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Gender composition at work and women's career satisfaction: An international study of 35 societies

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Abstract

Drawing from status characteristics theory, we develop a multilevel model to explain the relationships between gender composition (e.g., female-female supervisor-subordinate dyads, a female majority at the next higher

Abbreviations: CFA, confirmatory factor analysis; CFI, Comparative Fit Index; HLM, hierarchical linear modeling; ICC, intraclass correlation coefficients; MGCF, multi-group confirmatory factor analysis; MNEs, multinational enterprises; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; TLI, Tucker–Lewis Index; WBL, Women, Business and the Law Index.

Jane L. Y. Terpstra-Tong, Len J. Treviño and Alara Cansu Yaman contributed equally.

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level, and a female majority at the same job level) in the workplace and women's career satisfaction. We hypothesise that working with a female supervisor and a female majority at the same level will be negatively related to women's career satisfaction, while a female majority at the next higher level will be positively related to women's career satisfaction. Moreover, we propose that formal societal (gender-equality) institutions and informal cultural (gender-egalitarian) values, each has a moderating effect on the impact of gender compositions on women's career satisfaction. Our results from a multilevel analysis of 2291 women across 35 societies support the three hypothesised main effects. Whereas institutions that support gender equality weaken the positive effect of working with a female majority at the next higher level, they amplify the negative effect of a female majority at the same hierarchical level. Our findings highlight the complex and paradoxical nature of gender composition effects on women's career satisfaction. We discuss the theoretical contributions of our findings and their implications for the diversity management practices of multinational enterprises.

KEYWORDS

career satisfaction, gender status beliefs, intragender competition/cooperation, paradox, queen bee phenomenon, status characteristics theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

The proportion of jobs filled by women globally has increased substantially over the last several decades (Fields & Blum, 1997; Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2018). In response, a research stream has emerged regarding the impact of gender composition (e.g., female-majority, male-majority, and mixed-gender work environments) on individual and team outcomes. In the context of women at work, some notable contributions include Engel et al. (2023), who found that women considering joining a start-up are sensitive to organisational gender composition and less willing to apply for jobs in start-ups with a minority of women. In addition, Born et al. (2022) reported that women were less willing to lead than men, irrespective of team gender composition, but more willing to lead a female-majority team than a male-majority team. Moreover, Bradley et al. (2021) found that female-majority teams performed better than male-majority teams when interpersonal dislikes were present among team members. Furthermore, Bordalo et al. (2019) discovered that beliefs about one's ability are more gender-stereotyped in mixed-gender pairs than in same-gender pairs. These findings complement one of the most popular research areas in gender composition research, namely board gender composition and its impact on organisational decisions and performance (Ahmed & Atif, 2021; Li & Zhang, 2019; Romano et al., 2020).

Although the aforementioned studies indicate that substantial strides have been made in understanding the impact of gender composition on individual, team, and organisational outcomes, little is known about how gender composition relates to the subjective evaluation of careers, including career satisfaction. This is unfortunate, as careers are important for the vast majority of people (Anderson et al., 2015), and career satisfaction is the most widely used indicator of how people view and evaluate their careers (Heslin & Latzke, 2019; Hu et al., 2022; Latan, Jabbour, Jabour, Ali & Pereira, 2022; Terpstra-Tong et al., 2022). Indeed, career satisfaction reflects individuals' evaluation of their career progression and prospects (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Greenhaus et al., 1990). The importance of the subjective perspective of careers has been strongly emphasised for its utility in explaining and predicting how individuals feel and act in organisational environments (Dries, 2020). For example, career satisfaction is related to willingness to share knowledge with colleagues (Kundi et al., 2023), innovative behaviours (Zhu et al., 2022), and turnover intentions (Zhu et al., 2019). Therefore, how gender composition in the organisational environment relates to career satisfaction can provide insights into how employers can retain women employees and motivate them to perform well (cf. Ng & Feldman, 2014).

The inclusion of more women in leadership positions has been found to play a crucial role in facilitating greater women's representation in lower organisational levels (Cohen & Broschak, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2023). Prompted by this finding and the potential outcomes associated with increased representation of women, we extend the gender composition literature by investigating whether greater representation of women at various levels within an organisation would similarly lead to higher career satisfaction—a psychological state that most employees and employers would aspire to achieve. This leads to our research question: To what extent does gender composition contribute to the career satisfaction of women employees? Answering this question is important because gender composition in an organisation is a modifiable social structure achievable through deliberate organisational intervention, similar to changing the gender mix on a corporate board. As such, we believe that modifying gender composition could be a tactic that organisations use to achieve their workplace gender equity objectives. Additionally, we argue that gender composition is as important as increasing the sheer number of women given its association with desirable organisational outcomes. To this end, we investigate three alternatives. First, we examine the extent to which working with a female supervisor (i.e., a dyad) is related to career satisfaction for women subordinates. Second, we study the extent to which working with a female majority at the next higher level (i.e., a cross-level group) is related to career satisfaction for women. Third, we evaluate the extent to which working with a female majority at the same hierarchical level (i.e., a peer group) is related to women's career satisfaction. We select these gender composition relationships because they are the most immediate and proximal interpersonal contexts that individuals encounter in the workplace.

In developing the theoretical foundation for this study, we draw primarily from status characteristics theory (Ridgeway, 2011, 2019) to conceptualise the potential intragender dynamics inherent in the aforementioned gender composition contexts, ultimately impacting women's career satisfaction. According to Ridgeway (2019), status refers to the comparative social ranking of individuals or groups, determined by the level of honour, respect, and esteem accorded to them. Status, deeply ingrained in people's minds, acts as a 'cultural schema that individuals employ to manage situations where they are either cooperatively interdependent to achieve desirable goals, or competitively interdependent to enhance their personal outcomes from collaborative efforts' (Ridgeway & Markus, 2022, p. 3). Therefore, status beliefs and perceptions shape how individuals respond to social situations. Extrapolating on this point, we posit that status beliefs and perceptions also guide individuals to assess the extent to which they perceive a situation as competitive or cooperative, or both. Accordingly, we posit that gender composition represents a context within which women engage in competition, cooperation or both in the pursuit of career satisfaction. We argue that the balance between competition and cooperation varies according to women's psychological propensities in coping with different gender composition contexts in organisational settings. In the workplace, this competition-cooperation dynamic is likely more pronounced among women than men, given the often-reported female-on-female hostility and competitive behaviours towards one another (Apicella et al., 2017; Heim et al., 2001; Mizrahi, 2003). However, women are also known for celebrating sisterhood and unity in some

contexts (Huffman, 2013; McNulty, 2018), suggesting a complex relationship between collaboration and rivalry. Furthermore, to explain how women respond to competitive situations in the workplace, we highlight the ‘invisible burdens’ (i.e., disadvantages relative to men) they tend to endure at work (Ridgeway & Markus, 2022, p. 627).

To develop our three main hypotheses, we begin with a review of the central tenets of status characteristics theory and the cooperation-competition framework, and we supplement them with additional conceptual tools commonly used in the gender studies literature to unearth the challenges that women face in a given context. For example, Hypothesis 1 is related to female-female subordinate-supervisor dyads and, as such, we turn to the literature on the queen bee phenomenon to support our theorisation, given the frequently reported tension between female dyads. For Hypothesis 2, which focuses on cross-level groups, we adopt the social comparison lens to explicate the possible competitive or cooperative dynamics given the obvious status difference and numerical differentials. For Hypothesis 3, which is related to peer groups, we focus on the career-as-a-tournament model due to the embedded competition among peers in this context. While these three conceptual tools may appear unrelated, they all fall under the domain of concepts that are useful for explaining competition/cooperation dynamics and women's responses in the workplace. Paired with status characteristics theory, these conceptual tools enable us to capture the dominant intragender dynamics inherent in a given gender composition context, and how the nature of the context affects women's perceptions of their careers.

To this end, we utilise a primary international dataset of 2291 participants spanning 35 societies. As individuals' behaviours are nested in societies, and careers evolve within ecosystems and external environments, societal factors exert simultaneous influences on women's career perceptions (Baruch, 2015; Kossek et al., 2017). Furthermore, gender status, as a cultural schema, may vary across cultures and, as such, its impact could be affected by the prevailing status perceptions towards women in a given society. Therefore, we include formal institutions (gender equality laws and regulations) and informal cultural environments (gender egalitarianism values) (North, 1990) that shape members' gender-related responses and behaviours, as societal moderators in our multilevel models. By exploring these relationships across diverse cultural settings, our study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between organisational gender composition and women's career satisfaction. Figure 1 provides our hypothetical model.

Our multi-society, multilevel study makes several important contributions to the gender composition literature. First, investigating the relationship between gender composition and career satisfaction seen through the lens of status characteristics theory and the paradoxical competition-cooperation perspective represents a novel theoretical approach. While the competition-cooperation perspective is often utilised in the strategy literature, it has

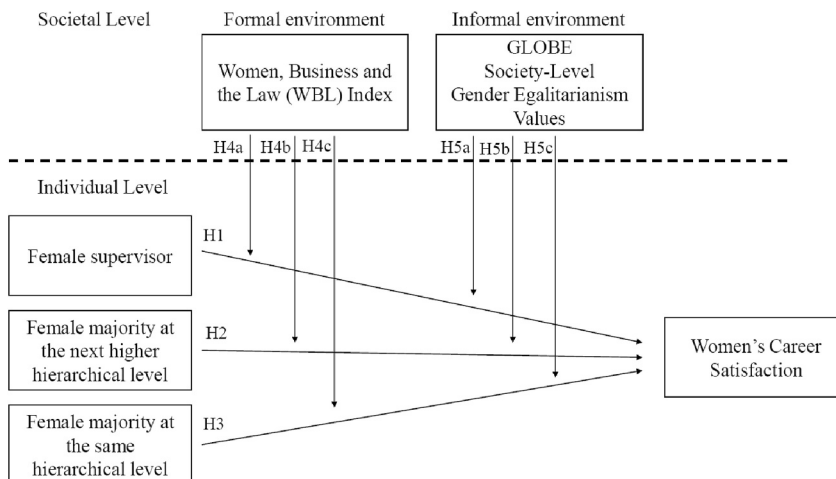


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

rarely been applied in workplace behavioural studies. This is evidenced by the call to pursue this line of research by Kark, Yacobovitz, Seagel-Caspi and Kalker-Zimmerman (2023). Second, our findings enhance our understanding of contextual determinants of career satisfaction, thereby addressing the call for more context-related research on career success (Spurk et al., 2019) and expanding the knowledge boundaries of the career success literature. Third, our dataset, which includes data from 35 societies, is a significant improvement over prior single-country research. As such, our cross-societal study broadens the geographic boundaries of the literature, allowing us to develop globally generalisable insights (Gelfand, 2024; Hennekam et al., 2017). Specifically, our multi-society findings enable us to discern which individual-level findings are likely to be global (in the absence of a societal moderating effect) and which are likely to be idiosyncratic (in the presence of a societal moderating effect). Where societal moderating effects are identified, we assess whether the societal influence is supplementary (magnifying the individual-level effect) or complementary (weakening the individual-level effect). By examining these relationships cross-culturally, we explore the nuances and deepen our understanding of the impact of gender composition in the workplace. This is crucial for theoretical refinement, as multi-society studies help to clarify the geographic boundary conditions of theories that have been derived from single-level studies. Fourth, the integration of our multilevel research design with our multi-societal dataset addresses concerns regarding individual-level relationships nested in societal-level macroeconomic environments (Smith & Bond, 2019), allowing us to delineate the variance explained at the individual-level versus the societal-level and yielding more precise findings (Hox et al., 2017).

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Our theoretical framework begins with status characteristics theory, wherein we highlight the impact of lower status on women's professional lives. We then elaborate on the interplay between competition and cooperation in an examination of the impact of gender composition on women's strategies for career satisfaction, setting the stage for a deeper discussion in the hypothesis development section.

2.1 | Status characteristics theory

Women's professional experiences in the workplace can be understood through status characteristics theory (Berger et al., 1977; Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). Status refers to the esteem, respect and honour accorded to an individual or a group in comparison to others, based on social characteristics such as gender or race (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006; Ridgeway, 1991). People of higher status are perceived to have higher general competence and ability across tasks and domains (Bunderson, 2003). Status matters in all social relations as it shapes other- and self-expectations about how one should act, react, treat others, and be treated (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022). In essence, it acts as a basis for the differentiation of expectations. In the workplace, status beliefs affect employees' perceived self-competence and others' performance perceptions of them, thereby influencing their access to resources and opportunities (Berger et al., 1977; Correll & Ridgeway, 2006; Ridgeway et al., 2022). As such, lower-status people, compared to higher-status people, face certain 'invisible burdens' (Ridgeway et al., 2022, p. 627). Specifically, women tend to be perceived as less competent than men, as well as less fit for having authority (Ridgeway, 2011). These are burdens with which men are not encumbered and of which men typically are not even aware that women are so encumbered, simply because women are perceived as lower status relative to men.

Gender, as a prototypical diffuse status characteristic (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006) and a primary status schema, functions as a mental shortcut. It enables others to efficiently gauge an individual's competence and abilities, even when there is limited knowledge about the person's specific characteristics and capabilities (DiMaggio, 1997;

Ellemers, 2018; Ridgeway, 2011). This framing mechanism has led to pervasive gender stereotypes within the workplace, where women are often perceived to be lacking the competencies and abilities necessary for high-status roles (Katila & Meriläinen, 1999; Ridgeway & Correll, 2006). Instead, they are expected to exhibit typical communal characteristics such as nurture, expressiveness and compassion. It is crucial to recognise that these gender status beliefs are common, consensual knowledge operating on an unconscious and implicit level, and that they are automatically activated when people (women and men) try to make sense of social situations (Eagly et al., 2020; Ridgeway, 2011).

Individuals with higher ascribed status are offered more opportunities to participate in and influence their organisations because they represent an 'ideal worker' image (Ridgeway et al., 2022, p. 627). Consequently, they receive more positive evaluations from others and their contributions to the group are perceived as more valuable than those with lower ascribed status (Correll, 2004), all of which lead to more career support and resources (Spurk et al., 2019). Given these advantages, individuals with higher ascribed status (e.g., men) are more prone to demonstrate initiative, share their ideas, and even interrupt others in workplace settings (McDonald et al., 2004), further reinforcing their elevated status. Conversely, status beliefs provide normative guidance for women to assume a subordinate role in the workplace, encouraging them to downplay their contributions and exhibit less initiative than men (Weck et al., 2022). Unfortunately, this creates a self-fulfilling prophecy (Cohen & Roper, 1972), reinforcing women's inferior position within an organisation.

In spite of these obstacles, career-oriented women can alter others' perceptions of their status and hence lessen the impact of invisible burdens they face by achieving specific status characteristics. Specific status characteristics convey information about an individual's competence or expertise in relation to a well-defined and identifiable task (Berger et al., 1977). Working diligently and displaying evidence of performance are effective ways to enhance the perception of specific status characteristics. Indeed, cross-societal studies (e.g., Ralston et al., 2024) have found that women are as proactive as men in applying organisationally beneficial, self-serving, and image-building upward influence strategies, and these strategies can be applied in the process of navigating one's career.

However, because of their diffuse lower-status characteristic and being perceived as less-competent than men, women tend to not only outperform their male counterparts to prove their abilities, but additionally, they tend to shoulder the 'burden of proof' (Wagner & Berger, 2017) by demonstrating their relative performance. This burden has been referred to as double standards (Foschi, 1996), and in practice, it means that the performance of lower-status individuals (e.g., women) is usually highly scrutinised because exceptional performance by them is unexpected, based on their lower status-based expectations. These deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about competence influence everyday interactions, policies, and job evaluations, mostly disadvantaging women (Ridgeway, 2011; Treviño et al., 2018; Webber & Giuffre, 2019). To effectively counter these cultural beliefs about competence, we posit that women must coordinate their social relations with others by strategically engaging in either competition or cooperation, or both, with their colleagues (Ridgeway, 2011, 2019).

2.2 | Cooperative and competitive interpersonal dynamics

The competition-cooperation interdependence reflects a fundamental tension in human society and in the workplace, where people need to cooperate with others to gain access to resources necessary for survival, while simultaneously competing with them to maximise what they can obtain from these cooperative endeavours (Ridgeway, 2019; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022). In the workplace, competitive interdependence refers to individuals engaging in conflict over finite resources or rewards, manifesting as a drive to outperform others to secure individual benefits. In contrast, cooperative interdependence manifests in individuals working together harmoniously to attain shared goals. This involves mutual assistance, information sharing, and coordinated efforts to maximise joint outcomes, mirroring women's communal gendered expectations (Eagly & Wood, 2012). These competition versus cooperation social situations represent a context in which the gender game ubiquitously comes into play (Ridgeway, 2011).

The competition-cooperation paradox is complex and can lead to various outcomes, as cooperative situations can generate promotive interaction through which members achieve positive outcomes at group and individual levels (Tjosvold & Johnson, 2013). As detailed by Tjosvold and Johnson (2013, pp. 418–420), promotive interaction involves a mutual exchange of help and support, both in terms of task accomplishment and the sharing of valued resources and information, and in terms of reciprocal critique and reinforcement of each other's work and collaborative efforts. The latter stimulates both parties to engage in critical thinking, and mutually motivates them to strive towards higher accomplishments. These multi-dimensional interactions not only advance the accomplishment of collective goals but also enhance personal development, job satisfaction, and career satisfaction of the individual (Tjosvold & Johnson, 2013). Conversely, a competitive situation could be a double-edged sword, as competition can motivate people to engage more at work, but it can also lead to burnout, with a negative net effect on career satisfaction (Spurk et al., 2021).

Entering a competition is a natural response to scarcity of valued resources, especially when individuals' status is at risk. Indeed, status within an organisation is often a zero-sum resource, as Frank (1985) described, and therefore, employees frequently evaluate whether their status is threatened (Anderson et al., 2006). When a threat is perceived, heightened competition is likely to ensue. The evaluation can be guided by the perceived distance of a status gap that involves social comparison. Following the central idea proposed by Reh et al. (2022), social comparison that is related to proximal status gaps (e.g., among peers) as opposed to distal status gaps (e.g., between employees of different hierarchical levels), can trigger a status threat. Conversely, when individuals perceive distal status gaps with those with whom they interact, they are likely to see these gaps as inspirational, rather than threatening, and to respond with self-improvement behaviours, such as the pursuit of growth.

In addition, women tend to shy away from competition (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007), and they compete against women more often than against men (Buunk et al., 2011). Further, their approach to competition distinctively diverges from that of men, influenced by physiological and safety considerations that lead to an innate inclination towards avoiding direct competition (Vaillancourt & Krems, 2018). When engaging in competitive behaviours, women are more likely to adopt low-risk, indirect strategies, in contrast to the direct and overt tactics typically employed by men. The competitive manoeuvres of women often manifest through nuanced social dynamics, including social exclusion, undermining, and the formation of alliances (Mavin et al., 2014; Vaillancourt & Krems, 2018). These strategies aim to subtly diminish a rival's status without engaging in open conflict, reflecting a sophisticated application of social networks and a concern for maintaining communal harmony while pursuing competitive advantage. This complex interplay between competition and social interaction highlights the unique ways in which women navigate competitive environments, employing strategies that leverage social intelligence and relational acumen to achieve their objectives in social relations.

With the background information on the prevalence of competition and cooperation in the workplace, the invisible burdens women bear, their preference for avoiding competition, and their inclination towards indirect competitive strategies, we will further elaborate in the next section on how these factors affect the impact of the three different gender compositions on women's career satisfaction. The nature of competitive environments, coupled with women's distinctive approaches to competition and cooperation, significantly impacts their career satisfaction. This impact likely leads to reduced satisfaction in highly competitive settings where their indirect strategies and communal expectations may be undervalued or misperceived.

3 | HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

3.1 | Interpersonal dynamics with a female supervisor

The relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate usually involves both cooperative and competitive interdependence. However, we argue that in female-female supervisor-subordinate dyads, the interpersonal

dynamics likely exhibit more competition than cooperation than in male-male dyads or in mixed-gender dyads. We posit so based on the diffuse gender status characteristics that advantage men in the workplace, and the associated queen bee and upward challenge effects to which we now turn.

Due to universal gender status beliefs, every woman enters the workplace under the weight of invisible burdens. As society tends to view women through a communal lens due to status beliefs, the qualities of caring and nurturing are emphasised (Conway et al., 1996; Zheng et al., 2018). This places women in a lower-status position in the corporate domain because the ideal, promotable worker is typically portrayed as male, characterised by qualities such as drivenness, dominance, and assertiveness (Ridgeway & Markus, 2022). In most workplaces, masculinity, traditionally associated with men, is still highly valued and rewarded, whereas femininity, typically associated with women, is still undervalued (Carlsson, 2020; Hechavarria & Ingram, 2016). When women attain supervisory roles, their supervisor status does not eliminate their diffuse gender status; instead, they are burdened with dual roles (i.e., a double bind)—being a supervisor and being a woman (Bierema, 2016). With the persisting background effects of lower-status, female supervisors are often viewed as less competent than their male counterparts (Ayalew et al., 2021; Samuel & Mokoaleli, 2017). Thus, while women tend to see and treat their male managers as ‘managers’, subordinate women tend to see and treat their female managers as ‘women’ (Mavin, 2006). Therefore, they are more inclined to exhibit competitive behaviours toward a female supervisor than toward a male supervisor, resulting in what we label, an upward challenge (cf. Kark, et al., 2023).

This hierarchical competition operates in both directions, and it could be directed downwards where a female supervisor exhibits competitive behaviours toward subordinate women, resulting in the ‘queen bee’ phenomenon (Grangeiro et al., 2024; Staines et al., 1974). The queen bee phenomenon describes behaviours exhibited by successful women leaders in mixed-gender workplaces that hinder the advancement of their female colleagues in lower-level positions. Specifically, ‘queen bees’ may speak negatively about their female subordinates’ leadership abilities as they perceive them as competitors for high-status roles (Ellemers et al., 2004; Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011). The queen bee phenomenon refers to intragender dynamics involving women, but not men (Mavin et al., 2014). Intragender competition is more common than intergender competition for both women and men (Sheppard & Aquino, 2017) because people tend to compare themselves with similar (e.g., same-gender), instead of dissimilar (e.g., opposite-gender), others (Garcia et al., 2013). Applying the aforementioned status gap analysis (Reh et al., 2022), the diffuse status between women and men sets them apart, making a male supervisor less likely to be a competitor to a subordinate woman. Therefore, we propose that the queen bee mindset subconsciously held by female supervisors, coupled with the competitive tendency of female subordinates, increase tension in this dyadic relationship. This tension may lead subordinate women to perceive less career support from a female supervisor than they would perceive from a male supervisor. Additionally, due to the proximal distance in the dyad, the tension experienced may significantly reduce career satisfaction of women who work with a female supervisor compared to those who do not. Thus, we hypothesise:

H1 *Working with a female supervisor is negatively related to women's career satisfaction.*

3.2 | Interpersonal dynamics with a female majority at the next higher hierarchical level

In female-female dyadic relationships, we have hypothesised a negative impact on subordinate women's career satisfaction. Conversely, in situations where a junior woman interacts with a female majority at the next higher hierarchical level, a scenario not dominated by a single female supervisor, we propose a positive effect on career satisfaction. This difference stems from the increased number of potential competitors, which likely reduces the competitiveness among junior women. As Garcia et al. (2013) reported, individuals exhibit lower competitiveness with a greater number of competitors, perceiving diminished odds of success and a reduced motivation to compete.

Therefore, gender composition in this context implies that junior women may feel less competitive with a group of higher-ranked women than with a single female supervisor.

The psychological distance argument (Lieberman & Trope, 2014; Reh et al., 2022) indicates that junior women feel closer to their immediate supervisor than to senior women, making the latter less relevant competitors. Furthermore, higher-level women often serve as sources of inspiration and valuable information rather than being perceived as direct competitors (Gibson & Lawrence, 2010). With a female majority at the next higher level, these women become more salient career referents (McGinn & Milkman, 2013), potentially reducing competitive dynamics and enhancing cooperation.

Additionally, with reduced upward competition, higher-ranked women might more readily embrace nurturing roles, aligning with gender expectations and increasing their willingness to mentor (*cf.* Catalyst, 2012; Kark & Shilo, 2007). This nurturing nature (Eagly & Wood, 2012), combined with their influential position, likely allows senior women to advocate for and implement policies beneficial to junior women, thereby fostering an environment conducive to women's career advancement and satisfaction. Moreover, organisations with a significant presence of senior women can challenge traditional biases about the 'ideal worker' (Ridgeway & Markus, 2022), potentially empowering lower-ranked women and altering perceptions of competence and eligibility for advancement. This theoretical logic is supported by the consistent empirical findings that women in more senior positions positively impact women at lower levels by altering the organisation's masculine culture, reducing aggressiveness, championing efforts to reduce inequality, and serving as role models (Burke & McKeen, 1996; Ely, 1994; Huffman, 2013; Kark et al., 2023; Schieman & McMullen, 2008). Given these dynamics, we hypothesise:

H2 *A female majority at the next higher hierarchical level is positively related to women's career satisfaction.*

3.3 | Interpersonal dynamics with a female majority at the same hierarchical level

In competitive environments, individuals often compare themselves with peers who are similar in performance and characteristics (Garcia et al., 2013). When applied to gender dynamics, women are likely to compete with female peers at the same hierarchical level. This competition can be likened to a tournament where individuals vie for finite resources and rewards (Connelly et al., 2014; Rosenbaum, 1979), and peers at the same level (*i.e.*, in the same league) become primary competitors. Given the socialisation of women towards communal roles and men towards assertiveness (Eagly & Wood, 2012), women may neither enjoy (Benenson & Abadzi, 2020) nor endorse competition (Kesebir et al., 2019) as much as men do and often prefer collaboration (Boudreau & Kaushik, 2023). They might also react more negatively to competition among themselves compared to how men react to male-male competition (Lee et al., 2016; Markowsky & Beblo, 2022). However, with a female majority at the same level, intensified competition due to restricted resource access (*e.g.*, advancement opportunities) for women (Gabriel et al., 2018; Sheppard & Aquino, 2017) could reduce women's career satisfaction, as evidenced by observed incivility among female colleagues (Gabriel et al., 2018).

In addition, it is important to acknowledge that increased female representation has been linked to reduced turnover (Elvira & Cohen, 2001), indicating potential benefits of a majority-women environment, such as enhanced safety and stability (Kunze & Miller, 2017; Stainback et al., 2011). Additionally, women may compete more on merit in female-majority contexts, leading to a 'segregated meritocracy' (Treviño et al., 2018), and homophily—the phenomenon of similarity attracts (*cf.*, Campero & Kacperczyk, 2020)—could foster a more harmonious work environment, supporting career satisfaction.

Our reasoning is not to suggest that women are any less inclined toward achievement than men. Rather, we argue that women tend to engage in 'scramble competitions', where they attempt to obtain dispersed resources on their own (Benenson & Abadzi, 2020), and often by social exclusion (Benenson & Abadzi, 2020), self-promotion and indirect aggression against same-sex others (Vaillancourt & Krems, 2018). Such intragender competition may

impact women's emotional experience more than men's. Taylor and associates (2022) observed that women, across various industries, frequently experienced emotions linked to devaluation and strain at work, particularly when there was a higher proportion of women in an industry. This suggests that women might engage in emotional labour, independent of occupational demands, due to their diffuse status characteristics of being communal and compassionate. Consequently, they may feel compelled to display emotions at work more frequently when there are more female peers at the same job level. Therefore, we hypothesise:

H3 *A female majority at the same hierarchical level is negatively related to women's career satisfaction.*

3.4 | The moderating effects of societal contexts

Macro factors can magnify or suppress the impact of micro-level relationships (Gelfand et al., 2008). Interpersonal dynamics embedded in gender composition are enacted in the wider societal gender environment. Hence, we propose that the societal context, comprising formal institutional (gender equality laws and regulations) and informal cultural (gender egalitarian values) environments, moderates the relationships between gender composition at work and women's career satisfaction that we have proposed in the preceding hypotheses (H1–H3).

3.4.1 | Formal (legal and regulatory) institutions

Laws and regulations impose coercive power over members in societies. Legislation that promotes GE can lead to structural changes to support women's career development. In the process, they elevate women's status in society and in the workplace, dampening the deeply ingrained diffuse status beliefs in the minds of organisational members. Strong laws and regulations intended to assure GE have proven effective, with evidence showing that they have led organisations to hire and promote more women into high-status management positions (Grant Thornton, 2022; Maume, 2011). This context can signal to women that they have the potential to be regarded as valued group members, facilitating their ability to advance in their careers. Hence, in such country contexts, structural changes often lead to higher GE (Piscopo, 2015). In fact, Belaounia et al. (2020), in a 24-country study, found that female board directors in societies with stronger GE legislations had higher social capital, enjoyed more board dynamics, and experienced higher efficacy in promoting firm performance than those in societies with weaker GE legislations. As recognised by Derks et al. (2016), queen bee behaviours arise in response to the discrimination and social identity threat that women may experience in organisations dominated by males. If there are more women employed and organisations are less dominated by men, the queen bee phenomenon arising from a self-protective motive could be attenuated under more gender-equality legal environments. Hence, the negative effect on career satisfaction of working under a female supervisor, due to competitive threat within the backdrop of diffuse gender status beliefs, may be attenuated.

In addition, gender-equality laws and regulations empower organisations to implement practices fostering women's career growth. These practices include training for promotion application, women mentoring programs, and the provision of childcare and breast-feeding facilities (e.g., Del Bono & Pronzato, 2022; Ramaswami & Dreher, 2007; Ramaswami et al., 2010). Given the broad impact of these laws, the distinction between working with a majority of men versus a majority of women may not be as pronounced in societies with robust gender-equality regulations compared to those with minimal regulations. In other words, the positive impact of receiving more career support and resources from a group of higher-status women may not be significantly greater in societies with stronger gender-equality laws. Instead, we anticipate that in societies with stronger gender-equality legislation, the positive relationship between working with a female majority at the next higher level and women's career satisfaction will likely be less pronounced.

In relation to peer dynamics, under the protection of gender-equality laws and regulations, we argue that women are likely to experience diminished gender biases within organisational tournaments and hence, fewer negative emotional experiences. This may happen even though we acknowledge that the primary competitive strategies employed by women (social exclusion, self-promotion, and indirect aggression), may not necessarily undergo significant changes due to their evolutionary roots (Vaillancourt & Krems, 2018). This persistence is expected because these preferences remain largely unaffected by legal frameworks. Nonetheless, the perceptions of a more level playing field, facilitated by GE laws and regulations, is likely to mitigate feelings of unfairness and stress associated with competing with peers.

In sum, in societies with stronger legislation promoting GE, the influence of diffuse gender status on intra-gender dynamics—whether between subordinate and supervisor women, junior women and a majority of senior women at the next level, or women and their peers, will likely be weakened.

Based on the preceding arguments, we hypothesise:

Hypothesis 4 The formal institutional environment (gender-equality laws and regulations) has a moderating effect on the relationship between gender composition and women's career satisfaction. Specifically,

H4a *The negative relationship between a female supervisor and women's career satisfaction will be weaker in a stronger formal institutional environment that promotes gender equality.*

H4b *The positive relationship between a female majority at the next higher hierarchical level and women's career satisfaction will be weaker in a stronger formal institutional environment that promotes gender equality.*

H4c *The negative relationship between a female majority at the same hierarchical level and women's career satisfaction will be weaker in a stronger formal institutional environment that promotes gender equality.*

3.5 | Informal cultural environment

The impact of gender composition on women's career satisfaction is not only nested in a society's formal institutions but also in its informal institutions (e.g., societal culture) (North, 1990). Thus, we argue that incorporating culture as a moderating variable is helpful in establishing the geographic boundary condition of our hypothesised relationships because “status [...] is based primarily in cultural beliefs.” (Ridgeway, 2011, p. 3).

First, countries with lower GEG are likely to attribute lower status to women (Emrich et al., 2004; Prasad et al., 2021). In cultures where men are more highly esteemed than women, any woman within a group is likely to be attributed a lower status than any man in the same group (Lucas, 2003). This disparity may lead women to experience more intensely the perceived negative effects of work contexts, which could further jeopardise their already diminished status and image. Thus, we argue that the negative effects of working under a female supervisor, and working with a majority of women at the same hierarchical level on women's career satisfaction will be amplified in less gender-egalitarian cultures. This amplification arises because, in such cultures, successful women will likely remain in the minority, or even be perceived as ‘tokens’ (Watkins et al., 2019). Consequently, the negative response induced by diffuse gender status characteristics, such as status threat, competitive threat, and competition intensity, are expected to be stronger. That, in turn, could lead to stronger queen bee behaviours and increased upward challenges for junior women. In summary, in a society exhibiting lower gender egalitarian values, the negative interpersonal dynamics between subordinate and supervisor women, and among female peers will likely be amplified, while the positive impact of having a majority of female at the next level will likely be stronger as junior women's need for career support will be greater.

In stronger gender-egalitarian cultures, women are perceived more favourably than in cultures with lower GEG (Elango, 2019; Williams & Best, 1990). In these cultures, women in managerial positions are more likely to be seen as legitimate occupants of powerful positions (Belaounia et al., 2020). Thus, women may be less concerned about others' perceptions of their competence and the negative status attributed to them. Furthermore, in stronger gender-egalitarian cultures, female supervisors are more inclined to evaluate other women based on meritocratic principles (Treviño et al., 2018), and perceive a lower threat from female subordinates (cf. Garcia et al., 2013). These may result in what we discussed for Hypothesis 4—weaker queen bee behaviours and decreased upward challenges coupled with a stronger perception of a meritocratic tournament, leading to a decrease in negative interpersonal dynamics between subordinate and supervisor women, and among female peers. Similar to the impact of stronger legislation on GE, stronger GEG may partially substitute the positive effect of working with a majority of senior women, making their support less necessary. Collectively, we hypothesise:

Hypothesis 5 Gender egalitarian values have a moderating effect on the relationship between gender composition and women's career satisfaction. Specifically,

H5a *The negative relationship between a female supervisor and women's career satisfaction will be weaker in societies with stronger gender egalitarian values.*

H5b *The positive relationship between a female majority at the next higher hierarchical level and women's career satisfaction will be weaker in societies with stronger gender egalitarian values.*

H5c *The negative relationship between a female majority at the same hierarchical level and women's career satisfaction will be weaker in societies with stronger gender egalitarian values.*

4 | METHODS

4.1 | Sample and procedures

For the individual-level variables we used survey data that were part of a larger research project on cross-cultural management. We collected survey data between 2014 and 2016 from 55 societies. For the society-level data, we used archival data. Due to missing society-level data, we were only able to use data from 36 societies. After dropping missing data from the individual-level dataset and the societies that had fewer than 30 female respondents, we retained 2291 female respondents from 35 societies for our analyses.

Our sample covered nine of the 10 GLOBE regional clusters (Gupta et al., 2002). The societies in our sample include: Middle East (Kuwait, Turkey), Confucian Asia (China, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea), Eastern Europe (Greece, Hungary, Slovenia), Southern Asia (India, Indonesia, Iran, Philippines, Malaysia), Germanic (Austria, Germany, German Switzerland, the Netherlands), Latin America (Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Venezuela), Latin Europe (France, French Switzerland, Italy, Portugal, Spain), Nordic (Finland), and Anglo (Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, U.K.). We also included Czech Republic even though it was not part of the original GLOBE nations. The only cluster we did not cover was Africa. We differentiated the individual-level data collected from German-speaking and French-speaking Swiss regions because prior studies supported cultural and values differences between the two groups of Swiss (Chevrier, 2009). German-speaking Swiss resemble Germans while French-speaking Swiss resemble the French (Kopper, 1993). Thus, our final sample consisted of 35 societies from 34 countries. In each society (except the Netherlands, Malaysia and Singapore), we collected data from at least two major cities, as within-society cultural variance has been noted in prior studies (Terpstra-Tong et al., 2014).

We prepared our global dataset based on the data management procedures in Karam and Ralston (2016). Further, we only retained those participants who were born and raised (spent 5 years or more before the age of 15) in their respective societies. Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics and key variables of our study by society.

Local collaborators, who are English-fluent academics, collected the data for the global dataset. They were provided with a written set of instructions to ensure that there was consistency across the data collection processes in all societies. For example, data collectors were instructed that no more than five respondents per employer were to be included within a society so that the sample was not dominated by a small number of organisations. These data collectors then either hand-delivered or sent a paper questionnaire to participants' offices by mail. Participation was voluntary and anonymity was ensured. The response rate varied from 13% to 32% across all societies.

4.2 | Measures

The original questionnaire was prepared in English. In non-English speaking countries, the local collaborators followed the standard translation and back-translation procedures to convert the survey questionnaire from English into their respective native languages (Brislin, 1986). The exceptions were India and Malaysia, where English is the business language.

4.2.1 | Career satisfaction

Career satisfaction was measured with the five-item scale developed by Greenhaus et al. (1990). This scale assesses satisfaction over five career dimensions (success, overall career goals, income, advancement, and development). This scale has been widely used and validated in several countries. A sample item is, 'I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career'. Participants rated the items with a nine-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 9 = strongly agree). Results of a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of a one-factor model had a good fit after we allowed for a covariance between the residuals of two items related to success and overall goals ($\chi^2_{(4)} = 42.997$, Comparative Fit Index = 0.995, Tucker–Lewis Index = 0.987, root mean square error of approximation = 0.065) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Cronbach's alphas were high in all societies (0.80 to 0.95; see Table 1 for details), far exceeding the usual threshold (>0.60) for cross-cultural studies (Fu & Yukl, 2000). As our hypothesised model only consisted of one latent variable, there was no need to perform an additional CFA on the measurement model to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of latent constructs.

4.2.2 | Supervisor and gender composition at work variables

We asked participants if their immediate supervisor was male or female (0 = male; 1 = female). For the gender composition questions, we asked how participants would describe the gender composition of people in their organisation who were at (1) the same job level, and (2) one hierarchical level above them. The choices of answers for both questions were mostly male, mostly female, and a balanced mix of both males and females. To enter these variables into our regression analyses, we converted each of the two questions into dummy variables. As we were interested in identifying whether there was a female majority at the same level, and at one hierarchical level above, we created for each of these two questions a dummy variable, with '1' denoting a female majority at same job level/one hierarchical level above, and '0' denoting otherwise.

TABLE 1 Mean of study variables, demographics and institution indices by society.

	N	Career satisfaction		Female majority (next higher level) % yes	Female majority (same level) % yes	Age Mean	Education Mean	Org. Tenure Mean	Firm size % large	Service industry % yes	Gender–equality institution ^a	Gender egalitarian values ^b
		Mean	Alphas									
Argentina	40	6.6	0.94	0.0	15.0	36.5	4.5	7.1	95.0	45.0	73.1	4.98
Australia	35	7.4	0.86	20.0	45.7	51.5	3.7	10.8	34.3	57.1	96.9	5.02
Austria	54	6.9	0.86	23.1	42.3	31.9	3.8	6.9	62.0	42.6	94.4	4.83
China	81	5.4	0.92	21.0	46.9	30.8	4.1	4.1	37.0	56.8	75.6	3.68
Colombia	61	7.1	0.86	18.0	41.0	38.2	4.3	8.0	65.6	57.4	78.8	5.00
Czech Republic	74	6.2	0.83	29.7	56.8	33.8	4.0	7.1	62.2	64.9	91.3	3.78
Ecuador	55	7.2	0.87	18.2	41.8	30.7	4.1	4.5	78.2	56.4	84.4	4.59
Finland	66	6.9	0.80	16.7	45.5	43.4	4.2	9.1	43.9	68.2	97.5	4.24
France	60	5.9	0.88	35.0	46.7	37.4	3.9	7.9	63.3	53.3	100.0	4.40
Germany	54	5.6	0.87	1.9	33.3	39.6	5.0	7.0	72.2	31.5	94.4	4.89 ^c
Greece	81	5.7	0.82	44.4	49.4	38.8	4.1	9.7	54.3	91.4	97.5	4.89
Hong Kong	64	6.0	0.92	35.9	56.3	43.3	3.8	11.0	54.7	56.3	89.4	4.35
Hungary	86	5.8	0.85	18.6	47.7	39.3	4.7	8.7	69.8	59.3	96.9	4.63
India	44	6.4	0.92	11.4	9.1	32.2	4.4	5.7	81.8	45.5	68.8	4.51
Indonesia	60	5.9	0.91	15.0	25.0	24.3	3.8	1.0	71.7	70.0	64.4	3.89
Iran	45	5.8	0.88	6.7	15.6	35.5	4.4	5.4	62.2	71.1	31.3	3.75
Ireland	104	5.9	0.90	10.5	38.6	35.3	3.8	6.9	77.9	52.0	95.0	5.14
Italy	50	6.3	0.84	6.0	34.0	42.5	4.9	9.9	68.0	48.0	94.4	4.88
Japan	142	4.1	0.88	3.5	23.2	35.0	3.6	10.4	71.1	52.1	81.9	4.33
Kuwait	46	6.3	0.92	34.8	34.8	32.7	3.9	7.8	89.1	56.5	32.5	3.45

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	N	Career satisfaction		Female majority (next higher level) % yes	Female majority (same level) % yes	Age Mean	Education Mean	Org. Tenure Mean	Firm size % large	Service industry % yes	Gender–equality institution ^a	Gender egalitarian values ^b
		Mean	Alphas									
Malaysia	62	5.9	0.92	19.4	45.2	33.7	3.8	7.7	61.3	53.2	50.0	3.78
Mexico	69	7.7	0.94	21.7	50.7	32.7	4.6	4.8	76.8	68.1	83.8	4.73
Netherlands	61	6.5	0.88	3.3	29.5	32.1	4.8	5.0	75.4	59.0	97.5	4.99
New Zealand	61	6.3	0.94	14.8	32.8	42.5	4.4	5.6	75.4	47.5	91.9	4.23
Philippines	67	6.7	0.86	40.3	47.8	33.6	3.5	7.7	61.2	79.1	78.8	4.58
Portugal	68	6.4	0.91	20.6	44.1	37.4	3.6	8.8	8.8	63.2	97.5	5.13
Singapore	57	6.0	0.87	40.3	51.4	31.4	3.6	4.2	71.9	42.1	82.5	4.51
Slovenia	115	5.9	0.83	22.8	45.6	42.0	4.2	8.6	72.2	63.5	90.6	4.83
South Korea	47	5.8	0.83	42.6	58.3	32.4	3.9	4.3	70.2	38.3	85.0	4.22
Spain	57	6.3	0.94	23.4	27.7	40.6	3.9	10.2	57.9	79.0	97.5	4.82
Switzerland-French	49	6.7	0.92	33.3	57.9	45.3	3.0	12.4	40.8	59.2	85.6	4.92
Switzerland-German	53	6.5	0.90	20.8	34.0	48.1	3.1	11.1	45.3	47.2	85.6	4.92
Turkey	94	6.3	0.94	20.7	40.0	34.9	3.7	5.9	66.0	60.6	82.5	4.50
UK	57	7.0	0.90	22.3	37.2	41.5	3.8	11.5	84.2	87.7	97.5	5.17
Venezuela	72	7.6	0.87	12.2	42.9	33.9	4.1	5.0	41.7	48.6	85.0	4.82
Total	2291	6.31	0.89	20.7	40.0	37.0	4.0	7.5	64.0	58.0	83.7	4.54

^aWomen's Business and Law Index.

^bGLOBE values.

^cWest German data.

4.2.3 | Society-level variables

We assessed societies' gender-related formal institutions with the Women, Business and the Law Index compiled by the World Bank (World Bank, 2015). This index measures how laws and regulations affect women's economic opportunities. The overall score was the average of eight facets of women's rights (mobility, workplace, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, assets, and pension). The possible scores range from 1 to 100. In our sample, Iran scored the lowest, at 31.3, and France scored the highest, at 100. We assessed the informal (cultural) environment with gender-egalitarian values from the GLOBE study (Emrich et al., 2004); the higher the score, the higher the GE values a society embraces. The original rating was a five-point scale (1–5) with '5' indicating the highest importance. In additional analyses, we replaced the GLOBE 'value' scores with 'practice' scores but the results were essentially the same. Table 1 provides the full list of both indices.

4.2.4 | Control variables

We controlled for five demographic variables: age, education attainment, organisational tenure, company size, and industry. Such variables typically appear in career satisfaction research (Ng & Feldman, 2014). Age and tenure were measured in years. Education was measured from 1 = primary school to 6 = doctorate degree. Company size was measured as 0 = less than 100 employees, and 1 = more than 100 employees. The industry variable was dummy coded as 1 = service industry, and 0 = other.

4.3 | Analytical strategy

We used STATA version 17 for all statistical computations except assessing measurement invariance for which we used MPlus 8.6. To validate our multi-item scale (career satisfaction) and assess its measurement invariance across societies, we used the alignment method with maximum likelihood estimation (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014a). The non-invariance rate for intercepts and loading were 14.3% and 11.4%, respectively. Hence, the average non-invariance was 12.9%, far less than the cut-off point of 25% suggested by Muthén and Asparouhov (see 2014, pp. 3–4). Thus, we have secured trustworthy alignment results for the unifactorial scale, career satisfaction. We report the details of the alignment method and the results in the Supporting Information S1.

To test our hypotheses, we analysed our two-level data with hierarchical linear modelling (HLM) and followed the standard procedures (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). First, we computed the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) for the null model of career satisfaction, to assess whether there was sufficient between-group variance to justify HLM analyses. The ICCs indicated that 15.0% of variance of career satisfaction could be explained by factors at the societal level, which signalled a large-sized group effect (Hox et al., 2017). Then, we grand-mean centred the societal variables prior to entering them into the HLM regressions. After estimating a model with only covariates at the individual level, we ran a series of mixed effect random intercepts models (Rabe-Hesketh et al., 2005). We first tested the direct effect of the gender composition variables, which was then followed by models that tested each of the hypothesised cross-level moderating effects. Finally, we assessed successive model fit by the reduction in deviance (i.e., the difference of log likelihood times minus two) for the nested HLM models. Better model fits are indicated by smaller deviance values with significant differences in deviance values between nested models.

5 | RESULTS

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations for the individual-level and societal-level variables of the pooled sample. Table 3 presents all HLM results.

Hypothesis 1, which stated that working with a female supervisor would be negatively related to women's career satisfaction, was supported ($\gamma = -0.154, p < 0.05$, Model 2). A female majority at the next hierarchical level was found to be positively related to career satisfaction ($\gamma = 0.225, p < 0.05$, Model 2), supporting Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 3, which stated that working with a female majority at the same hierarchical level would be negatively related to women's career satisfaction, was also supported ($\gamma = -0.319, p < 0.001$, Model 2).

Hypotheses 4a, 4b, and 4c stated that laws and regulations that aim to protect GE would weaken the hypothesised relationships between career satisfaction and the gender composition variables (female supervisor, a female majority at the next hierarchical level, and a female majority at the same hierarchical level). Model 3 shows that the moderating effect of formal institutions on the relationship between having a female supervisor and women's career satisfaction was not statistically significant ($\gamma = 0.002, p = 0.776$). Hence, H4a was not supported.

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics of study variables.

Individual-level variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Career satisfaction	6.20	1.74								
2. Female supervisor	0.41	0.49	−0.014							
3. Female majority (next higher level)	0.27	0.44	0.023	0.423***						
4. Female majority (same level)	0.55	0.50	−0.048*	0.335***	0.401***					
5. Age (years)	36.79	10.42	0.106***	−0.015	0.023	0.012				
6. Education	4.0	0.93	0.076***	−0.048*	−0.070***	−0.057**	−0.034			
7. Organisational tenure (years)	7.53	7.38	0.048*	−0.028	0.016	−0.001	0.622***	−0.105***		
8. Company size	0.64	0.48	−0.028	−0.013	−0.108***	−0.114***	−0.039	0.099***	0.019	
9. Service industry	0.59	0.64	−0.002	0.105***	0.098***	0.099***	−0.010	0.004	−0.004	−0.003
Society-level variable	Mean	S.D.								
1. Gender equality institutions	83.65	17.21								
2. Gender egalitarianism values	4.54	0.47	0.670***							

Note: N = 2291 at the individual level and 35 at the societal level.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 3 Results of hierarchical linear models.

	Null model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Individual-level variable									
Intercept	6.306***	5.320***	5.500***	5.492***	5.473***	5.460***	5.507***	5.503***	5.506***
Age		0.013**	0.013**	0.013**	0.013**	0.014**	0.013**	0.013**	0.013**
Education		0.124**	0.114**	0.115**	0.110**	0.110**	0.114**	0.114**	0.112**
Organisational tenure		0.098	0.009	0.009	0.009	0.009	0.009	0.009	0.009
Company size		−0.063	−0.074	−0.073	−0.066	−0.080	−0.074	−0.074	−0.072
Service industry		−0.059	−0.033	−0.033	−0.025	−0.025	−0.029	−0.031	−0.031
Female supervisor			−0.154*	−0.164*	−0.137	−0.136	−0.171*	−0.156*	−0.156*
Female majority (next higher level)			0.225*	0.225*	0.310**	0.219*	0.227*	0.230*	0.231*
Female majority (same level)			−0.319***	−0.321***	−0.320***	−0.220***	−0.319***	−0.314***	−0.319***
Societal-level variable									
Gender equality (GE) institutions				0.004	0.008	0.010			
Gender egalitarianism (GEG) values							0.413	0.542*	0.507*
Cross-level interaction effect									
GE institutions × female supervisor				0.002					
GE institutions × female majority (next higher level)					−0.017**				
GE institutions × female majority (same level)						−0.018***			
GEG values × female supervisor							0.222		
GEG values × female majority (same level)								−0.139	
GEG values × female majority (next higher level)									−0.086
Deviance (−2 × log likelihood)	8648.768	8611.328	8586.55	8586.076	8577.226	8571.924	8580.77	8581.846	8582.472
Δ Degree of freedom		5	3	2	2	2	2	2	2
Deviance difference (vs. Model 1)			24.78***	25.25***	39.40***	34.10***	30.56***	29.48***	28.86***

Note: Individual-level N = 2291; Societal-level N = 35; * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

However, there was a significant cross-level interaction between gender-equality laws and regulations and the gender work context with a female majority at the next hierarchical level ($\gamma = -0.017, p < 0.01$, Model 4), and the moderating effect was weakening. Hence, H4b was supported. H4c was not supported as we found a significant magnifying effect (instead of a weakening effect as hypothesised) on the negative relationship between a female majority at the same hierarchical level and women's career satisfaction ($\gamma = -0.018, p < 0.001$, Model 5). To visualise the interaction effects, we created two moderation plots. Figure 2 shows that the slopes of the regression lines were less steep at stronger gender-equality institutional environments, signalling a weakening effect. Figure 3 shows that the slope was steeper for societies with stronger gender-equality laws and regulations than for societies with weaker laws and regulations, indicating a magnifying effect.

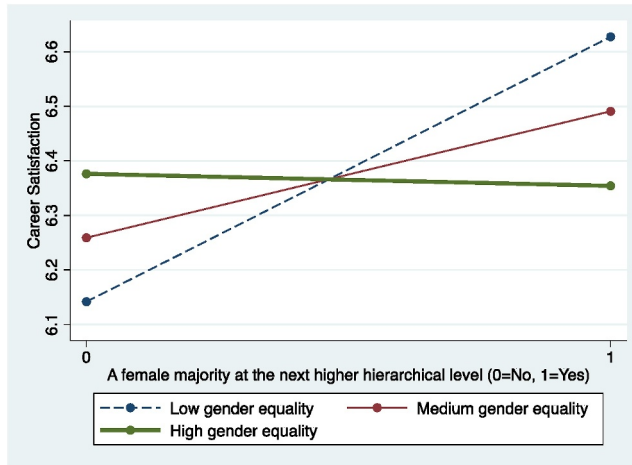


FIGURE 2 Moderating effect of gender-equality institutions on the relationship between a female majority at the next higher hierarchical level and women's career satisfaction. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

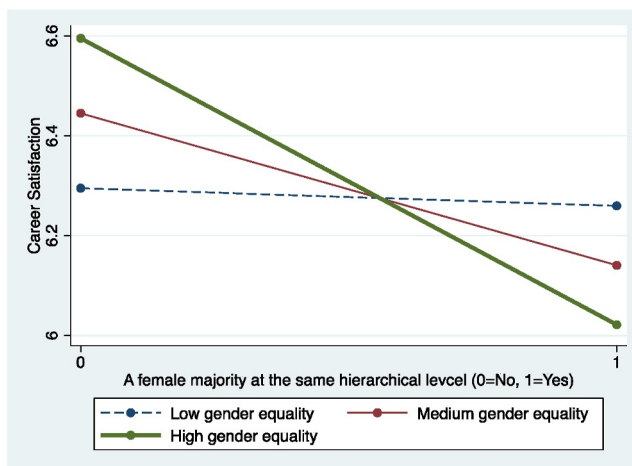


FIGURE 3 Moderating effect of gender-equality institutions on the relationship between a female majority at the same hierarchical level and women's career satisfaction. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Lastly, Models 6–8 present the results regarding the moderating effects of gender-egalitarian values. None of the cross-level interaction terms were significant, indicating no moderating effect by cultural values. Hence, no element of Hypothesis 5 was supported.

6 | DISCUSSION

We adopted a novel theoretical approach by conceptualising the role that status characteristics play in interpersonal dynamics. This enabled us to disentangle and explicate how these dynamics impact women's career satisfaction at the individual and organisational levels, while nested in a cross-cultural societal context. Using a 35-society dataset and a multilevel research design, we demonstrate empirically that women's career satisfaction is negatively affected by a female supervisor, positively influenced by a female majority at the next higher hierarchical level, and negatively impacted by a female majority at the same hierarchical level. We also found that gender-equality laws and regulations weaken the positive relationship between a majority of women at the next higher hierarchical level and women's career satisfaction but amplify the negative relationship between a majority of women at the same job level and women's career satisfaction. Therefore, our findings identify a rather limited societal impact (formal institutions) on these direct relationships, with two of the six moderating hypotheses supported. These results provide one of the first sets of cross-cultural evidence on the likely universal influence of gender dynamics on women's career satisfaction.

6.1 | Theoretical implications

Our inquiry, using a paradoxical competition-cooperation framework to explain the complexity inherent in the three intragender relationships, identified an intriguing paradox: women's career satisfaction is lower when working with a female supervisor, yet higher in environments with a female majority at the next hierarchical level. By applying status characteristics theory, we disentangled the underlying competition and cooperation dynamics to reconcile these seemingly conflicting findings. Schad et al. (2016, p. 10) define a paradox as a 'persistent contradiction between interdependent elements'. Drawing on this, our research considered the paradoxical, consensual and implicit expectations shaping working women's existence: being communal at work and non-work situations versus being agentic to qualify for advancement, and being a 'woman' versus being a 'manager' (for managerial women); in addition to exhibiting competitive versus cooperative behaviours in an acceptable feminine way. This focus on paradoxes enabled us to uncover nuances and complexities within the three interpersonal contexts in our study, thereby confirming the hypothesised paradox while developing a deeper understanding of the contextual drivers of career satisfaction across societies. In our study, gender composition is more than the numeric representations of women. Rather, it entails a natural organisational setting where women play out their social games, or using Ridgeway's term (2011, p. 34, 35 & 56), where they coordinate their 'dance' among various ongoing social relations. By neglecting the dynamics inherent in these paradoxes, researchers could easily overlook the 'persistence of the tensions and the associated virtuous and vicious cycles' (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 391), leading to oversimplifying realities while losing an opportunity to build a more comprehensive, yet refined model. One example would be studies on the queen bee phenomenon. We agree with Kark et al. (2023) that the conclusion of some queen bee studies implicating women being the culprit of not having more women at the top could have overlooked various mechanisms embedded in intragender relations, and the positive effect stemming from having more women at the next higher level.

The second theoretical implication stems from our application of a status lens in examining gender composition effects. Our study explicitly embedded status characteristics theory into the foundation of our theoretical framework, which we enriched by integrating other related perspectives commonly used in gender studies. This

theoretical scaffolding deviates from the traditional masculine gender bias approach upon which many studies were developed (e.g., Arvate et al., 2018; Born, et al., 2022; See Kossek et al., 2017 for a review). The bias approach focuses on others' perceptions of women and how biases are formed, centring on the perceivers and evaluators. In contrast, the status perspective we adopted takes a more balanced approach by considering the perceptions of both subordinate women and other women in the organisational hierarchy with whom they interact. Although we did not directly measure women's assessment of the degree of competition and cooperation in the studied intragender relational settings, we offer a plausible theoretical rationale to establish the hypothesised relationships. Consequently, our approach can help in the examination of interpersonal dynamics and implicit mechanisms that underpin intragender interactions (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006; Ridgeway, 1997; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022). The status approach can also be instrumental in gaining insights into various gender diversity issues in the workplace, such as how to promote the rights of gender minorities and other minorities who do not share the same characteristics as the dominant majority. Furthermore, gender diversity issues can be framed as inequality and hence, a status problem (Ridgeway & Markus, 2022). According to Ridgeway et al. (2022), status functions as a social structure, serving a dual purpose. On one hand, it acts as a cultural schema, influencing and shaping the expectations of both individuals and others regarding appropriate behaviours. On the other hand, it plays a crucial role in determining the practical allocation of organisational resources, thereby influencing career satisfaction. In essence, the status approach provides a valuable framework for understanding how cultural norms and resource distribution mechanisms interact to shape the dynamics of gender diversity in the workplace.

The third theoretical implication of our findings is that they support the plausible universality of strained female-female dyadic relationship. Based on our 2291 observations from 35 societies, we found that working with a female supervisor was negatively related to women's career satisfaction, and this negative relationship was not moderated by societies' formal or informal institutions related to GE. Although we did not directly measure supervisor behaviours, our sizable sample provides strong evidence for the negative association between working with a female supervisor and women's career satisfaction. As our multilevel model controlled for the gender compositions, with a female majority at the same and the next higher hierarchical levels, our finding suggests the queen bee phenomenon could exist beyond contexts in which senior women are tokens (*cf.* Duguid, 2011; Duguid et al., 2012). Our findings indicate further research is necessary to clarify the predictors of interpersonal relations in female-female dyads.

Lastly, we identified two significant moderating effects of the institutional environment but none of the cultural environment. These findings lead us to infer that, due to their coercive nature, the formal institutional environment, as represented by gender-equality laws and regulations, is more effective than the cultural environment in reshaping the individual-level impact of gender composition. Interestingly, institutions played a complementary role by weakening the positive impact of a female majority at the next higher hierarchical level, but a supplementary role by strengthening the negative impact of a female majority at the same hierarchical level. This finding suggests that future research should be discerning in theorising the societal effects on individual-level phenomena and relationships.

6.2 | Limitations and future research

Despite the multi-society design of our study, there are some limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, we collected cross-sectional data, limiting the causality of the investigated relationships. Future research could consider using field experiments (e.g., Born et al., 2022) to complement survey research findings, such as ours. Given global Internet connectivity, researchers could form or leverage their existing international research network to conduct experiments on a global scale. While the challenges of forming a worldwide lab are considerable, such an initiative would likely yield generalisable findings. Second, we used dummy variables for the gender compositions in our models. Future research could consider using continuous measures (*i.e.*, the percentage of a gender at a job

level) to deliver more refined statistical results (e.g., Qian & Fan, 2019). Third, we did not incorporate any lower-level mediating variable or moderating variables. Future research could consider adding either one or both in building a more comprehensive model. However, we acknowledge that a multilevel model like ours is already complex, and further complexity could pose a challenge to statistical analysis (Vandenberg, 2020). To build a mediation model, one possibility could be to develop a measure of coopetition, as proposed by Kark et al. (2023) to assess the extent of cooperation and competition between co-workers of different hierarchical levels. Using the example of female-female supervisor-subordinate dyads, researchers can conceptualise their relationships along a continuum of cooperation and competition.

Fourth, our multilevel models may not have captured some confounding variables, such as the nuance begot by the professional labour market's demand and supply in the sampled countries. This could have been helpful in explaining the finding that runs contrary to expectations, namely that an environment with stronger gender-equality laws and regulations was found to strengthen (instead of weakening) the negative relationship of a female majority at the same level with women's career satisfaction. It could be that the expanded pool of female competitors increases the intensity of competition among peers, explaining the amplifying moderation effect. Fifth, our findings suggest a universality of tension between female supervisor and female subordinate, representing a different conclusion from the systematic review of Kark et al. (2023). As the extant research on female-female supervisor-subordinate relationships is mostly qualitative or experimental using student samples (Born et al., 2022; Kark et al., 2023; Webber & Giuffre, 2019), future research could consider applying survey methodologies in workplace settings and the new construct, coopetition, to examine the leader-member tension of same-sex dyads (similar to Brouer & Harris, 2007).

Sixth, societal gender-egalitarian values had no moderating effects in our study, which was surprising. Future research could also explore that moderating effect using other cultural constructs (e.g., the business values dimensions from Ralston, Russell and Egri (2018)) on the paradoxical relationship between gender composition and career satisfaction. Lastly, describing precisely when and why women engage in competition or cooperation is beyond the scope of this study. Although our findings imply that female-female subordinate-supervisor dyads and a female majority at the peer level are characterised by competition, further studies are needed to identify which personal, interpersonal, team, leadership, or environmental factors support women's cooperation over competition, and vice versa.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that the explanations provided in this paper represent only one of the possible lines of reasoning about how intragender contexts may affect women's career satisfaction. Additionally, our study did not explicitly measure the interpersonal dynamics proposed in our conceptualisation. These limitations highlight the necessity for further research to understand why these relationships occur. We encourage future studies to collect more direct data on the experiences of women who are led by other women, employing qualitative methods or longitudinal designs. Such research could provide deeper insights into the dynamics of female-female supervisor-subordinate interactions, the impact of having a female majority at the next higher level, and the effects of peer dynamics in female-majority groups. Exploring these alternative explanations with more nuanced data would enrich our understanding of the phenomena and inform interventions aimed at improving career satisfaction among women in diverse organisational contexts.

6.3 | Managerial implications

On one hand, the absence of cross-societal differences for certain relationships suggests the potential for policies with universal applicability. On the other hand, our finding that the presence of gender-equality laws and regulations moderates issues of career satisfaction in two out of three main effects suggests the need for (multinational enterprises) MNEs to tailor their gender diversity strategies to the distinct legal environments of their host countries.

Our findings suggest that female-female supervisor/subordinate dyads are detrimental to women's career satisfaction, and this is possibly a global phenomenon. This means that MNEs, regardless of the country in which they operate, should identify the challenges faced by female-female dyads and, as appropriate, develop tactics to reduce tensions therein. One potential intervention tactic would be to train supervisors to provide mentorship to their subordinates (e.g., offering emotional support, counselling, career development advice, and role modelling) that has been proven to improve subordinates' career satisfaction (Pan et al., 2011). Indeed, encouraging women to mentor their female subordinates as part of an informal mentoring culture or a formal mentoring program can help to alleviate or even reverse the detrimental effect of having a female supervisor on women's career satisfaction. Considering that mentoring delivers career benefits across cultures (Bozionelos et al., 2016), this can be a realistic human resource intervention that MNEs can utilise across the board.

The observed association between working with a female supervisor and lower career satisfaction among women highlights complex dynamics within workplace gender relations, rather than attributing blame to women for perpetuating gender inequality. This phenomenon underscores the intricate ways in which societal norms and structural inequalities are reflected within organisational contexts. It suggests that the challenges faced by women in leadership roles, including navigating gendered expectations and biases, can have ripple effects on their subordinates' experiences and perceptions of career progression. Therefore, addressing these issues requires changes in organisational culture to support women at all levels of the organisation, encouraging a culture of mutual support, mentorship, and recognition of diverse leadership styles. By focussing on structural solutions and fostering an environment that values diversity and inclusion, organisations can work towards dissolving the barriers that contribute to gender inequality in the workplace.

Several studies have indicated that higher women's representation at an earlier time (time 1) likely leads to increased overall women's representation at a later time (time 2) (e.g., Cohen & Broschak, 2013). Our study builds on this finding and demonstrates that having a significant proportion of women at the next hierarchical level is associated with higher career satisfaction. This suggests that if an MNE plans to increase women's representation, it should strive to ensure a substantial presence of women at senior levels, rather than a token percentage. Additionally, these effects are contingent on the societal laws and regulations regarding GE. Therefore, to design the most effective gender-focused policies and practices, MNEs must pay attention to the legal environment of their subsidiaries/societies. Given that the positive effect is weaker in societies with stronger gender-equality laws and regulations, MNEs should ensure that women are well-represented at higher levels, particularly in subsidiaries located in societies with weaker gender-equality institutional environments. In addition, their investment in GE should be greater in subsidiaries located in weaker institutional environments than in those located in societies with stronger institutional environments. Furthermore, as discussed, MNEs need to be aware that women may experience higher competitive stress and less career satisfaction in a female-majority peer level. This effect is amplified in subsidiaries located in societies with stronger gender-equality laws and regulations. As such, MNEs may want to allocate more funds to address employees' well-being and career needs in societies with stronger legal protection for women.

Finally, seen through the lens of status, gender diversity can be viewed as an inequality problem, as explained above. By framing diversity issues as inequality, MNEs' diversity managers may become more sensitive to organisational norms and the different status beliefs that individuals bring to the organisation, as well as to how societies in which subsidiaries are embedded impact interpersonal dynamics. MNEs operating in different cultural environments should recognise that the implicit and unspoken nature of cultural programming, especially that associated with status, adds a nuanced layer of complexity to the company's diversity objectives. This is especially pertinent in a multi-cultural, multi-faith workforce, where understanding and navigating these subtleties becomes critical. Therefore, a strong top management commitment to diversity values (Kelan & Wratil, 2021) is also essential for implementing effective, broad-based diversity initiatives in MNEs.

7 | CONCLUSION

Understanding how gender composition in the workplace leads to women's career satisfaction is an important research agenda, not only because of the impact it has on individual female employees' careers, but also because of its aspirational impact on other female employees embedded in the organisational structure. Our findings confirm a paradoxical outcome, namely that women's career satisfaction is lower when working with a female supervisor but higher when working with a majority of women at the next higher level. This extends the competition-cooperation framework by not only delineating the context within which women manage how and when to cooperate and/or compete to advance their own careers but also those of other female employees in lower levels of the organisation. Overall, our novel theoretical approach and findings lay the groundwork for future research into gender composition and intragender work dynamics, while advocating for a paradoxical framework supported by a multi-society dataset.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the first author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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