Cultural | n = 1 | n = 5 | n = 1 | n = 0 | n = 5 | n = 5 | n = 2 | n = 0 | n = 5 | n = 3 |
| | Structural | n = 5 | n = 7 | n = 0 | n = 2 | n = 6 | n = 4 | n = 5 | n = 4 | n = 6 | n = 7 |
| Practical implications: Total | | n = 7 | n = 25 | n = 2 | n = 14 | n = 17 | n = 26 | n = 8 | n = 7 | n = 11 | n = 22 |

Note: The column 'Recruitment and Selection (n = 21)' means that 21 of the identified articles concern organisational context factors that addressed the first stage of the employee lifecycle. In the row 'Research question: Focus' and 'Practical implications: Focus', the numbers reflect the number of articles that focus on the individual, cultural, and structural level. In the row 'Practical implications: Focus', one can see the number of practical implications (not the number of articles) that reflect a gender-sensitive or gender-neutral perspective. For example, in the column 'Recruitment and Selection', 'Individual n = 1' and 'n = 13' means that overall, one gender-neutral and 13 gender-sensitive practical implications were provided by authors at this employee lifecycle stage. In the column 'Practical implications: Total', the digits reflect the total number of gender-neutral and gender-sensitive practical implications.

4 | FINDINGS

Table 1 provides an overview of the categorisation of all articles into the ELC stages, the three levels of research focus (i.e., individual, cultural, structural), and the gender-neutral or gender-sensitive nature of the practical implications. Descriptively, most research addresses the structural level at Recruitment and Selection, Reward and Retention, and Organisational Setting. In contrast, for Learning and Development and Performance Appraisal, the focus tends to be slightly more on the individual level. While there is an alignment of the conducted research and the practical implications for Learning and Development, Performance Appraisal, Reward and Retention, and Organisational Setting, this is not the case for Recruitment and Selection; specifically, most practical implications pertaining to Recruitment and Selection focus on the individual level despite it not being the focus of the conducted research. Table 2 displays an overview of the themes that emerged at each ELC stage and categorises these themes into the three foci.

TABLE 2 Emerging themes at the employee lifecycle stages, categorised by individual, cultural, and structural level.

| | Individual level | Cultural level | Structural level |
|---------------------------|---|--|---|
| Recruitment and Selection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-application to an organisation, for example, women are less likely than men to re-apply for a different position in an organisation that has rejected their previous application (Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2017) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational climate, for example, nomination of women as successors for leadership roles is positively linked to a more favourable diversity climate for women (Virick & Greer, 2012) • Organisational economic situation, for example, women are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions during crisis (Haslam & Ryan, 2008) • Organisational claims, for example, congruence in the organisational claims (business vs. social; Abraham & Burbano, 2022; Lee & Huang, 2018), the presentation of HR roles as well as an organisations public commitment to diversity (Hickey & Cui, 2020) impacts the representation of women (Pichler et al., 2008) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job advertisement, for example, wording of job ads impacts female candidates' feelings of belongingness when the recruiter is male (Hentschel et al., 2021) • Qualifications of female applicants impact perceived riskiness and salary offers (van Esch et al., 2018) • Female quota is associated with mixed findings for female leaders (Maida & Weber, 2022; Seierstad et al., 2021) and must be introduced consciously (Mölders et al., 2018) • Number of female managers already working in the organisation is a structural characteristic that can positively impact the probability that positions are filled with female applicants (Bossler et al., 2020; Cohen & Broschak, 2013; Tate & Yang, 2015) • Appointment of a female CEO is positively linked to the selection of female candidates (Ng & Sears, 2017); yet, women in such positions appear to weaken the relationship between gender diverse boards and shareholder proposals on gender diversity (Berns & Williams, 2022) • Succession announcements of female CEOs may violate |

TABLE 2 (Continued)

| | Individual level | Cultural level | Structural level |
|--------------------------|--|--|--|
| | | | participants prescriptive stereotypes, activate stereotypical perceptions (Dwivedi et al., 2021), and make thorough succession planning necessary (Greer & Virick, 2008) |
| | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male predecessors play a crucial role in fostering the success of female leaders by advocating for gender-inclusive practices during CEO succession (Dwivedi et al., 2018), concurrently, the likelihood of women securing board positions is enhance when the applicant pool contains more women (Tinsley et al., 2017) |
| Learning and Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mentorship programmes for women and other minorities are an important resource when it comes to increasing women in leadership positions in the long run (McDonald & Westphal, 2013; Ramaswami et al., 2010)• Female leader model (Taiyi Yan et al., 2022) may impact women's self-selection for leadership depending on their dominance (Carbonell & Castro, 2008) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Integration of women in networks is identified as an effective initiative for mitigating gender biases entrenched within corporate culture (Allison et al., 2019; Brands et al., 2015; de Klerk & Verreynne, 2017) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leadership development programmes (Hirschfeld & Thomas, 2011) to enhance female leaders' success (Kimball et al., 2021); which may be enhanced in combination with coaching (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2022) |
| Performance Appraisal | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluation biases (Ciancetta & Roch, 2021; Lyness & Heilman, 2006; Vial et al., 2018), for example, men (compared to women) are less likely to perceive women as successful leaders (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015) with women facing disadvantages depending on the performance context; yet, Kaiser and Wallace (2016) find the absence of biases against female leaders | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Biases deeply rooted in organisational culture (Badura et al., 2018; Gupta et al., 2018; Joshi, 2014; Padavic et al., 2020), for example, gender-biased organisational cultures, can lead to discriminatory organisational practices and must be considered in the larger societal cultural context (Taser-Erdogan, 2022) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Workforce composition can impact the perception and advancement of female leaders in the organisation (Corwin et al., 2022; Hatmaker & Hassan, 2023; Viallon & Marti-not, 2009; Walker & Aritz, 2015; Wang et al., 2018)• Global performance management (GPM) bears the risk of being perceived differently by men and women, with women being less satisfied with current GPM (Festing et al., 2015)• Meeting settings provide an environment in which individuals are directly and dominantly influenced, hence |

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

| Individual level | Cultural level | Structural level |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managerial derailment, for example, ineffective interpersonal behaviours (e.g., not being adaptable to many types of people) are more detrimental for female than male leaders (Bono et al., 2017) • Internalisation of biased perception, for example, female leaders receive fewer development opportunities, which negatively impacts their leadership aspirations (Hoobler et al., 2011) • Negative self-perceptions, for example, female leaders rate themselves as significantly less effective in terms of their leadership skills than male leaders (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014) with second-generation gender biases negatively impacting their leadership identity (Opoku & Williams, 2019) • Servant leadership behaviours can benefit female leaders in female-dominated group compositions (Lemoine & Blum, 2019) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biased perceptions are reflected in monocultural, statistical, and structural stereotypes (Murray & Syed, 2010) • Affective organisational commitment of subordinates is lower for female leaders (compared to male leaders) despite them enacting transformational leadership behaviours (Triana et al., 2017) • Biased perceptions of female leaders with respect to leader prototypicality (Scott & Brown, 2006) • Organisational culture (Roebuck et al., 2019) can help reduce gender inequality in the perceptions of women | <p>meetings do not prove much room for more feminine forms of leadership such as transformational approaches (Grisoni & Beeby, 2007)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational crisis and less social resources for a new leader positively impact the selection of women for leadership roles (Rink et al., 2013) |
| Reward and Retention | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turnover rates, for example, negative association between turnover rates and the degree of gender diversity of the workforces (Ali et al., 2015) and general biased evaluations of women in upper-level leadership positions that facilitate higher turnover rates among women (Samuelson et al., 2019) • Opt-out mechanism (i.e., per default, people are signed up for the promotion decision for leadership positions) increases the likelihood of women to take |

TABLE 2 (Continued)

| Individual level | Cultural level | Structural level |
|------------------------|---|--|
| | | <p>part in the leadership selection process (Erkal et al., 2022)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Retention and advancement of women can be facilitated through HRM departments by positively impacting the female talent pipeline (Servon & Visser, 2011)• Job promotions are more strongly linked to job satisfaction for men than for women (Otto et al., 2022)• Career mobility, for example, high career mobility among junior female professionals with same-sex leaders (McGinn & Milkman, 2013)• Reduction of compensation differences, for example, benefits of having a woman as the chair of the compensation committee, since they can influence compensation decisions, and thus the compensation gap among male and female top executives is reduced (Cook et al., 2019); yet, greater representation of women in top leadership roles is negatively associated with employees' dissatisfaction with the gender wage gap (Georgeac & Rattan, 2019) and the link between female CEOs' salary and their external board memberships is weaker compared to male CEOs (Malhotra et al., 2021) |
| Organisational Setting | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organisational climate (e.g., interpersonal element of cooperative climate) influences men's and women's leadership aspirations differently (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2017)• Masculine generic language related to leadership leads to an association with men (Bailey et al., 2022) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Impact of stable organisational characteristics, for example, size of an organisation (i.e., larger organisations) or organisational hierarchy (i.e., egalitarian; Chin, 2016; Hillman et al., 2007)• Organisational strategies and set-up, for example, firm foreign ownership and firm internationalisation are negatively associated with the number of women in leadership roles (Ng & Sears, 2017) and work-life-initiatives are |

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

| Individual level | Cultural level | Structural level |
|------------------|----------------|--|
| | | <p>positively associated with women's leadership aspirations (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018) as well as the general organisational efforts towards overcoming barriers for women (Evans, 2010)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of boards impacts diversity efforts within organisations (Berns & Williams, 2022; Halliday et al., 2021) • Male-typed industry (Ali et al., 2021; García-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006), for example, in male-typed industries, a female leader's work results influence how other female candidates are evaluated for leadership positions (Manzi & Heilman, 2021); simultaneously, women's leadership identification impacts whether they promote other women in such industries (Kaiser & Spalding, 2015) • Workforce composition (Alexander & Nowacki, 2022; Bossler et al., 2020; Gould et al., 2018; Ko et al., 2015; Kurtulus & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012; Mitra et al., 2021; van Emmerik et al., 2010; Walker & Aritz, 2015), for example, women in mixed-gender groups are significantly less willing to take the lead compared to women in female-only groups (Chen & Houser, 2019) or male-majority groups (Born et al., 2022) |

4.1 | Recruitment and Selection

The ELC begins with Recruitment and Selection. 'Recruitment' refers to activities by the HRM department and other organisational members to attract candidates, advertise open positions, conduct interviews, and run (standardised) assessments (Hsu & Leat, 2000; Woodhams & Lupton, 2006). 'Selection' refers to the choice of a suitable candidate and involves assessing applicants to decide who receives a job offer (Potočník et al., 2021). This lifecycle stage plays a crucial role in an organisation's gender composition. We categorised all articles that discussed gender in recruitment and selection into this stage ($n = 21$). As visualised in Table 1, most publications ($n = 14$) focused on the structural level, referring to the structural components (e.g., job advertisements, quota policies, and succession announcements) that

women encounter when they approach an organisation. Six articles concerned the cultural level (e.g., communication about organisational claims related to social-impact framing or climate), and one addressed the individual level (i.e., female applicants' likelihood of reapplying to an organisation after a rejection). In sum, research has largely focused on the structural means that organisations can implement to appear as attractive employers to women.

4.2 | Learning and Development

As part of HRM, organisations implement Learning and Development programmes to advance the skills and expertise of their employees. While much research concerns formal learning and development activities, this stage also encompasses mentorship and sponsorship programmes designed to informally support employees in broadening their networks, expanding their human capital, and creating visibility within the organisation (Hunt & Michael, 1983). Participation in learning and development programmes is positively associated with managerial success (Hoobler et al., 2011), which implies that this stage constitutes another crucial building block for women to obtain and retain leadership roles. We classified 10 articles as pertaining to this stage. In contrast to Recruitment and Selection, most of the articles focused on the individual level ($n = 4$). This may be explained by HRM measures related to learning and development being predominantly designed to enhance the skills and abilities of individuals across various organisational settings. In terms of topics, the identified articles covered matters such as mentorship programmes and leadership development programmes. Three of the articles concerned structural features and explored, for example, features of different leadership development programmes for women (Kimball et al., 2021) or different approaches to coaching female leaders (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2022). Another three articles were relevant to the cultural level (Tables 1 and 2)—specifically, concerning the integration of women into networks.

In sum, the distribution of articles highlights the focus on learning and development opportunities that individuals can leverage to increase their prospects of obtaining and retaining leadership roles. Nevertheless, there is much less interest in investigating learning and development as tools to address barriers, such as biased perceptions of female talent among leaders and employees.

4.3 | Performance Appraisal

Performance Appraisal is the assessment and review of an employee's performance. This stage comprises all activities that HRM departments or other organisational members conduct to evaluate an employee's contribution to an organisation. Performance evaluations are often essential for promotion decisions (Sumelius et al., 2014). Notably, evaluations are not limited to formal HRM practices, such as an opt-out instead of opt-in mechanism for all employees eligible for leadership roles (Ekal et al., 2022), which is a measure at the structural level. Instead, evaluations can also refer to others' perceptions of female leaders and their effectiveness (i.e., cultural level) and to female leaders' self-assessments (i.e., individual level). Overall, we classified 28 articles as pertaining to this stage, and they could be allocated to all three levels—individual ($n = 11$), cultural ($n = 9$), and structural ($n = 8$). This fairly balanced distribution of articles indicates that scholars not only focus on institutionalised processes (i.e., structural level) but also notice the relevance of gender biases in Performance Appraisal (i.e., how others perceive and thus assess women; the cultural level) as well as women potentially holding themselves back (the individual level).

4.4 | Reward and Retention

Reward and Retention refers to the benefits that an employee receives from the organisation. These benefits could be monetary (e.g., wages and bonuses) or nonmonetary (e.g., work assignments). Performance Appraisal and this fourth

stage are closely linked (e.g., performance-contingent rewards; Geary, 1992). To clarify our coding approach, we classified articles that concerned the evaluation of employees under Performance Appraisal, and articles on the consequences of evaluation (e.g., wages) as pertaining to Reward and Retention. Promotions are not necessarily the result of an evaluation, but they serve as a form of employee reward, as promotions mostly involve structural changes, such as salary raises and expanded job responsibilities. All nine articles addressing Reward and Retention belong to the structural level. Prevalent themes in this context include promotions (Otto et al., 2022) and career mobility (McGinn & Milkman, 2013).

4.5 | Organisational Setting

Organisational Setting refers to contextual factors that pertain to the broader organisational setup, such as male-versus-female-typed industries (e.g., automotive manufacturing being stereotypically male-typed) and organisational leadership arrangements (e.g., hierarchical structure). These characteristics are not specific to any ELC stage; rather, they have an overarching influence on female leaders' ability to advance in organisations. For articles concerning Organisational Setting, 21 out of 23 were allocated to the structural level. An example is research investigating the impact of male-dominated industry on the representation of women in the workforce (Ali et al., 2021).

4.6 | Derived practical implications: Gender-neutral versus gender-sensitive

Thus far, we have provided a bird's-eye view of the extant literature by mapping what we know onto the ELC and, classifying the literature in terms of research foci (i.e., individual, cultural, structural level). This approach has allowed us to gain an overview of the prevalent research foci for each ELC stage (Table 1) and the major research themes (Table 2) that scholars focus on when studying organisational context factors related to gender and leadership. Next, we will delve into the practical implications provided in extant publications. Specifically, we present the results of coding the practical implications¹ of all identified articles in terms of their level (individual, cultural, structural), as well as the underlying assumptions regarding their gender-neutral or gender-sensitive approaches (Table 3).

TABLE 3 Overview of gender-neutral and gender-sensitive practical implications.

| Approach underlying the practical implication | Topic of practical implication | Practical implications: Focus |
|---|---|--|
| Gender-neutral (<i>n</i> = 38) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies (<i>n</i> = 21) • Organisational culture (<i>n</i> = 13) • Train and develop employees (<i>n</i> = 4) • Bias trainings (<i>n</i> = 3) • Mentorship/sponsorship (<i>n</i> = 2) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural • Cultural • Individual • Individual • Individual |
| Gender-sensitive (<i>n</i> = 67) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies (<i>n</i> = 23) • Women as catalysts (<i>n</i> = 15) • Mentorship/sponsorship/role models for women (<i>n</i> = 14) • Organisational culture (<i>n</i> = 13) • Train and develop women^a (<i>n</i> = 13) • Train on gender biases (<i>n</i> = 10) • Men as catalyst (<i>n</i> = 3) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural • Individual • Individual • Cultural • Individual • Individual • Individual |

Note: Some articles recommend gender-neutral as well as gender-sensitive practical implications, which entails that the sum of gender-neutral and gender-sensitive implications is higher than the *N* = 87 articles included in this review.

^aone article recommends training male leaders.

Overall, we identified 38 gender-neutral measures and 67 gender-sensitive implications. A closer examination of the practical implications in these articles revealed that the recommendations for HRM practitioners often exceed the initial research scope. More specifically, although most of the studies in this review adopted a gender-neutral approach in terms of their study design (i.e., collecting data from male and female study participants or assessing archival data [e.g., board member appointments] irrespective of gender; see Appendix), their recommendations often emphasised a gender-sensitive approach, predominantly focusing on females.

4.7 | What has been recommended?

4.7.1 | Structural level

First, gender-neutral structural measures ($n = 21$) are recommended nearly as often as gender-sensitive structural measures ($n = 23$). This finding suggests that scholars recognise the barriers inherent in organisational structures for women, thereby advocating for structural rather than individual adjustments encapsulating the idea to 'fix the game, not the dame' (Gloor et al., 2020, p. 497) or to 'fix the system, not the women' (Morrissey & Schmidt, 2008). For instance, scholars recommend gender-neutral structural measures that provide equal opportunities for male and female leaders, such as concrete selection criteria (e.g., Chin, 2016) or neutral and non-discriminatory hiring and evaluation criteria that entail 'promoting people on competency and skill irrespective of gender' (Murray & Syed, 2010, p. 289). Gender-sensitive suggestions on the structural level include policies related to hiring mechanisms (Maida & Weber, 2022) in combination with broader regulatory strategies like strategic workforce planning and regular monitoring of gender representation across all organisational levels (Seierstad et al., 2021).

4.7.2 | Cultural level

Practical implications at the cultural level equally cover gender-neutral ($n = 13$) and gender-sensitive ($n = 13$) approaches. Gender-neutral practices are directed at creating an organisational culture that fosters fairness, equality, flexibility, support, and collaboration (e.g., Scott & Brown, 2006; Walker & Aritz, 2015). The underlying assumption of these articles is that a gender-neutral and inclusive organisational culture can play a vital role in overcoming managerial biases. In contrast, 13 articles recommended gender-sensitive practices that target organisational culture, but they were rather vague. This issue—a lack of specificity in such recommendations—has been a point of critique for over a decade (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010), and our findings indicate that it continues to be pertinent. To illustrate, the recommendations suggest that organisational members should reflect on addressing (second-generation) biases (e.g., Opoku & Williams, 2019), or the organisation should signal the value it attributes to female representation (Ali et al., 2021). A notably specific suggestion is in the work of Triana et al. (2017), who recommended displaying pictures of successful women on the walls of the organisations. Similarly, Wang et al. (2018) offered the relatively concrete recommendation to create more points of contact between shareholders and women in leadership roles.

4.7.3 | Individual level

Overall, 64 gender-neutral and gender-sensitive measures were allocated on the individual level (Table 3). Gender-neutral measures included training and developing CEOs, managers, and employees (e.g., Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015) concerning their skills ($n = 4$) and ability to recognise and reduce biases ($n = 3$). However, most

individual-level measures entailed a gender-sensitive approach, with gender-sensitive recommendations related to mentorship, sponsorship, and role models being prominent at the individual level ($n = 14$). In contrast, mentorship, sponsorship, and role models were among the least frequently suggested implications for all employees (gender-neutral; $n = 2$). The 13 articles that recommended gender-sensitive training programmes differed slightly in their proposed approaches to helping women by developing paths through which they can obtain and retain leadership roles. For instance, de Klerk and Verreyne (2017) highlighted the importance of training programmes for increasing female leaders' skills and abilities. In contrast, Virick and Greer (2012) focused on elevating the visibility of women (e.g., through high-visibility assignments) to increase the likelihood of women being promoted. One commonality between the two recommendations was that they target the behaviours of individual women. This tendency to target women's behaviour was also evident in the 15 articles that highlighted the importance of women acting as catalysts of gender diversity at organisations. These articles stood in contrast to 10 articles that we classified as gender-sensitive, as they focused on gender biases while recommending to educate and communicate related issues to all employees and managers (e.g., Chin, 2016), shareholders (Mittra et al., 2021), or women (e.g., Badura et al., 2018) as well as to three articles that highlighted the gender-sensitive approach of men acting as catalysts for women.

4.7.4 | Summary

Our analysis revealed that despite a growing trend to delineate structural and cultural practical implications aimed at modifying processes, procedures, and institutionalised gender-neutral practices, a strong emphasis on the individual in terms of gender-sensitive recommendations remains. The classification of articles throughout the ELC allowed for more detailed insights. Specifically, gender-sensitive practical implications have a larger share across all ELC stages except for Reward and Retention (Table 1). The discrepancy between gender-neutral and gender-sensitive recommendations was especially large for Recruitment and Selection. For this stage, only seven articles suggested gender-neutral approaches, whereas 25 recommended gender-sensitive approaches. This discrepancy entails that, especially in recruiting female talent, many of the suggested measures focus on the female candidate. For example, that women from the organisation may serve as recruiters, advocating for the advertisement of development programmes to potential female candidates (see Hentschel et al., 2021), or recommending that the organisation should empower HRM to address inappropriate statements towards women by interviewers (see van Esch et al., 2018). All of these measures aimed at boosting the likelihood of woman ascending to leadership roles.

5 | DISCUSSION

In this review, we identified and mapped organisational context factors influencing women in obtaining and retaining leadership position through the ELC. We next outline the theoretical and practical implications before turning to the future research directions as well as the limitations of this SLR.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

Whereas authors of previous reviews screened the literature through keywords with negative connotations, such as 'career challenges' or 'career obstacles' (e.g., Taparia & Lenka, 2022), we conducted a more neutrally targeted SLR (for example, by including only the keyword 'leader*' in our search string). As a result, we not only identified obstacles for women striving for leadership positions but also found several articles that highlighted unique opportunities or even advantages for women (e.g., Brands et al., 2015; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). From these

findings, we gleaned that actively seeking counterfactuals could be more systematically employed in research on women and leadership. This technique entails contemplating a hypothetical alternative to the actual event or prevailing belief, termed the 'counterfactual' (McDermott, 2023). Doing so allows scholars to examine potential outcomes under the assumption that the opposite of the widely held view is true. For instance, rather than defaulting to the assumption that women face barriers, theory throughout the ELC could be developed differently if it specifies scenarios wherein women encounter neutral or even preferential conditions.

Secondly, our analysis of existing publications' research foci, particularly in terms of how they address individual, cultural, or structural factors within the ELC, reveals a notable variety in research emphasis. For example, a substantial body of research identified in this SLR (23 out of 87 articles) involved studies where scholars considered the wider organisational setting in which women work. In today's diverse working world encompassing various organisational settings—from gig-workers, small startups, and venture capitals to large corporations—recognising the importance of the organisational setting enables HRM practitioners and researchers to meticulously tailor their HRM initiatives to meet the needs of female talent within specific organisational contexts. In terms of levels, we noted a pronounced emphasis on structural factors in Recruitment and Selection, Reward and Retention, and Organisational Setting. In terms of Performance Appraisal, our findings show that research encompasses all three levels—individual, cultural, and structural. These findings indicate that the different stages of the ELC tend to attract distinct research interests, which unveils promising avenues for future research.

Thirdly, we analysed the alignment between the levels as well as the gender-neutrality and gender-sensitivity of the actual findings and the suggested practical implications within the reviewed articles. Our analyses revealed discrepancies between study findings and derived practical implications. For example, while most studies focus on organisational structures, the practical implications predominantly centre on the individual. This discrepancy becomes even more pronounced when considering the orientation of the practical implications, whether gender-neutral or gender-sensitive. To illustrate, while 13 articles recommended the implementation of mentorship and sponsorship programmes as well as role models, only two articles (McDonald & Westphal, 2013; Ramaswami et al., 2010) examined the effectiveness of these programmes. This mismatch is alarming, as the main function of the practical-implications section is to "facilitate [the] implementation of a study's findings" (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010, p. 110).

Even in articles with matching study designs and practical implications concerning gender-neutrality (e.g., collecting data from all employees and suggesting organisational measures addressing all employees) and gender-sensitivity (e.g., collecting data specifically from women and suggesting organisational measures addressing women), there was often a mismatch between what was tested empirically and what was recommended. For instance, Taser-Erdogan (2022) interviewed women about the underrepresentation of women in managerial positions and recommended training programmes to tackle gender bias among male and female employees without investing these programmes.

In sum, in our review, we observed that numerous articles extended their scope to offer practical recommendations that surpassed the direct findings of their respective studies. While we have critiqued this tendency for its potential overreach, we took a different approach in identifying practical implications. Specifically, to genuinely assist practitioners, we meticulously synthesised evidence-based recommendations rooted in the actual findings of all the studies we identified. This approach ensured that our guidance was grounded in empirical evidence and aligned closely with the existing research landscape. However, before sharing these implications, our groundwork has established a platform to delineate future research directions specifying (1) which stages of the ELC could receive more recognition regarding female leadership and organisational context factors, (2) how knowledge can be advanced by further testing the appropriateness of gender-neutral versus gender-sensitive HRM approaches, and (3) why a more nuanced approach to studying female leadership in organisations from an intersectionality perspective is needed.

5.2 | Implications for future research

Based on our review, we identified at least three broad areas for future research. First, our analysis of the ELC revealed that some stages—specifically, Learning and Development ($N = 10$) and the Reward and Retention ($N = 9$)—receive less research attention than others. Even more, for Reward and Retention, scholars have not covered all three research foci. Specifically, for Reward and Retention, scholars have focused on the structural level while neglecting the potential of the individual level, whereas for Learning and Development, only few studies have been conducted for the three levels. Delving into these stages is a promising avenue for future research, as it enables scholars to guide organisations in addressing the individual, cultural, and structural levels from a gender-neutral and gender-sensitive perspective when attempting to empower women.

To illustrate, in recent publications, Bonneywell and Gannon (2022) assessed types of coaching for women as part of a more extensive development programme, and Kimball et al. (2021) compared different leadership development programmes for women. While such studies reflect gender-sensitive approaches targeting the structural level, HRM research could benefit from more detailed insights into the setup of such programmes. For instance, in a recent meta-analysis, Uslu et al. (2022) investigated the effectiveness of different employee training methods and concluded that ‘administering multiple methods may not be uniformly effective; rather, the method of choice may need to be tailored toward the outcomes at hand’ (Uslu et al., 2022, p. 61). In the context of female leadership and organisational context factors, HRM scholars could investigate whether specific training methods (e.g., web-based, face-to-face, individual-based, group-based trainings) are more suitable depending on the recipients of such training programmes as well as the targeted outcome variables (e.g., advance skillset, retain employees, tackle biases).

Concerning Reward and Retention, we found a strong focus on the structural level, which can be explained by most articles centring around turnover rates (e.g., Samuelson et al., 2019) and monetary compensation (Malhotra et al., 2021). However, considering that overall, around one 10th of the articles in our review could be assigned to this category and that women continue to face burdens (e.g., flexible schedules) that make it more difficult for them to retain in organisations (Thomas et al., 2023), HRM scholars should focus their efforts more firmly on this stage. For example, to better understand Reward and Retention, scholars could test the effectiveness of HRM practices specifically tailored to women, such as analysing whether HRM activities targeting the 3 Ms (i.e., menstruation, maternity, and menopause; Atkinson et al., 2021) can increase organisations’ success in retaining female leaders.

Secondly, a pertinent issue across all stages was that the research focus was often misaligned with the actual practices implemented by organisations or with the recommendations made by scholars for what companies should do. To address this issue, more experimental field studies—also referred to as ‘intervention studies’—could offer a promising future research avenue. Specifically, intervention studies could prove instrumental in validating the effectiveness of recommendations provided to women (e.g., in the practical implications section) for obtaining and retaining leadership positions. Whereas most extant research focuses on the somewhat ‘easier’ assessment of women’s current situation in organisations (e.g., through archival data, interviews, or surveys), this limits the ability to draw causal conclusions of theoretically proposed effects (Antonakis et al., 2010). Intervention studies, in contrast, shift the focus from merely understanding the present conditions to actively testing and verifying the efficacy of measures and policy recommendations.

Nevertheless, intervention studies should not be misconstrued as a cure-all solution; they have their limitations. For example, field experiments tend to be somewhat limited in scope (i.e., they test the effects of a specific measure), are susceptible to the influence of organisational changes such as restructuring initiatives (Olsen et al., 2008), and are often conducted in a single organisational setting (i.e., generalisability concerns). Moreover, to conduct an intervention study, HRM scholars must obtain access to employees and/or leaders in organisations, which often entails overcoming bureaucratic and economic obstacles (Horwitz & Horwitz, 2012). Regardless, these difficulties should not deter researchers from striving to address the fundamental question of ‘What works?’.

As a third future research direction, extant research still has a rather narrow focus on gender irrespective of other demographic attributes, thereby neglecting the notion that 'experiences and career progression of women with traditionally marginalised identities' (Thomas et al., 2023, p. 31) may be different from those of more privileged women. Historically, diversity scholars have increasingly acknowledged that people hold several identities, which constitute and reinforce one another in a dynamic process (Shields, 2008). One theoretical starting point to address these multiple identities (Petsko et al., 2022) could be the investigation of identity-conscious interventions (Plaut et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022) that consider gender and other dimensions (e.g., race, age, sexual orientation) that influence identity (i.e., belongingness to a group). Illustrating the potential of such more nuanced perspectives, a study with a representative sample of more than 300,000 employees did not just find that LGBT employees reported lower work experience than non-LGBT employees but also that LGBT women felt significantly less respected and empowered in their workplace than did LGBT men (Cech & Rothwell, 2020). For HRM scholars, these findings indicate that implementing HRM interventions targeting women's advancement in organisations may miss the intended effect when other characteristics of these women (e.g., their sexual orientation, age, or ethnicity) are not considered.

Applying this to the relatively under-researched Learning and Development stage, scholars could investigate the effect of organisational diversity claims on the enrolment of female talent from various racial backgrounds in development programmes, similar to assessing organisational business versus social claims on gender composition (Abraham & Burbano, 2022). Moreover, revisiting our recommendation for Reward and Retention, which involves implementing HRM activities addressing menstruation, maternity, and menopause, scholars could broaden such initiatives by studying the effects of offers specifically tailored for women from marginalised groups. Taking such ideas even further, recent advancements of a lens-based approach to intersectionality have stated that a person could perceive someone holding multiple social identities (e.g., a black LGBT woman) through a simplistic lens (e.g., the lens of race) or a complex lens (e.g., a race-by-gender lens; Petsko et al., 2022). Accordingly, future research could investigate the effectiveness of HRM practices for women with different demographic characteristics (e.g., age, ethnicity) and simultaneously account for the intersectionality lenses applied by perceivers (i.e., supervisors, colleagues, and employees). Doing so would not only allow for the consideration, revelation, and, ideally, elimination of biased intersectionality lenses but also help create more gender-inclusive HRM practices in the long term.

5.3 | Implications for practice

To provide an overview of practical implications for HRM departments, we developed Table 4. Here, we extracted and aggregated all evidence-based research findings reported in the identified articles and sorted them by focus (individual, cultural, and structural).

Beginning with the individual level, we noted, for example, that although several articles broadly suggested training programmes (see Table 3), the descriptions often fall short in specifying what should be developed. Our evidence-based overview offers concrete insights into the skills that could be taught in such programmes (e.g., servant leadership skills; see Table 4). Similarly, the practical implication of 'offering mentoring programs for female leaders' tends to remain vague; yet, we do have some studies suggesting more specific design features for such programs (e.g., senior-male mentors in male-dominated industries, combining individual and group coaching) (cf. Bonneywell & Gannon, 2022; Ramaswami et al., 2010).

On the cultural level, a plethora of HRM activities seeks to address biases and initiate culture change. In addition to training employees and leaders, an often-overlooked recommendation is to explicitly encourage evaluators to reflect on their (potentially biased) perceptions when assessing female leaders' expertise because the recognition of expertise tends to be influenced by the evaluators' attributes (Joshi, 2014). Additionally, drawing from the contact hypothesis (Binder et al., 2009), it can be an easy-to-implement recommendation to create more

TABLE 4 Evidence-based practical implications for HRM to support women in obtaining and retaining leadership positions based on the $N = 87$ articles identified in our review.

| Types of organisational measures | Evidence-based practical implications for practitioners |
|---|--|
| Measures targeting the individual level | <p>Leadership skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase servant (Lemoine & Blum, 2019) leadership skills as well as agentic behaviours of female leaders (Badura et al., 2018; Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015) • Develop a cooperative climate which increases women's leadership aspirations (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2017) • Address female employees' lower career motivation due to a lack of organisational development opportunities through allocating more training and development opportunities, career encouragement and challenging work to female employees (Hoobler et al., 2011) <p>Mentoring and networking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide mentoring opportunities especially for female first-time directors (McDonald & Westphal, 2013) • Increase the visibility of women through senior-male mentors in male-dominated industries (Ramaswami et al., 2010) • Help women to gain social capital by leveraging the power of their own networking approach (de Klerk & Verreynne, 2017) • Provide a combination of individual and group coaching for developing female leaders (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2022) |
| Measures targeting the cultural level | <p>Biases</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on the (biased) perceptions of evaluators when evaluating female leaders' expertise because the recognition of expertise is mainly driven by the evaluators' attributes (Joshi, 2014) • Create positive experiences for employees with female leaders to reduce gender biases (Duehr & Bono, 2006) <p>Cultural change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question the status quo and confront social defences, such as hegemonic narratives, which maintain existing power structures and hinder the advancement of women (Padavic et al., 2020) • Position women as catalysts for cultural transformation because they cultivate a more female-friendly culture (Tate & Yang, 2015) • Promote the use of gender-inclusive language rather than masculine generic terms (e.g., head instead of master; Bailey et al., 2022) • Organisations should improve their involvement (i.e., most employees are highly involved in their work) and mission (i.e., there is a long-term purpose and direction) culture (Roebuck et al., 2019) |
| Measures targeting the structural level | <p>Job application</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on wording in job advertisements because the wording impacts female candidates' feelings of belongingness when the recruiter is male (Hentschel et al., 2021) • Reflect on how to communicate rejections to applicants against the backdrop that women are less likely to re-apply after a job rejection (Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2017) • Consider the implementation of a female quota as it is associated with mixed findings in increasing the representation of women in corporate boards (Seierstad et al., 2021), and in top executive or top earning positions (Maida & Weber, 2022) |

TABLE 4 (Continued)

| Types of organisational measures | Evidence-based practical implications for practitioners |
|----------------------------------|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection process must clearly define the required and the preferred qualifications (van Esch et al., 2018) |
| | Hiring |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise that the chance of new job openings being filled with women increases when the share of female organisational members is higher (Cohen & Broschak, 2013) • The appointment of a woman CEO may help foster more balanced boards over time, particularly in national contexts of lower gender equality (Halliday et al., 2021) |
| | Communication |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen communication plans that support the introduction of quotas for women in leadership positions, thereby particularly providing narratives about women's agency and communality (Mölders et al., 2018) • Organisations must do more to combat negative assumptions surrounding the appointment of female directors, for instance, by being more transparent and systematic regarding how directors are nominated and selected (Malhotra, 2021) • Organisations should state that all stakeholders are supportive of the appointment of a new leader prior to his or her entry into the organisation (Rink et al., 2013) |
| | Career progression |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish an opt-out instead of an opt-in mechanism for leadership succession (Erkal et al., 2022) • Reflect on performance appraisal by supervisors against the backdrop that women are held to stricter standards for job promotions (Lyness & Heilman, 2006) • Encourage male higher-level managers to empower women because male predecessors can pave the way for female CEOs through gender-inclusive gatekeeping (Dwivedi et al., 2018) • Consider that better performing incumbent managers are more likely to suggest a female successor (Virick & Greer, 2012) • Reflect on promotion packages against the backdrop that job promotions impact women's (compared to men's) job satisfaction to a lesser positive extent (Otto et al., 2022) |
| | Number of women |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the number of women (especially middle managers) to achieve a more equal gender ratio and higher leadership aspirations among women (Ali et al., 2021) • Increase the share of women in top leadership as it supports further growth of women in managerial positions (Kurtulus & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012) • As a succession planning practice, increase the amount of diverse talent to prevent tokenism and related effects (Greer & Virick, 2008) • Increase the proportion of women represented in the candidate pool to enhance the probability that a women will be selected (Tinsley et al., 2017) • Hiring female managers results in the hiring of more female managers in the subsequent period (Bossler et al., 2020) • Since women are less willing to lead teams with a male majority than those with a female majority, quotas may benefit not only the women directly affected by |

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

| Types of organisational measures | Evidence-based practical implications for practitioners |
|----------------------------------|--|
| | <p>them but also women who find themselves in minority positions (Born et al., 2022)</p> <p>Workforce composition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware of the impact of mixed-gender group compositions because extant findings are mixed. On the one hand, McGinn and Milkman (2013) found higher career mobility among junior professionals with same-sex leaders. On the other hand, scholars reported lower turnover rates (Ali et al., 2015) for gender-mixed groups <p>Compensation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appoint women as the chair of compensation committees (Cook et al., 2019) or other committees (Malhotra et al., 2021) because it positively affects executive compensation |

touchpoints and positive experiences for employees with female leaders to reduce gender biases (Duehr & Bono, 2006).

Most evidence-based recommendations can be given for the structural level. Starting with the first stage of the ELC, Recruitment and Selection, evidence indicates that organisations are well advised to carefully choose the wording throughout the process, including their job advertisements (i.e., language of belongingness to increase women's intentions to apply; e.g., Hentschel et al., 2021) and rejection messages (because women are less likely to re-apply after a job rejection, e.g., Brands & Fernandez-Mateo, 2017). Studies also point to the notion that organisations should not underestimate the importance of female representation in the workforce for attracting new female talent (e.g., Maida & Weber, 2022); this seems to be interpreted as a signal that the organisation not only talks about gender diversity but lives up to this promise. In that regard, it is also interesting that a female quota and succession planning practices focusing on increasing the amount of diverse talent are suggested to contribute to reaching a 'critical mass' of female leaders that is sufficient to prevent tokenism and related negative effects. In terms of communication and career progression along the ELC, our review identified some out-of-the-box recommendations that can help HRM practitioners to increase the share of women in leadership positions. For example, they may utilise an opt-out instead of an opt-in mechanism for leadership succession, such that all potentially eligible employees are automatically considered for an open leadership position unless they opt out of the promotion process (Erkal et al., 2022). When actually promoting women, HRM departments may want to consider redesigning their benefit package, given that the promotion itself increases women's job satisfaction to a lesser extent compared to men's (Otto et al., 2022). Moreover, when promoting a female leader, it is important to prevent potential backlash (i.e., 'she only got the job because she is a women') by being transparent and systematic regarding how candidates were nominated and selected (Malhotra et al., 2021) as well as emphasising that all stakeholders are supportive of the appointment of a this new leader (Rink et al., 2013).

5.4 | Limitations

While we employed an SLR with a transparent methodological approach appropriate to answer our research question (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), we did not conduct a scoping review (Grant & Booth, 2009), nor did we consult a panel of experts from academia and practice beforehand (Sharma & Bansal, 2023). Adopting this approach may have led to the identification of additional relevant concepts or phenomena, or the generation of further research

questions (Rojon et al., 2021; Rosenberg et al., 2021). In our case, such an approach could have particularly facilitated critical reflection on the inclusion of grey literature and potentially broadened our search terms related to organisational context factors in our search string. As the scoping-review methodology is gaining popularity and relevance (Levac et al., 2010), future scholars could complement our findings by conducting such a review as a precursor to an SLR (Peters et al., 2020). Furthermore, the scope of our review was confined to peer-reviewed articles published from 2000 onwards. While selecting a cut-off year is a common practice in research (e.g., see for example Guchait et al., 2023; Argyropoulou & Spyridakis, 2022), doing so may somewhat limit the findings, as relevant literature published outside the investigated timeframe was not assessed.

Second, while the SLR method has many advantages for understanding the overall landscape of research findings, it is not immune to the risk of publication bias (Rynes & Bartunek, 2017). Additionally, despite our efforts to reduce selection bias (Ferguson & Brannick, 2012) through an expansive online search complementing our journal screening approach, eliminating this risk was challenging. For example, we did not account for insights from unpublished research. In addition, the papers included in this review may have carried inherent biases (Ioannidis, 2005). For instance, organisations with a proclivity towards diversity may be more inclined to participate in studies about female leadership, potentially skewing the results towards these types of organisations.

Lastly, we relied on the ELC stages and drew on the dichotomous categorisation of practical implications as gender-neutral or gender-sensitive. In this way, we could contribute significantly to the ongoing debate on gender-neutral and gender-sensitive organisational measures. However, in the future, scholars may want to consider more continuous classifications, such as viewing gender on a spectrum (Hopkins & Richardson, 2021). This approach would enable evaluations of how practical implications either contest conventional gender roles or promote gender diversity and inclusion within the workplace.

6 | CONCLUSION

Guided by the research questions 'Which organisational context factors have been studied in relation to women obtaining and retaining leadership positions throughout the ELC?' and 'What underlying gender-neutral and gender-sensitive assumptions manifest in the practical implications derived from extant studies, and how are they aligned with the foci of the studies in question?', we conducted an SLR. Aggregating and analysing extant research, we not only outlined a discrepancy between what is empirically tested and ultimately practically concluded from such findings but also have provided scholars with specific research directions. With this, we hope to inspire scholars to continuously investigate the outcomes of workplace interventions to obtain and retain women in leadership positions. Concurrently, we aim to empower practitioners with evidence-based strategies for practical application in their daily work environments. Ultimately, it is not mere intentions that will secure women a place at the leadership table but the application of empirically investigated methods.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Some articles do not include a separate practical implication section. For these articles, we screened the discussion section following the presentation of findings to identify the authors' implications for practice.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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