

Promoting gender equality in large enterprises in Slovakia: The perspective of human resource professionals and managers

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Abstract: The article examines how human resources (HR) professionals and managers in large industrial enterprises in Slovakia perceive gender equality, focusing on awareness, perceived fairness, and experiences with obstacles in implementing equality policies. Gender equality is particularly important in large enterprises, as they employ many people, influence their work and personal lives, and serve as role models for other, often dependent, enterprises. Perceptions of gender equality differ across cultures, reflecting societal values, norms, and structures rather than a universal concept. The research is based on a questionnaire survey, and a descriptive approach was chosen to answer the research questions, defining the research framework. The findings show that the majority of HR professionals and managers are familiar with the issue of gender equality and consider it important, but differences in the perception of this issue persist between men and women. Women more often report only partial awareness, experiences of unequal treatment, and limited career opportunities compared to their male colleagues. The research brings both theoretical and practical implications for the field of HR management and diversity management, especially in the promotion of gender equality, policy making, internal communication, and the development of an inclusive organizational culture in large companies.

Keywords: Career Advancement, Gender Equality, HR Professionals, Industrial Enterprises, Managers, Organizational Culture.

1. Introduction

Gender equality is becoming an increasingly important topic in large corporate environments, where it directly affects employees' working lives, career opportunities, and overall corporate culture. Despite the fact that equal opportunities are often declared as one of the key values of modern organizations, in practice, they are still limited by deep-rooted stereotypes, prejudices, and ways of evaluating employees. Gender, marital status, and traditional ideas about gender roles can invisibly shape working relationships and influence decisions about promotions and remuneration.

It is therefore important for managers in large enterprises not only to understand these mechanisms but also to actively create an environment where everyone has an equal chance to realize their potential, regardless of gender. HR departments and managers play a key role in shaping policies that are intended to prevent discrimination, promote transparency, and open up space for fair performance evaluation. However, equal access to opportunities is not only a matter of set rules but also of everyday practice. Discreet forms of inequality, such as microaggressions or unconscious prejudices, can hinder career advancement, especially for women, who, despite having the same qualifications, more often encounter a glass ceiling.

Microaggressions in the area of gender equality can be a major obstacle to its promotion, as they represent subtle, often unintentional behaviors or remarks that express prejudices and stereotypes against women or men. Unlike overt discrimination, they operate covertly, but by repeating themselves,

they create an unpleasant and disadvantageous environment for the parties involved. At the same time, it is necessary to take into account the role of men and their attitude towards gender equality because change is only possible if all parties are involved.

The issue of gender equality in the workplace is closely linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Large enterprises play a crucial role in fulfilling this goal, as their internal policies, managerial practices, and organizational culture can either reinforce or help eliminate structural inequalities. By promoting equal opportunities, transparent career progression, and inclusive working environments, organizations contribute not only to sustainable business performance but also to broader societal progress in line with SDG 5.

This article, therefore, focuses on how HR professionals and managers in large enterprises in Slovakia perceive gender equality issues.

2. Theoretical Framework

Essentialist gender beliefs hinder support for equality interventions, especially among men in leadership positions, indicating that these beliefs must be addressed to attain gender balance in leadership roles [1]. The persistence of gender stereotypes is a matter of debate, with some researchers arguing that they remain unchanged due to their deep-rooted social interpretations, suggesting the need for further research into their development [2]. Attitudes and perceptions of gender roles significantly influence behaviors such as bicycle use, demonstrating that social norms and stereotypes play a key role in gendered activities [3]. Employees often perceive elements like gender and marital status as unfair predictors in performance evaluations, raising concerns about bias and discrimination [4].

Gender stereotypes contribute to discrimination in the workplace, where women are often perceived as lacking competence in areas dominated by men [5]. It should not be forgotten that important competencies for managers are not only technical skills, but also so-called soft skills [6]. The strengthening importance of soft skills and the importance of inclusive and empathetic leadership in diverse work environments is particularly evident in management positions [7]. Women are predominantly found in positions such as marketing and public relations, while men dominate in more prestigious creative and technical positions, which indicates a clear division of labour by gender [8].

Discrimination is evident in both promotion opportunities and everyday interactions, with a significant percentage of women reporting experiences of bias in the workplace [9]. Microaggressive behaviours, such as gender stereotyping, create barriers for women and contribute to phenomena such as the impossibility of career advancement [10]. Gender bias in appraisals leads to the devaluation of women's performance and can lead to their being penalized for their competence, which affects their career advancement compared to equally performing men [11].

Gender inequalities in promotion and pay are widespread, and studies suggest that women perceive significant bias in these areas, which is negatively correlated with job satisfaction [12]. As a result, many employees experience differential treatment based on gender, increasing the risk of discrimination and dissatisfaction at work. Women often face greater barriers to career advancement than men, despite equal performance. It is therefore essential to constantly challenge and reassess gender norms to promote true equality of opportunity for all.

Critical challenges, therefore, include educating employees about gender sensitivity and addressing issues related to individual attitudes [13]. Being familiar with gender equality issues is important because it allows for a better understanding of persistent inequalities and their effective response at both the individual and systemic levels. Gender equality efforts have traditionally focused on removing barriers for women, but it is also essential to consider the impact on men and their roles in this process [14]. Understanding the barriers that women perceive in different fields is key to developing effective strategies to increase participation and career advancement [15]. Gender equality initiatives need to address both quantitative and qualitative aspects to ensure comprehensive progress in education and the

workplace [16]. Policies that promote social justice and gender equality are essential, especially in addressing the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions [17].

Legislative measures aimed at improving gender representation reveal the complexity of public perceptions of fairness and meritocracy, which are influenced by individual beliefs about fairness [18]. Gender pay gaps persist because both men and women perceive women's lower earnings as fair, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of the underlying beliefs that underpin these gaps [19].

Organizations are encouraged to develop comprehensive interventions that integrate different perspectives to promote gender equality and address biases [20]. Larger organizations are more likely to engage in social or environmental responsibility activities. Compared to smaller businesses, they have different capacities and motivations for choosing approaches that lead to sustainability [21]. Implementing transparent internal communication can empower female employees to effectively address gender discrimination in the workplace [22]. The climate for gender inclusion is shaped by fairness, talent utilization, and support in the workplace, which together influence women's career equality outcomes [23].

A supportive organizational environment can improve women's access to career opportunities and enhance their experiences compared to men [24]. An approach that emphasizes caring for employees and creating a favorable atmosphere for the development of each employee should be considered successful management of any organization [25].

The demand for fair and innovative business practices that require creativity is constantly growing. The corporate environment and shared values that motivate employees contribute to the success of organizations [26]. An appropriate corporate culture should be a summary of the behavior and actions of the organization as a whole and its individual employees. An appropriate corporate environment significantly influences opportunities for employees, regardless of gender, the ability to utilize their potential, and the overall success of the organization [27]. The way businesses operate is a key aspect of a society's socioeconomic resilience. This increases their social responsibility and economic stability. It is important that corporate social responsibility focuses on a proactive approach [28].

These findings highlight that perceiving gender equality as a key part of organizational culture is essential for creating a fair, supportive, and inclusive work environment. In particular, the role of managers is important in focusing on appropriate morale and developing a favorable work environment that emphasizes recognizing each employee's contribution over the long term.

3. Materials and Methods

The aim of the presented research was to identify the perception of gender equality in large enterprises by HR professionals and managers. The research focused on the promotion of gender equality carried out in large industrial enterprises in Slovakia. The respondents included HR professionals and managers who are expected to have sufficient and relevant information on gender equality in the enterprise. With the increasing importance of human resource management for enterprise performance, professionals responsible for human resource management are increasingly represented in top management or in the executive management team of organizations [29]. Awareness of gender equality is especially important for managers and HR professionals, as they are the creators and main bearers of corporate culture and represent a model of behavior for other employees. A total of 68 respondents participated in the research, with basic characteristics shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Characteristics of respondents.

	Men			Women		
	AF	RF [%]	CF [%]	AF	RF [%]	CF [%]
Baby boomers 1946-1964	1	3.03	3.03	2	5.71	5.71
Generation X 1965-1980	9	27.27	30.30	13	37.14	42.86
Generation Y 1981-1995	18	54.55	84.85	17	48.57	91.43
Generation Z 1996-2012	5	15.15	100	3	8.57	100
Sum	33	100		35	100	

Note: AF = absolute frequencies; RF = relative frequencies [%]; CF = cumulative frequencies [%].

Table 1 presents the distribution of respondents by generation, divided into men and women. Columns AF indicate absolute frequencies, RF [%] shows relative (percentage) representation within gender, and CF [%] represents cumulative frequencies. We chose the distribution by generation because a generation represents a group of people born approximately in the same period. Having experienced similar social, economic, and political events that shaped them, they may share similar attitudes and values.

Among men, the most numerous group is Generation Y (54.55%), followed by Generation X (27.27%), Generation Z (15.15%), and the least represented are Baby Boomers (3.03%). Cumulative frequencies show the gradual addition of shares, with the sum reaching 100%.

Among women, Generation Y is also predominant (48.57%), followed by Generation X (37.14%), then Generation Z (8.57%), and the least represented are Baby Boomers (5.71%). The total number of male respondents is 33, and among women, 35.

The table thus provides an overview of the age structure of the sample by gender and points to the largest representation of younger generations in both groups.

Primary data were used for the study. The research tool was a questionnaire, divided into two parts. The first part contained socio-demographic questions to characterize respondents by gender, generation, and confirmation that their work affiliation is tied to an industrial enterprise. The second part contained questions with options that respondents indicated, including the possibility of adding their own answers. The questions are the subject of the evaluation of the research questions.

The data were evaluated mainly using MS Excel using tables of absolute, relative, and cumulative frequencies. We also used bar graphs of absolute frequencies.

Two research questions were set to define the research framework:

RQ1: What is the perception of gender equality in large industrial enterprises?

The first research question examines whether HR professionals and managers in large industrial enterprises are familiar with the issue of gender equality and to what extent they consider it to be an important part of the work environment. It aims to reveal the general awareness and attitudes that form the basis for implementing measures.

RQ2: How are differences in the treatment of employees perceived in terms of gender equality?

The second research question focuses on how HR professionals and managers perceive differences in treatment based on gender and who, in their opinion, has better career opportunities. It also investigates what obstacles they perceive in connection with the implementation of gender equality policies in their work environment. One's own past experience has a significant impact on individuals' attitudes and influences the way they view gender equality issues, not only in the workplace.

The evaluation of the research questions is carried out through descriptive statistics, using cross-tabulations of frequencies and data visualization in the form of bar graphs. This approach allows for a clear interpretation of the distribution of responses.

4. Results

This section of the article presents the results of data collection that answer the formulated research questions. The evaluation is based on descriptive statistics and aims to highlight the main findings regarding perceptions and experiences of gender equality in the workplace.

RQ1: What is the perception of gender equality in large industrial enterprises?

The first part of RQ1 aims to assess whether respondents are familiar with gender equality issues within their industrial enterprise. The evaluation is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Respondents' awareness of gender equality issues.

Respondents/responses	Yes, I am familiar with the issue		I am partially familiar with the issue		I am not familiar with the issue.	
	AF	RF [%]	AF	RF [%]	AF	RF [%]
Men	24	54.55	7	41.18	2	28.57
Women	20	45.45	10	58.82	5	71.43
Sum	44	100	17	100.00	7	100.00

Note: AF = absolute frequencies; RF = relative frequencies [%].

Table 2 shows how familiar men and women in management positions or HR specialist positions are with the issue of gender equality in large industrial enterprises. The data show that more than half of men (54.55%) stated that they were familiar with this topic, while among women, this share was slightly lower (45.45%). Partial familiarity was declared by 41.18% of men and 58.82% of women, which indicates that women more often perceive their knowledge of the issue as partial. Only 2% of men admitted to being unfamiliar with the topic, but as many as 5 women, which represents 71.43% of this group of responses. These results indicate that the majority of respondents have at least a basic awareness of gender equality, with women more likely to report only partial knowledge or lack of knowledge. This may indicate the need for better information and internal training activities aimed at raising awareness of this topic among all employees.

We also investigated whether respondents consider gender equality important as part of the evaluation of RQ1. The responses are shown in Figure 1.

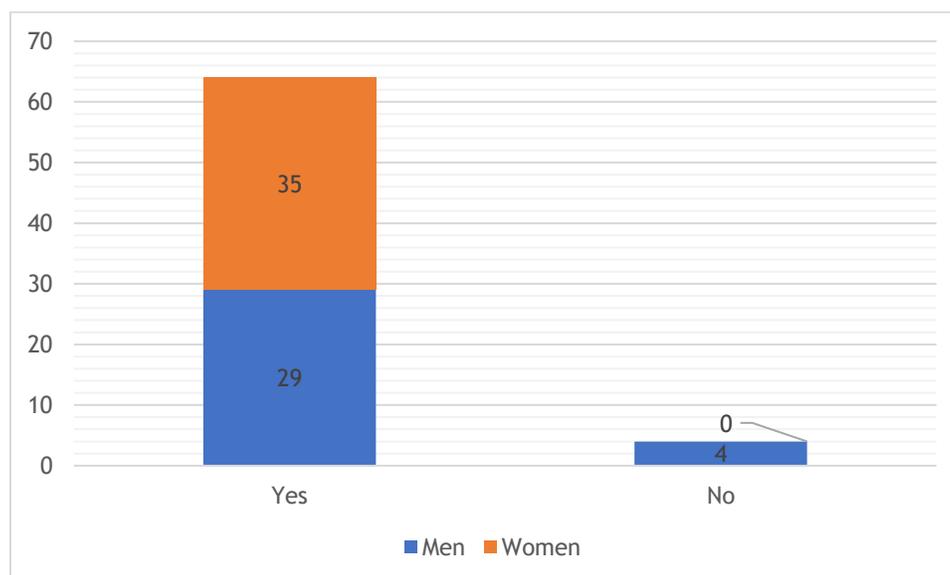


Figure 1.
Respondents' perception of the importance of gender equality.

The results in Figure 1 illustrate the distribution of respondents' answers to whether they consider gender equality important. The majority of respondents (64 respondents) said yes, with 29 men and 35 women in this group. Only a minority (4 people) answered negatively. The results show that most HR professionals and managers in large enterprises perceive gender equality as important, confirming the need for active support and implementation within organizational practice.

RQ2: How are differences in the treatment of employees perceived in terms of gender equality? As part of the analysis of RQ2, we focused on Table 3 to evaluate whether HR professionals and managers in large enterprises have experience with different treatment from the perspective of gender equality in the enterprise. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3.
Perceived differences in treatment between respondents.

Respondents/ responses	Yes, men are favoured		Yes, women are favoured		I don't see any differences		No answer	
	AF	RF [%]	AF	RF [%]	AF	RF [%]	AF	RF [%]
Men	2	16.67	1	50.00	29	54.72	1	100.00
Women	10	83.33	1	50.00	24	45.28	0	0.00
Sum	12	100	2	100.00	53	100.00	1	100.00

Note: AF = absolute frequencies; RF = relative frequencies [%].

Table 3 summarizes respondents' answers regarding whether they have experienced differential treatment from a gender equality perspective in their enterprise. Most respondents (53 people) stated they do not experience differential treatment, with men slightly predominating. Conversely, 12 respondents stated that men are favored, with a significant majority of women reporting this experience. Only two respondents stated that women are favored. Overall, these results indicate that some employees still perceive differences in approach based on gender, highlighting the need for sensitive handling of these issues within the framework of corporate human resources management.

Differences are also often perceived in the area of career development and growth. This area was covered by another part of the RQ2 analysis, focusing on how respondents perceive opportunities for career growth in the enterprises they work for. Specific answers are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.
Respondents' opinions on career growth opportunities.

Respondents/ responses	Women and men have equal chances and opportunities		Rather men		Rather women		I can't judge	
	AF	RF [%]	AF	RF [%]	AF	RF [%]	AF	RF [%]
Men	26	59.09	5	25.00	1	50.00	1	50.00
Women	18	40.91	15	75.00	1	50.00	1	50.00
Sum	44	100	20	100.00	2	100.00	2	100.00

Note: AF = absolute frequencies; RF = relative frequencies [%].

Table 4 provides an overview of how respondents perceive equal opportunities for career growth in their enterprise. The majority of respondents (44 people) believe that women and men have equal career opportunities, with this opinion being held more often by men. On the other hand, up to 20 respondents, mostly women, believe that men have greater opportunities. Only a negligible number of respondents were inclined to the opinion that women are advantaged in this area, or were unable to assess the situation. The results point to persistent differences in the perception of equal opportunities, with women more often questioning equal conditions for career growth.

The identified barriers often reflect the specific inequalities and differences that employees experience in practice. As part of the evaluation of RQ2, we also focused on the barriers that respondents perceive regarding the implementation of gender equality policies. The results are shown in Figure 2.

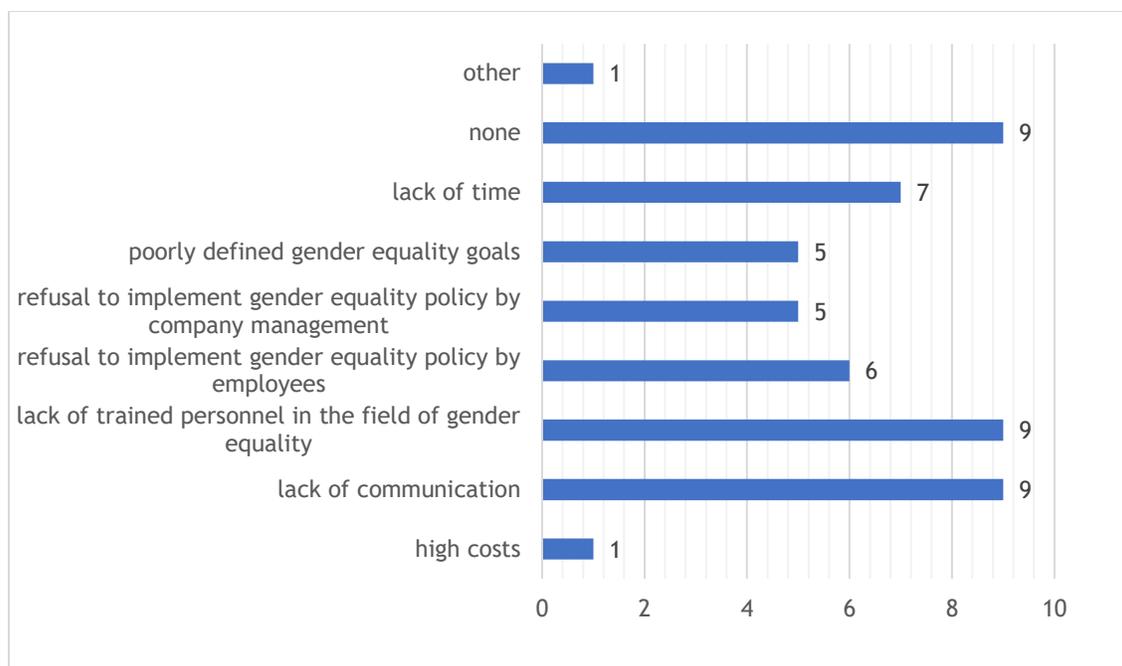


Figure 2.
Perceived obstacles to the implementation of gender equality.

Figure 2 presents the results of responses to the question regarding perceived obstacles in implementing policies to enhance gender equality in the respondents' industrial workplaces. The most frequently cited obstacles were the lack of trained personnel in gender equality, insufficient communication, and the possibility that there are no obstacles to improving gender equality, each indicated by nine respondents. Other barriers included lack of time (seven respondents), employee refusal to implement policies (six respondents), management refusal (five respondents), and poorly defined gender equality objectives (five respondents). The options of high costs and the response "other" were selected by only one respondent.

Respondents were also able to provide their own answers. Among the freely formulated answers that are not included in the figure, attitudes reflecting skepticism or rejection of the concept of gender equality emerged. Some respondents stated that it is not possible to employ more women in their enterprise due to the nature of the work. Others stated that the position of women and men will not be equal in the foreseeable future, especially not in terms of finances. One respondent stated that women naturally have different gifts than men, and therefore it is not appropriate to completely erase the difference between the sexes, but rather to work with it. There were also opinions that the enterprise is not interested in addressing this issue, that "paper can withstand everything," or that there are no obstacles in reality. One opinion emphasized that gender equality as a concept cannot work because the decisive factor in the labor market is performance, skill, and efficiency, not gender. In this view, the key is the correct setting of processes, corporate culture, and employee motivation, while gender does not play a significant role.

The research results showed that most respondents have at least basic knowledge of gender equality issues, while women more often declared only partial knowledge or a lack thereof. Most respondents consider gender equality to be an important topic, which confirms its importance in business practice. The analysis also pointed out that although most managers and HR specialists do not report experiences with different treatment based on gender, some respondents, especially women, perceive men as being favored, especially in the area of career promotion. The results thus indicate persistent differences in the perception of equal opportunities, with women more often questioning equal

conditions. The most significant barriers to implementing gender equality policies include a lack of professional staff, poor communication, and organizational constraints. In addition, respondents also pointed out obstacles associated with skepticism or rejection of the concept of gender equality, which points to the need for a sensitive and systematic approach by management at various levels.

5. Conclusion

The way large enterprises are managed affects the lives of many people, given that large enterprises employ hundreds to thousands of employees. If fair and inclusive practices are applied in these enterprises, this affects not only their corporate culture but also the wider society. Furthermore, large enterprises often have a wide range of positions and career paths. If these opportunities are fairly accessible, the risk of attrition of talented female employees is reduced, and the gender balance in leadership is improved. It is precisely an environment where men and women have equal opportunities that brings greater diversity of views and experiences. This supports creativity, innovative potential, and the ability to respond to the needs of customers from different segments. Promoting gender equality also makes sense for organizations active in the field of social responsibility. Organizations that promote equal opportunities are perceived as modern and socially responsible. This strengthens their employer brand and attracts quality employees and investors. Adherence to the principles of equality minimizes the risks associated with dissatisfaction, employee departure, or legal disputes. In large enterprises, there is a higher probability of trade unions that defend the interests of employees. Therefore, declaring the application of the principles of gender equality in large enterprises is a certain prevention of conflicts and discriminatory disputes, since large enterprises are more in the public eye and in the media. However, despite legislative support, the promotion of gender equality in enterprises still encounters various obstacles, both at the organizational and individual resistance levels. The most commonly perceived barriers to implementation include a lack of trained staff, poor communication, and resistance from employees or management. The results highlight the need for strengthening internal communication, targeted awareness, and support from leaders in order to create an inclusive organizational culture.

The article contributes to the discussion on gender equality by bringing the perspective of key actors, HR professionals, and managers who play a crucial role in shaping fair and transparent working practices.

The main limitations of the research include the limited representativeness of the sample. The research focused only on large industrial enterprises; therefore, the possibility of generalizing the results to other sectors and small- and medium-sized enterprises is limited. Managers of industrial enterprises have a high workload, which may lead to brevity in their responses. The results may also be influenced by specific corporate cultures, which may not be comparable across all enterprises. Some respondents may perceive gender equality as a sensitive topic, which may lead to the suppression or trivialization of some experiences.

There is scope for future research to include small and medium-sized enterprises and other sectors. The survey could also be conducted among other categories of employees. Future research could focus on objective data on equality, such as pay gaps and actual career paths. Another area of interest is the inclusion of methods such as in-depth interviews or case studies, which would provide more detailed knowledge about barriers and experiences with gender equality. Further knowledge would be gained by examining the effectiveness of measures, and thus assessing the effectiveness of specific policies, training, or programmes to support gender equality, and analysing whether the support of equality affects productivity, employee satisfaction, or innovation potential.

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The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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