

Abstract

This study examines how human resource professionals design and implement recruitment strategies to increase female applications for middle and top management positions in STEM industries. Despite rising female educational attainment, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, particularly in these contexts. Prior research has primarily focused on experimental evidence related to recruitment signals, offering limited insight into how such strategies are interpreted and enacted in organisational practice within male-dominated environments.

Building on role congruity theory, signalling theory, and social identity theory, this study adopts an interpretivist qualitative approach. The empirical analysis draws on ten semi-structured interviews with HR professionals in the German STEM sector, complemented by an analysis of organisational artefacts.

The findings indicate that gender inequality in executive recruitment is shaped less by supply-side constraints than by organisational inertia, exclusionary mechanisms, and the cognitive framing of recruitment gatekeepers. Rather than reflecting an objective shortage of candidates, recruitment outcomes depend on how organisational actors interpret and respond to structural inequality. Based on these insights, the study develops the Inertia–Action Framework, which explains how contextual pressures, structural inertia, and managerial interpretation interact to produce divergent organisational responses, ranging from symbolic compliance to structural disruption.

Ultimately, achieving gender equity in executive recruitment requires structural disruption rather than symbolic compliance, as procedural neutrality and superficial marketing alone are insufficient to generate sustained organisational change.

Keywords:

Female Leadership, STEM Recruitment, Organisational Inertia, Gatekeeping Mechanisms, Signalling Theory, Role Congruity Theory, Social Identity Theory, Inertia–Action Framework.