Business Ethics and Gender Diversity: Rethinking Equal Opportunity in Multinational Organizations

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Abstract
This paper examines the relationship between diversity and inclusion programs and business ethics, emphasizing the ethical considerations that must guide the development of such initiatives in organizational settings. The focus is placed on gender diversity, chosen because equal opportunities for women and men remain one of the most debated and sensitive aspects of organizational health. Over the past decades, gender diversity has become a central theme in the literature, where it has been described both as a driver of innovation and performance and as a potential source of conflict and ethical risk when implemented through rigid indicators or numerical targets. The research design is qualitative and exploratory, relying on semi-structured interviews with human resources specialists and hiring managers from multinational companies in Romania. The interviews were conducted online, transcribed, and analyzed using content analysis to understand how gender diversity indicators shape recruitment and selection practices. Respondents were selected through convenience sampling based on their professional experience in organizations with gender diversity policies. The findings reveal that while gender diversity programs are widely adopted in Romanian multinationals, reliance on performance indicators can sometimes create unintended consequences. Recruitment teams and hiring managers reported pressures to meet specific numerical targets for female representation, which in certain cases led to targeted searches based solely on gender or to the relaxation of selection criteria. Such practices risk generating discriminatory outcomes, particularly against male candidates, and may undermine the principle of equal opportunity that these programs were designed to protect. The contribution of this research lies in its critical examination of gender diversity initiatives through the lens of business ethics. By highlighting both their potential and their limitations, the paper calls for approaches that move beyond rigid targets and instead cultivate organizational cultures that promote fairness, merit, and equity in practice.

Keywords
business ethics; equal opportunity; gender diversity; human resources; inclusion; recruitment.

Introduction

The paper examines the relationship between diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and business ethics, emphasizing the importance of ethical conduct when implementing such initiatives. More specifically, the paper seeks to highlight the challenges and ethical risks that companies face when designing and applying DEI programs. At the same time, it is intended as a warning for organizations that pursue these initiatives without fully considering the ethical dilemmas they may entail. The motivation to address this subject also stems from the fact that both gender diversity and equal opportunities are pressing issues in the field of organizational health and are increasingly addressed by companies in Romania.

The relevance and novelty of this work lie in its focus on whether gender diversity programs genuinely uphold the principle of equal opportunities for women and men in organizational settings. At a time when gender diversity has become a sine qua non condition of organizational health, this paper questions whether such programs remain faithful to their foundational principle - equality of opportunity. Moreover, the topic reflects an exercise in academic boldness, given that many organizations continue to struggle with gender diversity initiatives, as this study also explores their inherent limitations and risks. This paper thus underscores the importance of gender diversity programs in organizations while encouraging the promotion of equal rights and freedoms for all individuals, regardless of gender, race, political affiliation, or any other potentially discriminatory criterion. In this respect, the analysis aims to assess the extent to which gender diversity fosters equality of opportunity and the degree to which human resources teams and hiring managers succeed in creating fairness through such programs.

This paper aims to provide a literature review of gender diversity and equal opportunities, while also highlighting the ethical risks companies may encounter when developing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs. The analysis focuses exclusively on gender diversity, following the recommendation that each dimension of diversity be addressed as a distinct construct (Badal & Harter, 2014). Within organizations, gender diversity has become an increasingly prominent topic, yet it remains both contested and complex (Fine et al., 2019). It is contested because, as this paper will demonstrate, human resources specialists hold divergent views on how to manage gender diversity. It is complex because it concerns fundamental differences between women and men, raising questions about the extent to which these differences can confer advantages in organizational settings. In the specialized literature, gender diversity - as a component of organizational diversity management - has often been described as a 'double-edged sword'. The study was motivated by the author's professional experience within large organizations engaged in diversity-focused hiring. In 2021, while part of a recruitment team, the emphasis appeared to be on achieving gender diversity targets rather than on the quality of hires. This observation raised important questions and provided the impetus for a deeper investigation into the ethical implications of such practices, which are examined in the present research.

Literature review

Gender diversity and equal opportunities

In both private companies and public institutions, equal opportunities in the workplace are generally defined as the principle that decisions regarding hiring, promotion, and pay must be based on skills and experience, without being influenced by factors such as gender, skin color, race, or nationality (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). The definition of gender diversity itself has evolved over time, initially shaped by anti-discrimination legislation that has been developing for more than four decades (Dickens, 2005). During this period, legal reforms supported diversity primarily through non-discrimination clauses and workplace equal rights provisions. By 2016, most countries—whether democratic or non-democratic—had adopted laws prohibiting discrimination at work based on gender, race, or ethnicity (Barak, 2017).

Over time, however, diversity has expanded beyond legal compliance to encompass broader business objectives. In this contemporary perspective, diversity is understood as a means of supporting and promoting differences among employees and potential employees, while aligning organizational practices with principles of business ethics. To illustrate, Michàlle Barak defines diversity management as "the voluntary actions of an organization that aim to create, through policies and programs, greater inclusion for employees from diverse environments within the formal or informal structures of the organization" (Barak, 2017). From this perspective, diversity management is inherently proactive: it transcends legal requirements and reflects initiatives that organizations choose to pursue, rather than obligations imposed externally. Gender diversity in the workplace can therefore be understood as a process designed to create and sustain a positive organizational climate in which both similarities and differences between individuals are valued. The overarching aim is to enable all employees to reach their potential and contribute to the organization's strategic objectives (Patrick & Kumar, 2012). Historically, the concept of diversity emerged in the field of human resources to strengthen a sense of belonging among underrepresented groups within institutions. In the case of gender diversity, it arose from the need to balance rights and ensure equal opportunities for women and men in employment.

At the same time, research warns of unintended consequences. Dover et al. (2020) argue that gender diversity initiatives may inadvertently undermine the very goal they are intended to serve - namely, the creation of equal opportunities. This tension underscores the importance of grounding gender diversity management in the principles of business ethics, ensuring that such programs genuinely advance equity rather than reproducing new forms of exclusion. Within multinationals operating in Romania, gender diversity represents both a general organizational objective and a specific priority of human resources departments. In these companies, gender diversity in the workplace is closely linked to the process of employee inclusion, with the two concepts becoming intertwined: diversity objectives cannot be achieved without the active involvement and integration of employees into team activities. The very concept of gender diversity was initially developed to encourage the inclusion of individuals who had historically been excluded from education (Herring, 2009) or whose rights to employment and promotion had been restricted. Without inclusion, gender diversity risks remaining only a theoretical construct. For this reason, at the level of multinationals, the discussion is consistently framed in terms of DEI, as we will refer to it in this paper, meaning diversity and inclusion taken together.

Inclusive organizations are those that 'create and support a culture based on the acceptance of differences between individuals' (Barak, 2017). Deloitte's study Unleashing the Power of Inclusion (2017) demonstrates that inclusion is a fundamental part of organizational culture and that inclusion management has a significant impact on employee retention. According to this study, companies with explicit inclusion goals are more successful in retaining their employees. Thus, beyond initiatives directly linked to gender diversity, human resources departments must prioritize cultivating an organizational culture rooted in integration and involvement in both internal and external activities. Such a culture is not only an emblem of diversity but also a practical way to embed diversity in everyday organizational life, while aligning with principles of business ethics that emphasize fairness and respect for difference.

Romania's cultural and economic context

A post-communist country, Romania joined the European Union in 2007 and has experienced significant economic growth since its integration, transitioning from an industrial to a service economy. The corporate environment adopted Western human resources practices quite rapidly, even if cultural alignment cannot happen overnight. Nowadays, Romania's public sector still struggles to adopt better human resources management, and the World Bank has been supporting the government in designing and implementing key reforms (World Bank, 2025).

Taking Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions into consideration, Romania has its own characteristics in the corporate environment. The power distance in Romania is high, meaning that, in general, employees expect clear direction. The workplace tends to be more hierarchical with clear levels of authority, and challenging a superior may be less common. Thus, the recruitment process tends to focus more on qualifications and technical skills rather than soft skills. Communication practices within the Romanian cultural context are often characterized by a relatively indirect style, especially in interactions with individuals occupying positions of authority. Romania is also a collective society, and the employees tend to consider others and the team itself more than the work or their results. Similarly, Romania is a relationship-based country, so the business relationships within teams mostly determine the results of the work. Trust is built over time, and personal relationships often play a role in professional interactions. When it comes to uncertainty, Romanians have a low tolerance for risk, and they exhibit a more cautious approach to change, valuing security and stability. Employees might prefer clear, established, and well-defined outcomes. Although work-life balance is becoming more important, Romanian culture emphasizes restraint, and they do not place much emphasis on leisure time, exercising greater control over their desires. Employees may still feel pressure to stay late or be available outside working hours.

Romania's socio-economic and institutional transition also affects how DEI practices are introduced and applied within organizations. While many human resources models have been adopted relatively quickly from Western corporate environments, cultural and institutional alignment naturally takes longer to develop. As a result, DEI initiatives are often implemented in line with European regulations or multinational company standards, but their practical application may vary across local organizational realities. In this context, DEI practices in Romania should be viewed as part of an ongoing transition in which organizational modernization and cultural adaptation evolve simultaneously. At the same time, it is important to consider the cultural dimension, as some DEI practices have been transferred and implemented following external models, sometimes without sufficient adaptation to local cultural particularities and organizational norms.

DEI practices within Romania's multinationals

Romania has made significant improvements in gender equality over recent decades, although progress remains uneven and slower compared to the EU average (Kamenitczky & Török, 2024). Multinationals in Romania are increasingly attentive to DEI processes, the management of which has come to be known as DEI management. According to a study conducted by Mkor (Cimpoca, 2020), DEI management delivers multiple benefits in Romanian multinationals, including enhanced creativity and productivity, stronger employee loyalty and engagement, improved employer reputation, and more effective communication and management practices. At the employee level, a Catalyst (2014) study found that inclusion practices directly contribute to higher levels of creativity, productivity, and innovation. These findings highlight that the ethical and business dimensions of inclusion are closely aligned: treating employees fairly and ensuring they feel included enhances both their well-being and organizational outcomes. Further data reinforce this conclusion. According to the same Mkor study (Cimpoca, 2020), 60 percent of multinationals in Romania report having a well-defined DEI strategy, and 96 percent of these strategies specifically address gender diversity. This confirms that gender diversity is the most widely pursued construct among Romanian multinationals, embedded into objectives defined at the organizational level. The main challenge, however, lies in defining precisely what should be measured and for what purpose (Lockwood, 2010). In other words, which dimensions of gender diversity are assessed, and how can this information support organizational development in an ethically sound way?

Organizations integrate gender diversity management into HR strategies for three main reasons: moral, business-related, and reputational. The moral rationale emphasizes fairness and equal opportunity, aligning with business ethics by underscoring the obligation to make employment decisions based on competence rather than bias. The business rationale highlights the efficiency gains and performance benefits of heterogeneous teams, while the reputational rationale reflects the external signaling of inclusiveness and responsibility to stakeholders (Dover et al., 2020). Common initiatives include targeted recruitment, retention programs, and leadership development for underrepresented groups (McKay & Avery, 2005). Cox & Blake (1991) were among the first to argue that diversity provides a competitive advantage, a view reinforced by later studies linking gender diversity to financial performance, innovation, and corporate reputation (Herring, 2009; Fine et al., 2019; Wilton et al., 2018).

In practice, most multinationals in Romania adopt gender diversity programs designed at headquarters and implemented locally. These often include numerical targets, such as requiring a minimum percentage of female hires or managers. While such targets demonstrate commitment, they also risk generating perceptions of reverse discrimination. Nevertheless, research consistently shows that gender-diverse teams are more innovative, creative, and financially successful (Herring, 2009; Badal & Harter, 2014). Gender diversity also strengthens employer branding and enhances talent attraction from both minority and majority groups. Beyond business outcomes, gender diversity initiatives rely heavily on leadership commitment. Inclusive leadership fosters dialogue, models fairness, and reinforces organizational values (Allen, 2018).

Challenges and risks in DEI implementation

At the same time, diversity management is not a universal remedy. It can generate challenges, including greater potential for workplace conflict. However, as Herring (2009) observes, such conflicts may be constructive, creating opportunities for creativity and new solutions. Programs that focus narrowly on representation metrics, however, risk creating resentment and perceptions of reverse discrimination (Dover et al., 2020). Sustainable diversity strategies, therefore, require balance: they must ground opportunities in merit while cultivating fairness and inclusion, thereby ensuring that employees feel valued as individuals rather than as categories. Sposato et al. (2015) argue that gender diversity must operate alongside inclusion and be evaluated against the principle of equal opportunity. While organizations often adopt diversity initiatives for their instrumental benefits, their primary purpose should remain fairness and equity, not merely competitive advantage. True inclusion requires equal rights, respect for individual differences, and the integration of all employees, regardless of gender.

The persistence of gender diversity initiatives reveals that women still require structural support to access, integrate, and progress within organizations (Dover et al., 2020). Nevertheless, initiatives tied to performance targets may unintentionally foster perceptions of unfairness among men. Moreover, research suggests that current programs often fall short of consistently creating more equitable or inclusive workplaces (Fine et al., 2019). To address these challenges, Dover et al. (2020) recommend several adjustments: reframing initiatives to emphasize the value of group differences; encouraging rather than mandating diversity training; redesigning recruitment processes to reduce reliance on internal referrals that reinforce homogeneity; and fostering collaboration between men and women in mixed teams. Crucially, organizations must also implement evaluation frameworks to determine whether diversity programs genuinely advance equal opportunity, rather than simply fulfilling numerical goals. In conclusion, gender diversity management should not be reduced to compliance mechanisms or statistical targets. Its legitimacy rests on whether it contributes to business ethics, equity, and the cultivation of inclusive cultures that benefit both employees and organizations.

The process of inclusion constitutes a gender diversity management strategy that transcends the boundaries of legal compliance and may be regarded as the next stage in organizational development, following equal opportunity programs and affirmative action policies. Inclusion is conceptualized as an organizational commitment to embrace and integrate differences among employees, with the explicit objective of generating added value at the institutional level (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). More than the mere acknowledgment of difference, inclusion entails the active valorization of individual heterogeneity, transforming interpersonal interactions and the diversity they embody into organizational assets. Within this perspective, distinctions are not merely tolerated but deliberately cultivated and strategically leveraged to enhance team effectiveness and organizational performance.

Prejudice often arises when informational gaps are filled with stereotypes, which, once acted upon, result in discriminatory practices. For example, a hiring manager may assume that an unmarried 35-year-old female candidate will soon seek maternity leave and reject her application. This constitutes "double discrimination": the decision rests on an unfounded stereotype and simultaneously restricts a fundamental right—the right to work as guaranteed by Article 41 of the Romanian Labor Code (Codul Muncii [Labor Code], n.d.). Positive stereotypes can be equally harmful. Assuming, for instance, that women are naturally more detail-oriented may disadvantage male applicants if hiring decisions rely on such assumptions rather than competence. As Clements & Spinks (2009) argue, prejudice and discrimination can be addressed through awareness and deliberate action. Their root drivers include ignorance, power imbalances, vulnerability, conformity, and lack of education. Effective countermeasures, therefore, involve empathy, awareness, sensitivity to consequences, and a commitment to ethical behavior and fair conduct. Gender stereotypes are especially pervasive, reinforced from early childhood through cultural narratives in which women are depicted as beautiful and nurturing while men are portrayed as strong and heroic. In organizational life, these stereotypes often manifest in biased judgments and discriminatory practices (Hanappi-Egger, 2007). The critical question, therefore, is whether gender diversity initiatives in Romanian multinationals truly advance equal opportunity or whether they risk reproducing inequalities under new forms - a question explored in the qualitative research presented in the following chapter.

Diversity framework design

Apart from formal indicators, recruitment and promotion targets on diversity hiring, a healthy diversity and inclusion program should be ethical and should take into account ethics, equal opportunities, competencies, and merit-based evaluation. From my professional perspective, the companies will be diverse and inclusive once we talk more about competencies and potential, rather than gender. A diversity and inclusion framework should include everyone (no matter the gender, race, sexual preferences, or politics) and then apply an evaluation rather than select based on criteria and flex the evaluation based on that.

The framework design for a diversity and inclusion program should include everyone at every step of its process, without using diversity factors as criteria (Figure 1). The first step I recommend is establishing clear, job-relevant criteria (for recruitment or promotion). The second step will be to address everyone, while the third step will involve everyone who meets the criteria established in the first place. After this, we have the selection process, the fourth step; the selection is made based on predefined criteria, ensuring that hiring, promotion, or evaluation outcomes remain competence-driven. At this point, all the people involved in the decision-making process should have completed bias and diversity training. The final step is inclusive integration by acknowledging and accommodating individual differences within teams and organizational practices.

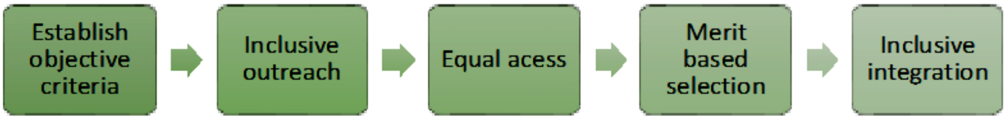

Figure 1. Framework for inclusive and criteria-driven organizational decision-making

Methodology

Research design

This qualitative study aims to examine if organizational policies on gender diversity respect the principle of equal opportunity. Building on this objective, the research design is structured around three guiding research questions:

RQ1. To what extent do indicators measuring gender diversity create an equitable working environment within Romanian multinationals?

RQ2. Do gender diversity indicators in Romanian multinationals lead to discriminatory practices against male candidates in recruitment processes?

RQ3. Do hiring managers adjust their selection criteria according to the gender of candidates in order to meet diversity-related performance targets?

This research design was developed to gather the necessary information for addressing the above questions. The study focuses on multinational companies operating in Romania, with participants consisting of human resources specialists and hiring managers. The chosen methodology is qualitative, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how diversity indicators set by multinational corporations affect employees and candidates in recruitment processes. The research is therefore exploratory, aiming to capture organizational realities while probing HR professionals' perceptions and attitudes toward gender diversity. Qualitative methodology was selected precisely because it enables a nuanced investigation of the link between gender diversity and equal opportunity through a detailed examination of the social realities within Romanian multinationals.

Data collection

To collect data, semi-structured interviews were employed, considered suitable for generating rich information even if they require more time to conduct. This method was selected because it supports the collection of complex responses from participants (Frunzaru & Ivan, n.d.), which in turn allows for an analysis of the relationship between gender diversity and equal opportunity. The interview guide was designed around the research questions and applied flexibly as each discussion progressed. It followed a classical structure, beginning with a short introduction in which the researcher introduced themselves, explained the purpose of the interview, and emphasized confidentiality. Data were transcribed and analyzed manually without the aid of dedicated qualitative analysis software.

A content analysis guided by the research questions was conducted, with the primary objective of answering them. In addition, six clusters were created to identify recurring patterns in interviewees' responses. Based on the information obtained, it was assessed whether the study succeeded in addressing the research questions and whether the research raised further questions that could serve as the basis for future investigations. For respondent sampling, several clear criteria were established, and a non-probabilistic convenience sampling strategy was employed. This choice was motivated by the ease of access to respondents and reduced costs (Frunzaru & Ivan, n.d). Access was facilitated by the researcher's professional background in business and human resources. HR specialists working in, or having previously worked for, Romanian multinationals with gender diversity policies were contacted. Only those who met these criteria were included in the sample.

Potential respondents were approached and, after confirming eligibility, invited to participate in online interviews. Those who accepted were interviewed using the prepared guide. Interviews were held via Microsoft Teams and video-recorded, enabling both full transcripts and the observation of non-verbal cues. Transcriptions were carried out using specific symbols to preserve as much content and nuance from the conversations as possible. The interviews were conducted between January 2022 and November 2024. The researcher's professional background positively influenced the creation of the respondent list, as it facilitated access and encouraged greater openness from participants to take part in the study. At both the beginning and end of each interview, participants were reminded that their identity would remain confidential, ensuring a safe environment in which respondents felt comfortable sharing their experiences. In total, nine HR professionals with experience in various multinational companies in Romania were interviewed. These measures strengthened the credibility of the qualitative research and supported the collection of authentic, in-depth insights. The following section presents the results and analysis derived from the qualitative study described above.

Results and discussion

The interviewees had all worked in multinationals with gender diversity programs in place; however, in every organization, there were also performance indicators for meeting gender diversity criteria. Based on the interviewees' perspectives, six of the companies analyzed use performance indicators related to gender diversity. In these organizations, recruitment and selection teams are required to ensure that a certain percentage of employees are women, even when this proportion does not occur organically (for example, due to the number of applicants or the available talent pool). Several respondents highlighted a phenomenon reminiscent of the *affirmative action* practices that, as discussed in previous chapters, originated in the United States. Specifically, when gender diversity performance indicators are imposed at the recruitment-team level, additional efforts are made to include more female candidates in selection processes.

By contrast, companies without gender diversity performance indicators seek to promote gender balance by cultivating an organizational culture that fosters equal opportunities across human resource processes more broadly and within the organization as a whole. From the interviews, it also emerged that multinationals pursuing gender diversity through formal indicators generally set targets of between 25% and 30% female employees. As a result, these targets cascade down to recruitment teams and, in many cases, to individual recruiters, who are tasked with ensuring progress toward these objectives. In such cases, recruitment teams make additional efforts to involve female candidates in recruitment and selection processes, even when these candidates are particularly difficult to identify in the labor market.

As respondents explained, recruiters often resort to targeted searches to identify female candidates across various recruitment channels. For example, when managing the hiring process for a programmer role, a recruiter may be required to ensure the inclusion of female candidates, even if a shortlist already exists that contains male applicants. To meet this requirement, recruiters may deliberately contact only female candidates for consideration. From an ethical perspective, this practice raises concerns, as actively including only female candidates in targeted searches may reduce the likelihood that male candidates are considered in recruitment and selection. In this sense, performance indicators intended to promote diversity may unintentionally foster discriminatory practices, thereby undermining the principle of equal opportunity.

Similar to recruitment teams, hiring managers also reported pressure to meet performance indicators related to gender diversity. Insights from the interviews suggest that, in some cases, hiring decisions are influenced by candidates' gender, with managers prioritizing this factor to meet diversity-related performance objectives. This issue was raised in discussions with two respondents, one of whom provided a concrete example: in a particular organization, a hiring manager abandoned several selection criteria in order to hire a female candidate. The decision was motivated by the low representation of women within that specific team. Nevertheless, as shown in the table above, in seven of the nine companies discussed, hiring managers did not express preferences related to gender diversity. In these cases, selection criteria remained focused on the competencies required for each role and on candidates' prior professional experience. According to respondents, there are instances in which hiring decisions are made based on gender, and, from an ethical perspective, such practices are discriminatory, insofar as they limit the rights of individuals in a particular category - consistent with the definition of discrimination itself.

Regarding prejudice, the participants in this study revealed that stereotypes and preconceived ideas about gender characteristics of candidates continue to persist. Even though the interviewees were human resources specialists, certain assumptions persisted about the traits expected of each gender, as illustrated in the table below. To mitigate the risk of discriminatory decision-making, we recommend delivering bias-awareness training within recruitment processes, targeting both recruitment teams and hiring managers. Concerning equal opportunity, discussions with participants revealed that in some Romanian multinationals, hiring managers and HR representatives strive to meet gender diversity objectives by targeting female candidates. However, achieving these objectives often comes at the expense of equal opportunity. True gender diversity will be realized only when recruitment is no longer guided by gender-targeted searches, but instead relies exclusively on equal opportunity and professional competence.

Based on the data and analysis presented above, we now return to the research questions outlined at the beginning of this paper:

RQ1. To what extent do gender diversity indicators create an equitable work environment within Romanian multinationals? The findings suggest that involving candidates in recruitment processes primarily on the basis of gender does not foster an equitable work environment within teams.

RQ2. Do gender diversity indicators in Romanian multinationals lead to discrimination against male candidates in recruitment processes? The results indicate that the presence of gender diversity indicators often generates targeted recruitment of female candidates, a practice that may result in forms of reverse discrimination.

RQ3. Do hiring managers adjust their selection criteria according to the gender of candidates in order to meet gender diversity indicators? Interviews revealed only a limited number of cases in which hiring managers relaxed certain selection criteria or qualifications to meet organizational objectives related to gender diversity.

These findings align with previous research emphasizing both the benefits and risks of diversity management. Dover et al. (2020) argue that diversity programs may unintentionally foster reverse discrimination, a concern echoed here, where recruitment teams and hiring managers reported pressure to prioritize female candidates to meet gender indicators. Similarly, Fine et al. (2019) highlight the limited evidence that such programs consistently create equitable workplaces, a point supported by the persistence of stereotypes and prejudices among HR specialists in our sample. By contrast, Herring

(2009) demonstrated clear business advantages of diversity in terms of creativity and innovation, yet in the Romanian multinationals studied, the emphasis on meeting numerical targets sometimes undermined merit-based selection, raising ethical concerns rather than delivering performance gains. Overall, the study extends the literature by showing that when diversity goals are narrowly translated into numeric quotas, they risk reproducing inequities rather than eliminating them, underscoring the need to anchor diversity management in business ethics to ensure that initiatives genuinely advance equality of opportunity.

Study limitations and directions for future research

The limitations of this study lie in the methodology and in the speed at which the corporate environment changes. The qualitative research involved deep conversations with specialists in human resources who were directly impacted by diversity and inclusion practices. The pieces of information derived from those discussions were very qualitative and very descriptive of the corporate landscape regarding diversity and inclusion practices. At the same time, the interviewees have shared their perspectives from very different companies where DEI programs were already in place.

The research design should also include quantitative research to determine the effect of DEI practices within the multinational environment in Romania. The results of such research should be corroborated with the results of this qualitative research to be able to draw a formal conclusion. Thus, the conclusions of this paper, as we will see below, will be drawn cautiously, and we should consider them an invitation to further research that could address, with fewer limitations, the ethical aspects of diversity and inclusion practices within multinational companies in Romania. Another direction for future research is to extend the study geographically to larger regions to assess whether these effects are perceived similarly across countries.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the qualitative research conducted for this paper revealed that, in certain cases, the use of gender diversity indicators within Romanian multinationals may inadvertently contribute to discriminatory practices in recruitment and selection. Specifically, when HR departments and hiring managers are tasked with meeting a fixed target for female representation, gender itself can become a selection criterion. The analysis further showed that stereotypes and prejudices regarding the social roles of women and men persist even within HR departments. Combined with performance indicators on gender diversity, such biases may reinforce practices that undermine rather than promote equal opportunity.

As a result, there are instances where hiring managers and recruitment teams include female candidates primarily to meet gender diversity objectives. On the one hand, this can lead managers to compromise on certain selection criteria; on the other hand, it encourages targeted recruitment of women, irrespective of broader competence-based considerations. This study, therefore, raises a warning about the ethical risks of such practices and underlines the importance of addressing prejudice and bias in recruitment through training programs. These trainings - delivered to both HR teams and hiring managers - should focus on raising awareness of unconscious bias and preventing decisions that might be considered discriminatory. Ultimately, ensuring that gender diversity initiatives are aligned with the principles of business ethics is essential. Only by embedding fairness, transparency, and merit-based decision-making at the core of recruitment and selection can organizations both advance diversity and uphold the principle of equal opportunity for all.

As for the element of novelty, it lies in this paper's attention to a phenomenon that, although not widespread according to the qualitative research conducted, is nonetheless present. Specifically, in teams where performance indicators related to gender diversity are imposed, discriminatory practices have been observed in recruitment and selection. In such cases, hiring managers and recruitment teams create an artificial candidate pipeline by actively targeting and involving exclusively female candidates in the selection process. This study, therefore, serves as a warning to multinationals that have already implemented, or are in the process of implementing, gender diversity programs. It underlines that gender diversity is a complex process that must be integrated into the organizational culture of each company, rather than imposed through rigid performance indicators (for instance, requiring that 30% of candidates in recruitment processes be women).

A more sustainable approach, as also suggested by HR specialists in the theoretical section of this paper, is to foster voluntary participation in training and development programs designed to raise awareness of diversity and inclusion. By embedding such initiatives within the organization, recruitment can remain grounded in competence while diversity objectives are reached organically. In this way, companies can pursue gender diversity in line with business ethics principles, avoiding practices that may inadvertently create discrimination while still advancing fairness and equal opportunity. Thus, the paper contributes to the broader academic debate on business ethics by questioning whether diversity and inclusion programs truly advance fairness or whether they risk creating new forms of exclusion.

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