

Empirical Research Paper

Policies and practices of gender-based equality and diversity in Australian project-based organizations

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between gender equality and diversity practices and their impact on gender diversity in project-based organizations has delivered mixed research results. Policies abound but the implementation of diversity practices has received limited research focus. The quality of the processes implementing equality and diversity practices is the focus of the present research report. The research systematically investigates how effective is the implementation of those practices using a multi-case research method across six project-based organizations in the Australian construction, property and engineering industry sectors, employing a frame designed by Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013). The findings reveal patchy and ineffective implementation of even well-considered and high-quality diversity policies. In terms of diversity practices, a focus on implementation in practice is equally important as a focus on policy design or selection.

1. Introduction

Project-based organizations (PBOs) are challenged by skill shortages; the Project Management Institute (PMI) (2017) recommends that improving gender diversity to leverage female participation could meet this demand as well as improve team and organizational performance and competitiveness (Baker et al., 2019a; Kim et al., 2020; Sang and Powell, 2012; Shrestha et al., 2020). High levels of skills and qualifications, the inclusion of multiple perspectives for decision-making, market insights and management styles can all be positively improved (Ali 2016; Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM), 2020; Baker et al., 2021) through the increased recruitment and retention of women (Morello et al., 2018; Shrestha et al., 2020). In many PBO organizations a range of gender equality and diversity policies have been designed and implemented. These policies cover a spectrum of gender-based human resource (HR) initiatives. Targeted recruitment and promotions, training and development, remuneration and succession planning, as well as work-life (WL) initiatives such as workplace flexibility arrangements (Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), 2014) are all part of the policy mix of principles or preferred action that have been codified and adopted. What is done or not done when enacting (or not enacting) policies, constitutes practices. Policies, as statements intended to guide actions, do not necessarily map seamlessly on to those actions that ensue as practices. The relation of practices to

policies is a variable empirical matter. Just as codified and documented strategy differs from strategy as practice (Clegg et al., 2022), policies, forming part of an overall strategy, differ from policies as practice.

Despite these policies, research investigating the relationship between gender equality and women's representation in PBOs as a result of diversity practices has delivered mixed results (Baker et al., 2019a, 2021; French and Strachan, 2015; Galea et al., 2015). Adopting the requisite HR policies is not enough to achieve desired organizational outcomes; these require effective implementation in practice (Woodrow and Guest, 2014). Seemingly similar HR policies produce different outcomes in different organizations (Makhecha et al., 2018), depending on how effective is their implementation in practice (Guest, 2011; Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Woodrow and Guest, 2014). The gap between intended policies and successful practices is filled by the effective implementation (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013; Khilji and Wang, 2006; Wright and Nishii, 2013).

To investigate the implementation of HR and WL gender equality and diversity policies in PBO organizations, the research draws on Guest and Bos-Nehles's (2013) four-stage HR practices implementation framework. The significance of this research is that, despite increasing efforts and the growing number of equality and diversity programs in PBOs, achieving workplace gender diversity continues to be one of the biggest and most persistent challenges both in Australia (WGEA, 2021) and globally (United Nations, 2019a). Improving the implementation

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process is a key to the effective achievement of workplace gender diversity in PBOs. While past research has investigated the relationship of gender equality and diversity policies with women's representation, effective implementation of these practices has not been explicitly investigated (Baker et al., 2021; O'Leary and Sandberg, 2017; Pitts et al., 2010; Ricco and Guerci, 2014; Verbeek and Groeneveld, 2012). The omission of this significant contribution is acknowledged by both Trullen et al. (2020) and Bondarouk et al. (2018) noting the need for more research focused on understanding how effective is the implementation of HRM to understand its impact. The contribution of the present research is to address the gap noted by prior research and respond to it by assessing the effective implementation of gender equality and diversity policies in practice, specifically gender-based HR and WL policies and programs in PBOs. The research addresses the following question: How effective are the process and quality of gender-based equality and diversity policies in practice in PBOs?

A detailed multi-case study assessment of gender equality and diversity policies and practices from six Australian PBOs is reported. The application of the four-stage framework for the analysis of effective HR practices implementation (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013) adopted in this study is extended in its contributions. Additional understanding to that of Trullen et al. (2020) addressing how effective implementation relates to the outcomes of gender equality and diversity practices in PBOs provides a contribution to the HRM field as well as the understanding of strategic HR initiatives in project organizations. The findings demonstrate the effectiveness of a multi-case study method in examining issues related to implementation of gender equality and diversity initiatives. Finally, the findings contribute to future practice by offering recommendations for improving diversity management implementation in PBOs. After a brief outline of gender equality and diversity policies and their outcomes in PBO industries is provided, a summary follows of the framework adapted from Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) and the research method outlined. In the findings that follow, the analysis of gender equality and diversity practices in PBOs are discussed. Finally, the discussion, contributions and recommendations for future research are presented.

1.1. Gender diversity in project-based organizations

An increasing number of organizations across multiple industries conduct their business through temporary PBOs (Bredin, 2008; Crawford et al., 2013; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006). In industry sectors such as construction, property, engineering and mining, the economic performance of PBOs makes a significant impact on employment and economic performance (Hobday, 2000; Lindkvist, 2004). Increasing demand for skilled labor has led to significant skill shortages in PBOs, representing a significant challenge and risk to sectoral competitiveness (Crawford et al., 2013; PMI, 2017).

Increasing workplace gender diversity is a way of enhancing organizational competitiveness (Goldman Sachs JBWere, 2009) by fostering innovation (Díaz-García et al., 2013), increasing productivity (Sahoo and Lenka, 2016), and improving financial performance (Campbell and Mínguez-Vera, 2008). Baker et al. (2019a) found leveraging female talent can improve organizational competitiveness and financial outcomes in project-based organizations across mining; construction; professional, scientific, and technical services; manufacturing; and information, media, and telecommunications industry groups. Similarly, Won et al. (2021) found the workplace diversity aspects such as efficient decision-making and countering the issue of skilled labor shortages improve project productivity performance. Further, increasing workplace gender diversity is also a way of addressing the wider issue of gender inequality, what the United Nations (UN) Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed described as one of the leading challenges of our time and "the most pervasive and universal form of inequality" (United Nations, 2019b). The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all UN member states in 2015 (n =

193) outlines 17 detailed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with two of those specifically linking to the focus of gender inequality. Goal 5 relates to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Further, Goal 8 involves the promotion of sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth with full and productive employment and decent work for all (United Nations, 2023). Sertyesilik (2022) argues that an increase in the employment of women in the construction industry can support achievement of UN sustainable development goals.

Nonetheless, women's representation remains low in PBOs globally. For instance, women's representation in construction is 25.9% in Australia (WGEA, 2021), 11% in the United States (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022), 9% in the European Community (Women Can Build, 2020) and 14% in the United Kingdom (Go Construct, 2022). Similarly, in engineering, women represent only 11% of employees in Australia (Engineering Australia, 2022), 16% in the UK (Engineering UK, 2022), and 17% in the US (US Census Bureau, 2021). Property is much more balanced, with women represent 48.7% of employees in Australia (WGEA, 2021), 48% in the US (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019), and 54% in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

The Australian construction industry generates nearly AUD360 billion in revenue annually, contributing 9% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employing approximately one in 10 workers, constituting 8.7% of the total workforce (Back to Basics, 2022). While, as previously cited, women represent 25.9% of all employees in the industry, most women work in support roles due to a high degree of vertical segregation, with just 18.8% holding senior managerial roles and only 4.4% CEO roles (WGEA, 2021). The property industry is the largest industry in Australia, making a 11.5% contribution to GDP and being the second largest employer, directly employing 11.8% of the total workforce. While women represent 48.7% of all employees, just 10.5% are CEOs and 37.8% senior managers (WGEA, 2021). In architecture, engineering, and technical services, women represent 27.8% of all employees, but just 6.7% of CEOs and 20.7% of senior managers. Both horizontal segregation, characterized by the workforce being predominantly made up of men, and vertical segregation, with women holding lower-level positions and status, characterize the situation (WGEA, 2021). The breakdown of female workplace demographics is shown in Table 1.

While some gains in women's representation have been achieved over the past few years, Morrison's (2020) report found that 27% of organizations put all or most diversity and inclusion initiatives on hold during the pandemic. This is a major concern for the PMI, noting that the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to PBOs putting diversity initiatives on hold, which may have eroded positive progress (PMI, 2020).

1.2. Impact of gender equality and diversity policies on organizational outcomes

The effectiveness of the implementation of gender equality and diversity policies is continuously debated with varying results, as evident in multiple discussions conducted by various scholars, including French and Strachan (2015), Kalev et al. (2006), Verbeek and Groeneveld (2012), Ali (2016), Baker et al. (2019b), Baker et al. (2021), Hanappi-Egger (2012) and Wyatt-Nichol and Antwi-Boasiako (2012). Kalev et al. (2006) found that diversity policies had positive effects on gender and racial equality in organizational workforces. Ali (2016) also found that gender equality and diversity policies led to improved representation of women. However, Verbeek and Groeneveld (2012) and French and Strachan (2007, 2009, 2015) argued that gender equality and diversity policies failed to increase the numbers of overall women in management in the traditionally male-dominated construction and transport industries. Baker et al. (2019b) found support for a positive relationship between work-life initiatives and the representation of women at management and non-management levels in Australian mining and property organizations; however, the effect of gender-based HR policies on women's representation at any organizational level was not apparent.

Table 1
Female workplace composition.

Workplace Composition	All Industries	Construction	Architectural Engineering & Technical Services	Property Operators
Number of Employees	4,188,336	154,339	70,685	5402
Number of Organizations	4474	187	120	18
Women Overall	51.0%	25.9%	27.8%	48.7%
Women CEOs	19.4%	4.4%	6.7%	10.5%
Women Senior Managers	37.4%	18.8%	20.7%	37.5%
Women All Managers	40.7%	18.7%	21.6%	39.7%

Past research indicates mixed results concerning the extent to which gender equality and diversity policies lead to higher performance outcomes. For instance, [Kidder et al. \(2004\)](#) argued that gender/ethnicity-focused policies may have negative effects on performance because of backlash from men, as the majority employees. Similarly, [Bloom et al. \(2009\)](#) studied 700 organizations in Europe and the US and found no relationship between WL policies and productivity. [French and Strachan \(2017\)](#) suggested that HR policies do not address serious structural and systemic inequality in male-dominated industries. By contrast, [Baker et al. \(2021\)](#) investigated the relationship between both gender-based HR policies and WL policies and performance in construction and engineering and while they found a positive impact of WL policies on operating revenue and profit before tax, they did not for gender-based HR policies. These results support the work of [Bloom et al. \(2011\)](#), [Perry-Smith and Blum \(2000\)](#), [Sands and Harper \(2007\)](#), and [Lingard and Francis \(2005\)](#), all finding a positive relationship between WL policies and performance.

[Becker and Huselid \(2006\)](#) posit that effective implementation of HR policies is key in improving organizational performance. [Guest \(2011\)](#) found good policies do not deliver positive outcomes without effective implementation. The understanding of effective implementation of HR initiatives remains under-explored ([Galea et al., 2015](#); [O'Leary and Sandberg, 2017](#); [Pitts et al., 2010](#); [Ricco and Guerri, 2014](#); [Trullen et al., 2020](#)). Research has not explicitly considered the quality and process of HR policy implementation in general, including gender equality and diversity policies ([Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013](#)), a finding supported by the PMI, which reported a large gap between diversity talk and action ([PMI, 2020](#)).

1.3. Framework for analysis of effective implementation

To explore the process of HRM implementation in relationship to organizational outcomes, [Guest and Bos-Nehles \(2013\)](#) proposed a four-stage analytic framework that forms the basis for this research. The [Guest and Bos-Nehles \(2013\)](#) framework considers implementation in a systematic approach by addressing each stage of the implementation process: 1) the decision to introduce HR policies; 2) the quality of HR policies; 3) the implementation of HR practices and 4), the quality of implementation. The framework uses a process approach suitable for PBOs' critical focus on processes in the application of project management methodologies. In the past, HRM researchers have investigated implementation of HR initiatives by focusing on the 'linkage model', the mediating processes and linking the presence of specific HR policies to employee attitudes and behaviour ([Markoulli et al., 2017](#)), while downplaying a second relevant pathway, namely that effective implementation of HR policies in practices ([Trullen et al., 2020](#)). The quality of HR practices' implementation was considered analytically by [Guest and Bos-Nehles \(2013\)](#) and later tested by [Woodrow and Guest \(2014\)](#).

In the context of PBOs' implementation of gender-based HR and WL practices, the first stage involves a decision to introduce policies in PBOs to improve organizational workplace gender diversity. All organizations of a certain scale are legally expected to host gender equality and diversity policies; however, no specific initiatives are mandatory under Australian legislation, with organizations free to select policies that they feel address their needs. As a result, considerable variation is seen in the

number and type of those policies ([Burgess et al., 2009](#)). Contextual factors, such as organizational size as well as corporate strategy, influence decisions ([Boxall and Purcell, 2011](#)). In addition, [Baker and French \(2018\)](#) argue that institutional factors, such as Federal diversity legislation, as well as pressure from the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) and industry bodies influence those decisions, by imposing the need for legislative compliance.

The second stage relates to the quality of gender-based HR and WL practices implemented ([Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013](#)). The quality of policies, like their number, can vary between PBOs. Some organizations offer symbolic policies as initiatives to fulfill legislative requirements ([Baker et al., 2021](#)). Other organizations, recognizing the value of diversity, may be driven by social justice principles, taking great care to design and select diversity policies that help achieve strategic objectives and organizational outcomes in practice. The practices may differ; for instance, they could be identity-conscious practices (i.e., targeting specific social groups such as women or people with disabilities), or identity-blind practices (i.e., targeting everyone, through generic training programs or flexible work programs). Each approach will have a different impact on outcomes ([Kulik, 2014](#)).

The third stage concerns implementation of practices by line managers, that is, the organization's operating managers ([Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013](#)). While HR managers normally design and select diversity [policies] and ensure their quality and fit, while executive teams endorse them, it is up to line managers to implement them in practice ([Gratton and Truss, 2003](#)). Implementation may be affected by how well line managers understand the policies and practices, whether they support them, whether they understand their impact on outcomes, and so on ([Khilji and Wang, 2006](#); [Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007](#)). For instance, HR managers may implement a recruitment strategy to attract more female applicants, but the line manager may rely on their personal preferences when selecting candidates.

The fourth stage concerns the quality of implementation ([Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013](#)). For example, line managers may agree to recruit more women into their teams but due to various factors, such as time pressures and multiple priorities, they may not allocate sufficient time to find suitable female candidates. Line managers may differ in their motivation to comply with HR policies and practices, as well as in their skills in implementing these ([Nehles et al., 2006](#)). [Guest et al.'s \(2013\)](#) framework indicates that establishing who is responsibly required to implement HRM practices and who is responsible for evaluating effective implementation of HRM practices is important. According to [Guest and Bos-Nehles's \(2013\)](#) model, responsibility for implementation normally rests with senior management, HR managers and line managers, while evaluation of effective implementation of practices can be achieved by a wider range of stakeholders, including senior management, HR management, line managers and employees ([Tsui, 1987](#)). [Guest and Conway \(2011\)](#) found that assessment of implementation by senior management and HR managers is associated with better performance.

2. Methods and material

2.1. Study design

This study was conducted as exploratory research, prompted by the

lack of adequate extant knowledge about effective implementation of gender equality and diversity policies in PBOs. A qualitative multi-case study design approach was used to meet the requirements of exploratory research (Yin, 2014) and the qualitative nature of the research question (see Fig. 1). This design was chosen because it enables not only answers to ‘how’, and ‘why’ type research question but also provides a variety of empirical evidence in detail, examining the phenomenon within case contexts (Creswell and Miller, 2000). The data can be used for comparison to validate whether the findings are unique or occur in other cases, as well as enabling examination of differences and similarities across multiple cases (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The multi-case study design has been widely used in organizational research to provide a rich analysis of social and organizational processes and contexts (Hartley, 2004).

2.2. Sampling method and participating organizations

Six Australian PBOs from the traditionally male-dominated construction, engineering, and property sectors were selected for this study. The selection criteria for participating organizations mandated that they be mid to large size Australian PBOs with over 100 employees, actively committed and promoting diversity through documented policies and practices. This commitment was demonstrated by submitting annual equality progress reports to the WGEA. Additionally, the organizations were required to be members of the Property Council of Australia (PCA), a peak industry association that represents influential leaders in the field and advocates for the industry’s reputation and overall impact. Each organization had reported multiple gender equality and diversity policies as a part of their strategies to the WGEA. They were recruited through the PCA, using purposive sampling to select highly representative case studies and participants able to provide relevant data on the implementation of diversity practices in Australian PBOs in the construction, property and engineering sectors (Maxwell, 1996). PCA promoted the study on their website and social media channels. Six organizations’ HR managers expressed interest in participating and promoted the study internally to recruit participants.

To preserve anonymity, the six cases will be referred to as Organizations A to F and are described in Table 2. Organization A is an engineering consultancy and a subsidiary of a European-owned multinational. The HR manager, one senior-level line manager and one mid-level line manager participated in the study. Organization B is an Australian subsidiary of an engineering services company that operates in over 120 countries. The HR manager and a senior line manager participated in the interviews. Organization C is a top-tier Australian construction organization and a subsidiary of a UK-owned multinational. A

Table 2 Case study organizations workplace composition.

Organization	Industry	CEOs % of Females	All Managers % Females	All Non-Managers % of Females
Org A	Engineering	0%	26%	37%
Org B	Engineering	0%	14%	24%
Org C	Construction	50%	50%	60%
Org D	Construction	0%	34%	41%
Org E	Property	0%	51%	65%
Org F	Property	0%	36%	56%
Total				

senior line manager participated in the interviews. Organization D is an Australian-based construction organization of 30 years’ standing. Interview participants included the HR manager and a senior line manager. Organization E is an Australian-based large property development organization founded over 60 years ago. The HR manager and senior line manager participated in the interviews. Organization F is an Australian small residential property company. The senior HR manager and two senior line managers participated in the interviews.

2.3. Participants

The participants within the case study organizations were selected based on their critical role in the design and implementation of initiatives and met the following selection criteria for offering an inside view of implementation: 1) being a mid to senior-level manager; 2) having accountability for the design and/or implementation of gender-based HR and WL initiatives. The aim was to recruit two to three participants per case organization and a maximum of 12–13 participants overall, considered adequate for a case study approach in qualitative research (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). In total, 13 participants were interviewed, and their demographics are summarized in Table 3. Participants’ average length of industry experience was 18 years, and the average length in the current organization was 8.4 years. An Interview Guide was used to ensure consistency in question design and delivery (see Appendix 1). The Interview Guide comprised three parts: 1) information about the interviewees and their experience in the industry and roles; 2) the process of implementation of gender-based HR policies and support for those initiatives and 3), the process of implementation of WL policies and support for them.

2.4. Documents

In addition to conducting semi-structured interviews, secondary data

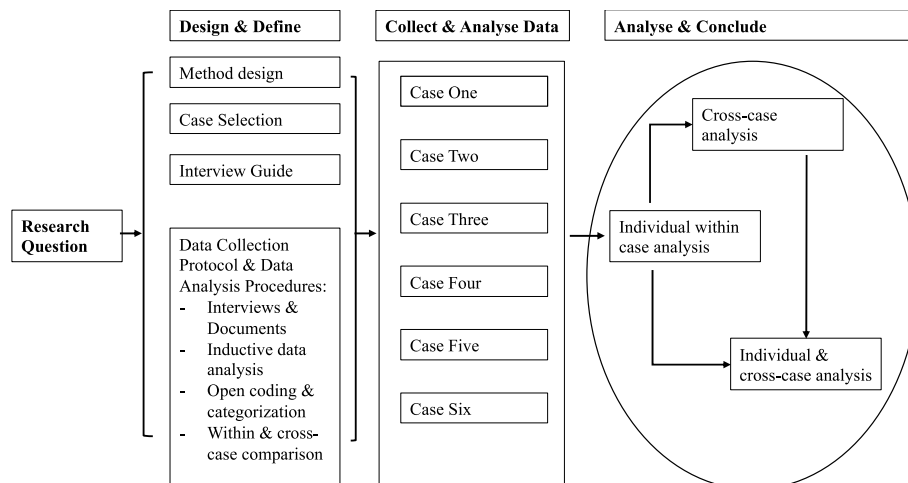


Fig. 1. Multiple-case study methodology based on Yin’s (2014) model.

Table 3
Participant demographics.

Participant	Industry	Organization	Gender	Role	Length in industry	Length in company
AA	Engineering	Org A	Female	HR Manager	3.5	3.5
AB	Engineering	Org A	Male	Line Manager	28	5
AC	Engineering	Org C	Male	Line Manager	18	5
BD	Engineering	Org B	Male	Line Manager	22	22
BE	Engineering	Org B	Female	HR Manager	11	7
CF	Construction	Org C	Male	Line Manager	32	3
DG	Construction	Org D	Female	Line Manager	29	29
DH	Construction	Org D	Female	HR Manager	1	1
EI	Property	Org E	Female	HR Manager	12	2
EJ	Property	Org E	Female	Line Manager	13	13
FK	Property	Org F	Female	HR Manager	11.5	11.5
FL	Property	Org F	Male	Line Manager	35	1.5
FM	Property	Org F	Female	Line Manager	20	6

was collected for the purpose of data triangulation (Yin, 2009). Organizational documents that were collected and analysed included publicly available information on policies gleaned from company websites, including annual reports, corporate sustainability reports, as well as diversity policy documents. These documents provided a context with which to corroborate and augment evidence from the interviews (see Table 4).

2.5. Data collection

Data were collected from six organizations that accepted the study invitation. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow in-depth exploration of information and to gain different perspectives about the topic that enabled rich data quality (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2014). The Interview Guide framed discussions with participants. Face-to-face and phone interviews ranging between 30 and 45 min were audio-recorded. Interviews were transcribed and deidentified. Field notes assisted unstructured observations during the interviews. Data was also collected from organizational documents.

3. Data analysis

3.1. Interview data analysis

The interview data was analysed inductively following the principles of qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002). Full-length transcripts were initially read thoroughly followed by re-reading for marking and condensing the information, the basis for creating codes. Codes were used to compare, sort and form groups of related content, resulting in the development of themes and sub-themes. Search for similarities, differences, underlying meaning and patterns in the data was performed simultaneously within- and in cross-case analysis to build overall findings across all cases and final evidence synthesis (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2014).

3.2. Documents data analysis

Interview analysis was followed by document analysis. The available information on policies gained from corporate websites was read and interpreted via an iterative process that combined elements of content

Table 4
Organizational documents.

Documents	Org A	Org B	Org C	Org D	Org E	Org F
Website	1	1	1	1	1	1
Annual report	1	1	1	0	2	0
Organizations						
Sustainability report	1	0	1	0	1	0
Diversity policy	0	0	0	0	1	0
Total	3	2	3	1	5	1

and thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009). The information was analysed regarding organizational values and strategy related to equality and diversity. The documents provided context framing participants' firms equality and diversity policies. They also provided background information on organization policies and helped verify and corroborate findings from the interviews. The sustainability strategy documents published on corporate websites were reviewed to identify strategic priorities related to maintaining a diverse and inclusive workforce and specific goals for increasing diversity. Document analysis allowed for convergence among the different sources of information to assist in forming categories in the study, thereby increasing the internal credibility of the research findings (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Yin, 2012), as well as providing a more holistic understanding of the phenomena (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

3.3. Data trustworthiness

Pattern-matching within the cross-case analysis supports the internal validity of this study (Yin, 2009). Replication across multi-case studies provides evidence to support the external validity (Yin, 2009). Reliability is achieved by documenting in detail the case studies undertaken, as well as the steps undertaken in the research. Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and the qualitative research software package NVivo were used to organize and help analyze the data collected (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). These enabled a structured and pragmatic approach able to overcome any potential bias and establish the credibility and authenticity of the data analysis (Polit and Beck, 2018).

3.4. Use of Guest and Bos-Nehles' (2013) framework in the analysis of the data

The Guest and Bos-Nehles' (2013) framework was used to guide the analysis of effective implementation of HR practices in PBOs. It facilitated evaluation of the implementation of gender equality and diversity policies against the four stages of implementation, as well as consideration of the primary responsibility for implementation and evaluation of these policies' effective implementation in practice. The model suggest that the first two steps are typically assumed to be the responsibility of HR, often working in collaboration with line managers, while the latter steps are the responsibility of line managers, often influenced by direction from senior managers (Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013).

The first stage concerns the decision to adopt specific HR policies, in this case gender equality and diversity policies. All Australian organizations are expected to have gender equality and diversity policies in place, as per legislation. However, the numbers and types of diversity policies across industries and organizations differ. To assess the first stage of the implementation process, two methods were used. First, data from the WGEA annual report was analysed, providing data on the demographics of the participating organizations; importantly, it reported the numbers and types of gender equality and diversity policies offered

by each case organization. Second, interviews with HR managers and senior line managers generated data to confirm the actual policies in place in the case organizations. To assess stage two of the framework, relating to the quality of practices, two methods were used. First, data was analysed from the interviews. HR managers and senior line managers were asked whether and how the practices aligned with policies embedded in the broader business strategy, as well as if the alignment indicated the quality of these practices. Data from organizational documents was cross-checked to corroborate this information. The extent to which respondents thought the policies were effective in practice and whether any employee consultation was offered regarding the design or the effective implementation of gender equality and diversity policies, was also investigated. To assess stage three of the framework, which relates to the implementation of the policies by line managers, participants were asked who had responsibility for implementation and evaluation of these policies when translated into practice in their organizations, as well as what had been the key challenges in their implementation. In the fourth and final stage relating to implementation quality, data was analysed from the interviews about how case organizations supported line managers in implementing these practices and how outcomes of the outcomes in practice were measured, reported and documented.

4. Findings

4.1. Stage 1: presence of gender-based HR and WL policies and practices

The number and type of gender-based HR and WL policies varied among the case study organizations. The HR policies most frequently offered included recruitment targets and bonuses for managers, graduate programs, retention bonuses for managers and staff, as well as sponsorship of key talent. In terms of WL initiatives, the most frequent initiatives were working from home, paid parental leave and flexible start and finish times. For instance, Organizations A and E were large corporate organizations with dedicated HR and diversity personnel, offering the greatest variety of formal and informal initiatives. On the other hand, Organizations D and F were smaller and privately owned organizations, with a much-reduced selection of informal initiatives. Table 5 provides a summary of all practices.

Table 5
Summary of gender equality and diversity HR practices by case study organization.

Documents	Org A	Org B	Org C	Org D	Org E	Org F
Mixed gender interviewers					x	x
Balanced shortlist of candidates	x				x	x
Recruiters trained in equality and diversity						
Removing gender from CVs	x				x	
Recruitment targets and KPIs for managers	x	x	x	x	x	
Policy for increasing women in leadership roles	x				x	
Proactive sourcing of women talent					x	
Graduate program targeting women	x		x	x		
Retention bonuses for female staff	x	x	x		x	
Sponsorship of key talent	x	x			x	
Bias training	x				x	
Training and development for women	x				x	
Other diversity training	x		x			
Salary reviews	x				x	
Salary updates with separate dedicated budget	x					

Organization A had recruitment policies including mixed pools of candidates, removing names from CVs, and having mixed-gender selection teams. Organization A’s policies also included gender-based recruitment KPIs and bonuses, graduate programs with gender targets, sponsoring and training key female talent, and retention bonuses. In addition, Organization A had introduced salary reviews and had well-advanced flexibility and well-being programs. Similarly, Organization E, recognized as an Employer of Choice for many years, offered gender-based KPIs and targets for managers in recruitment and promotion, proactive sourcing policies for traditionally male-skewed roles, balanced shortlists and mixed-gender selection panels in recruitment, policy for improving the representation of women in leadership roles, and gender-based graduate programs. Organization E also offered retention bonuses and sponsorship for key female talent, diversity and inclusion training for managers and development training for women, and a very comprehensive selection of flexibility policies.

On the other hand, Organizations B, C, D, and F had fewer gender-based HR policies that were reported mainly as merit-based and legislation-driven, with a focus on avoiding discrimination and appointing the right person for the job, irrespective of background. The participant from Organization C discussed how the organization offered recruitment bonuses and KPIs for managers that were performance-based but not specific to diversity. Participants from Organization D discussed how their HR initiatives more than adequately met industry standards and that women were well-remunerated but did not list any specific gender equality and diversity policies. Organization F did not have any gender equality and diversity policies or programs. It was a small and still-growing organization whose business focus was on building the business.

All case study organizations had some WL practices in place. Table 6 provides a summary of the practices. Participants from Organizations A and B praised their WL policies, which included opportunities for working from home, flex time, job sharing, reduced hours, and career breaks. In Organization B, flexibility initiatives were supported by formal policy but mainly offered informally via negotiations and agreements with immediate managers. The privately owned Organization D took a tailored approach to their WL policies. Believing that a ‘one size fits all’ flexibility approach does not work for most people, they offered opportunities for staff to negotiate bespoke arrangements based on individual needs. In Organization F, employees were also able to negotiate flexible working arrangements with their managers that allowed them to work reduced hours, part time, or occasionally from home. However, these arrangements were reviewed and approved on a case-by-case basis and largely depended on the type of role. Certain key operational roles were regarded as unsuitable for some flexible work arrangements, a policy justified by the challenges of being a small business. Organization C did not have a formal flexibility policy, which was explained by the nature of construction work, requiring six-day

Table 6
Summary of WL practices by case study organization.

Documents	Org A	Org B	Org C	Org D	Org E	Org F
Work from home	x	x	x	x		x
Flex start/finish	x	x		x		x
Job sharing	x	x				
Reduced hours	x	x				x
Sabbatical	x	x				x
Well-being programs	x		x		x	
Flexibility KPIs for managers						
Keeping in touch while on maternity leave programs	x					x
Transition back to work from maternity leave programs	x				x	x
Paid parental leave (above legislation)	x		x		x	x
Paid additional annual leave	x			x		

weeks, long hours and full-time employment.

4.2. Stage 2: quality of gender equality and diversity policies and practices

4.2.1. Business strategy alignment

Participants from Organizations A and E reported a close alignment between their gender-based HR and WL policies and organizational strategy. Organization A focused on increasing gender diversity to improve their employee engagement:

That's about ensuring that we're encouraging a diverse and inclusive workforce and diverse thinking at all levels of the organization and obviously with the purpose of engaging and improving employee engagement. (AA)

In Organization E, this was demonstrated through introducing gender based KPIs for the executive team and their active participation in advocacy committees and initiatives internally and externally:

All our senior leaders have their balance score cards. That's reported on monthly (basis), and so that starts I guess the conversation right from the top with support from our Executive Committee. There's a gender plan ... and that was set a couple of years ago and we have a target that we're trying to get towards in terms of the KPIs ... which is 50/50 women in management. So, I guess that gives us the yardstick of where we're trying to head. (EI)

By contrast, participants from Organization B discussed how their gender equality and diversity policies were aligned with legislative annual reporting requirements:

We did have recruitment and retention policies and promotions. We did use that framework of the WGA basically for those things. So, every year, obviously, you have to report to the agency and each year you're expected to do more, essentially. (BE)

Participants in Organization D discussed how general equality and diversity and WL policies were embedded into their organizational culture, and how family values were central to who they were and what they did:

So, work-life balance, flexibility, gender diversity is nothing new to us. It is the way that they have set up the organization from the very, very start, (they are) very, very active about seeking out women in construction to give them opportunities at the organization. So, in terms of big fanfare policies for diversity inclusion, flexibility, work-life balance; we have them in all places, but we don't have to wave the flag because it's just how we do things around here. (DG)

Due to the lack of gender equality and diversity policies in Organization F, staff could interpret these according to their personal view of diversity:

I mean certainly when we've been looking at filling roles, we've been certainly very open to all comers. And to be fair it's not all about gender as well, there's sometimes, I think we've got to take the blinkers off, it's not just a gender thing, there's a whole broader diversity question in my mind that sometimes gets a little bit railroaded by the gender piece. (FK)

4.2.2. Perceptions of effective implementation of gender equality and diversity practices

Participants across all organizations agreed that organizational gender equality and diversity policies are effective in attracting and retaining diverse employees. In Organization A, the policies were seen as changing outdated diversity stereotypes and organizational practices related to recruitment and retention as well as helping the organization to attract new talent:

Knowledge is half of the challenge for a lot of people and the initial thoughts were why, why are we doing it [diversity policies and practices], and then was the question around what are the benefits, and then is, how do we effectively integrate this? And that's breaking down some of the fundamental challenges of the way we've done things in the past. (AC)

In Organization B, while the senior operations manager was unable to recall any gender equality and diversity policies offered in his organization, he agreed with the HR manager that their flexible work initiatives, being part of WL practices, were very effective and useful in recruitment efforts:

Yeah, and we definitely talk about it [flexible work initiatives] when we're trying to attract and retain staff you know, that we do have that flexibility and that a lot of ... a variety of people take it up. (BD)

So, what was very pleasing to see was flexibility at the organization was off the charts, really, really good. (BE)

In Organization C, HR strategies were perceived to be effective, even though the participants could not recall any specific strategies. Their effective implementation was related to the success with general recruitment:

Ah, it is really about quality and talent and ... as a business I think we do it very well, they get out into the university campuses and do a lot of information sessions and talent scouting. (CF)

Similarly, the effective implementation of WL policies in Organization D was measured by recruitment success, with positive image in the marketplace resulting from these:

We attract them [women]. They know about the work-life balance. It's just something we do here. We don't wave a flag; it's something that is everyday business for us, and people in the industry actually choose to work with (us) because we're known for our work-life balance. (DG)

The participant in Organization E believes that the organization has been effective in their policies. This was justified by a high level of employee engagement as measured by engagement surveys:

So, we know through our employee engagement survey that diversity and inclusion is a key driver for employee engagement, and we score quite high above the Australian norm in this space. So obviously what we are doing is having an impact on the engagement levels of the organization. (EI)

In Organization F, the participants focused on the success of their work flexibility practices; however, there was no strategic approach framing formal or informal policies. It also appears that besides approvals of flexibility arrangements on a case-by-case basis, different rules may apply for different people:

But there was certainly some disgruntlement around a perception that flexibility didn't apply to everybody ... this comes down to gender again interestingly and this is my observation in the business. The perception that I personally had is that the men can take flexibility as they wish to. If the women do it, we have to seek permission ... It's a very unspoken but it's very much perceived that ... if we are to work from home that there is a sense that we're not really working. (FK)

4.2.3. Employee consultation

All case organizations approached employee consultation through employee surveys. Organizations A, B, and F, while not specifically measuring gender-based policies, conducted employee surveys to monitor employee satisfaction and engagement:

So, quite a lengthy questionnaire and we do a lot of analysis around that, we do workshops with the feedback from afterwards and then set the action and then obviously implement the action and then look back ... but that's not specifically gender. (AA)

We then have pretty intense employee engagement surveys annually and it has a very big section on diversity and inclusion and well-being and psychological safety and that would give us I guess some more qualitative insights around where hotspots for opportunities might be. (FK)

Only Org C did not engage in any type of employee engagement surveys; they did not discuss any specific measurements of gender equality and diversity outcomes.

4.3. Stage 3: implementation of gender equality and diversity policies in practice

4.3.1. Responsibility for implementation of the practices

Participants were asked how gender-based policies were implemented in their organizations, what the main implementation challenges were, and how line managers were supported in the implementation. The findings suggest that across all case study PBOs, a similar division of responsibilities for gender-based HR and WL policies was established. The boards of directors, CEOs and executive teams participated in policy development as part of strategy as well selecting suitable implementation practices, which were then communicated to the rest of the organization. The dissemination of strategy seemed to be well executed across all organizations. For instance, in Organization A, decisions about the strategy and direction for the gender equality and diversity programs and how they align to the business strategies were made by the global board, together with the Australian executive team, including senior representatives from HR. The people in these roles set up the diversity goals and targets and any guiding principles around them. The role of the HR team was to develop the initiatives, any KPIs related to their implementation, and communication platforms and content to disseminate information to senior and line managers, as well as to broader organization members.

Yes, so, we have to roll them out as a part of our role ... essentially, so, yes, we have to ensure that the business leaders understand the policies and therefore are encouraging, making their director reports aware of them you know, implementing them themselves. (AA)

The HR department should be able to talk more on the policy position and the policy development. (AC)

Responsibility for implementation, that is, for translating the policies into practices, mostly fell to line managers. Some line managers were aware of the organizational strategy and objectives for diversity and flexible work arrangements and were fully aware of KPIs and bonuses offered for fulfilling these policies at the operational level. However, others could not recall any specific policies, particularly related to gender-based HR initiatives, instead referring to the HR team for the details. For instance, in the case of the line manager from Organization A, he did not seem to be *au fait* with the detail:

I think the diversity was promoted and, yes, there would have been some sort of target to ensure a more diverse group of attendees than, you know, than not. (AB)

Similarly, in Organization B, equality and diversity practices were driven by the CEO and senior management, while the selection of those initiatives was made by the HR team:

Is really driven by what the top wants, essentially. (BE)

In Organization E, the role of diversity and inclusion staff was to design best policy initiatives and help management in their implementation. The role of the executive team as well as of senior

management was to communicate and promote these policy initiatives across the organization and help in their delivery of practices to be measured by individual KPIs. However, day-to-day implementation in practice was the responsibility of line managers. The line managers were well supported via training programs and the availability of HR managers to assist when needed:

We have a Managing at Organization E program that all new managers and anyone who's promoted as a manager for the first time would go through ... and there's some case studies in there, and how to have that conversation, and what a good arrangement might look like, and what's right for the individual and for the organization. (EI)

4.3.2. Challenges with implementation

Multiple challenges affecting successful implementation were identified. HR managers mentioned lack of capacity by lean HR teams to support the design and implementation of policies. On the other hand, line managers identified the financial constraints of project budgets, staff resistance and backlash related to gender-based HR practices (Kidder et al., 2004), and no formal support from HR teams as key challenges with implementation. Structural industry issues related to the six-day week, long hours, and significant workloads, particularly in the construction industry, were mentioned as key challenges to the implementation of WL initiatives and to meeting gender targets.

For instance, in Organizations A, B, and E, the HR managers reported that HR team's capacity was a constraint:

In the end, it has to be weighed up with the financial aspects as well ... and I guess the capacity of teams as well. We don't have a large HR team, so we can only do so much. (AA)

I have experienced some biases when men do say, oh, I need to work from home that day because, I look after the kids, or I need to finish at three o'clock for those three days because I do the pick-up. (BD)

The senior manager in Organization A identified financial constraints in the form of available budgets, as well as operational constraints related to lack of sufficient time to find a new employee, as being responsible for implementation challenges:

But the biggest challenge, I think, is the fact we need to move fast as a business to get good candidates and that doesn't allow us sufficient times to be able to secure (them). (AC)

In Organizations B and F, the implementation challenges came from the traditional views of managers in different parts of the organization about work practices:

They were one of the biggest challenges from day 1. They had that very traditional view, you must work nine to five, you must (work) way longer than nine to five, you must work full-time, they didn't like employing part-timers. (BE)

I mean one of the reasons I think, in terms of recruitment, to kind of focus on opening people's eyes to ... was actually that often what people do is recruit people like themselves. (FK)

Similarly, participants from Organizations E and F reported backlash from some male and female staff as an implementation challenge. On the one hand, some male staff were concerned that they were missing out on some role and promotional opportunities by competing with female colleagues. On the other hand, some women were concerned that their appointments and promotions may have been driven by their gender and not by their capabilities and merit:

The rapid pace of change around gender equity produces ... an undercurrent and a backlash ... I've heard things like this is reverse discrimination now and that's definitely that undercurrent and it's challenging because sometimes it's not overt and it's not spoken about. (EI)

I guess it's how you find that balance without sending people feeling like they're forced to take someone they think they're probably not necessarily the right person for that. If I've got someone here, but the quota or the mandate says that we've got to do this, I think that in the end it created a negative feel. (FK)

In Organizations C and D, due to the nature of regulated construction work and six-day weeks, flexibility practices were perceived to be difficult to implement:

As far as job-sharing, it's fairly hard because everybody has a fairly primary role and responsibility. Some things just can't work for us ... one thing that we have trialed is allowing people to work from home and, because there's a need to be here and coordinating and changing plans on the spot, you can't really offer that to the bulk of people ... if I turned around and said I'm going to work from home every Monday and Friday then I wouldn't have a job as a project manager. (CF)

Further, workload was also reported as the culprit in creating challenges with implementation of flexibility policies in practice by participants in Organizations C and D. Pressing everyday work, it was suggested, prevented senior managers from taking up flexibility and modeling it for their employees:

It's kind of um, like you need to lead by example, otherwise people feel threatened – if they use it, they'll be singled out ... so we're not perfect at it (flexibility) because we're all so busy ... some of our senior managers aren't really good at divorcing themselves from work because we're all so connected with computers and phones and everything else. So, actually, even if you're off work, you're really not off work. (CF)

Participants from Organization D also discussed the challenges with flexibility arrangements as depending on whether construction projects were delivered for clients or were owned by the organization. The client projects were competitive and required different management approaches. Therefore, less flexibility could be offered:

I don't believe every role can flex in a construction company if you are building for clients. It's easy if it's your own project. When you're working for a client, you have deadlines ... if I put people only working five days and some flexing ... well, I can do that, ah, but I'd be less competitive. I could do that if I was my own client. (DH)

You can't have a part-time site supervisor. The client would not accept that. It's an industry issue. (DG)

Another challenge mentioned by participants from Organizations D and F, this time about reducing the gender gap, was the limited number of women selecting training and a career in construction, an issue that the participant H referred to as a pipeline issue:

The bigger issue for me is the tiny pipeline we have ... There are just not enough women in the industry, full stop, at any level. (DH)

It's just a matter of the pool we're pulling from and ... to be honest, a lot of times when you go to market, the representation of getting the candidates, particularly by the time you filter them down can be quite challenging, but we have been able to at least get one or two women into interview. (FK)

4.4. Stage 4: quality of implementation of gender equality and diversity practices

4.4.1. Supporting line managers in implementation

Support for line managers in fulfilling their implementation role seemed to be limited and patchy. The support most discussed was limited to general communication by CEOs and senior management about company strategy and its focus on gender equality and diversity

policies. However, most translation of policies into practice relied on delivery by line managers, particularly by leaving them to negotiate and manage many informal arrangements directly with their staff. While this seems reasonable, due to line managers having the best understanding about their projects' operations and requirements, it adds additional pressures and responsibilities to their already busy schedules.

4.4.2. Measuring and monitoring of outcomes to ensure quality of implementation

The outcomes of the initiatives were mainly measured by tracking workplace gender composition required for annual reporting to WGEA or measuring performance against KPIs. Most organizations also conducted employee engagement tracking through annual employee engagement surveys. For instance, Organization A did not measure or report on the outcomes of equality and diversity policies in practice, except for the results of employee surveys and exit interviews:

The measure is through staff engagement survey scores ... and we can very easily see that through our staff churn rates as well and the feedback that we get through exit interviews. (AC)

I didn't see any published data on the performance of the various initiatives and the schemes. (AB)

In Organization B, the effective implementation of flexibility policies seemed to be measured by visible take-up of those policies by staff and anecdotal feedback, which showed no negative impacts on productivity:

We've never truly tested the um, like, the productivity changes but having said that, if productivities were changing you know, we'd be looking more closely at it. (BD)

Organization E, on the other hand, closely monitored their recruitment and promotion rates, as well as return to work from maternity and paternity leave:

KPI is tracked. So, we look at all that data that would give us some indicators. And that would then form part of the planning process to decide where the focus needs to be. (EI)

The data from the surveys was reviewed to identify any issues that may have negatively affected engagement, retention and performance. While some gender equality and diversity questions were included, they mainly aimed to measure engagement. However, none of the organizations purposely tracked and regularly reported on the outcomes of their implementation for organizational performance. None of the organizations had their own business case for diversity, with participants showing awareness only of its premise. Organizations C and F did not measure the results of implementation outcomes of their equality and diversity practices:

No. But having said that, there may be some things that HR are looking at. Personally, from my side, I don't know, I haven't seen anything. (FL)

5. Discussion

The research inquired into how gender-based equality and diversity practices are implemented in PBOs. [Guest and Bos-Nehles \(2013\)](#) suggest investigating the process of implementation based on the grounds that impact of practices is likely to be limited if those practices are poorly implemented. While previous HRM research has emphasized this focus ([Khilji and Wang, 2006](#); [Wright and Nishii, 2013](#)), further research was required ([Woodrow and Guest, 2014](#)). [Guest and Bos-Nehles \(2013\)](#) presented a four-stage analytic framework for more systematic analyses of the HRM implementation process. The present research advances understanding of the implementation process by using the framework to explore the implementation of specific gender-based HR and WL policies in PBOs. It therefore presents more detailed explanatory analysis,

insights and guidelines for practice. Previous research delivered mixed results about the effective implementation of gender-based HR and WL policies in increasing gender diversity in PBOs but has not investigated the process of implementation of these in practice.

The findings within the [Guest and Bos-Nehles \(2013\)](#) framework reveal that within the first stage, the presence of policies, all case study PBOs offered gender-based HR and WL policies. While this was expected, the practices associated with the policies differed in number and type by organization. Variation was likely driven by organizational size and availability of HR and financial resources as well as strategy and focus ([Boxall and Purcell, 2011](#)). However, the study identified a noticeable difference between the number of gender-based HR and WL practices reported to the WGEA and reported in the interviews. This could reflect a gap between the presence of initiatives (as reported) and the experience of those initiatives by staff as not all practices may be relevant to all employees ([Gerhart et al., 2000](#)). Further, HR managers appeared to have better grasp of both policies and practices than the line managers tasked with their implementation, perhaps because the decision to introduce gender-based HR and WL policies, as well as the selection of the types and numbers of practices, is typically seen to be the responsibility of the HR function ([Guest and Bos-Nehles, 2013](#)). Overall, the presence of policies has been confirmed.

The second stage of the framework relates to the quality of the policies in practice. As the Australian equality and diversity legislation requires all organizations with more than 100 employees to report their policies and practices annually to the WGEA ([WGEA, 2014](#)), it is expected that PBO organizations would at least meet the minimum requirements to comply. However, some may exceed expectations with carefully selected or designed practices in line with their strategic aims and expectations. This study assessed the quality in practice of the implementation of the gender-based HR and WL policies in PBOs based on alignment with organizational strategy and leadership support. The findings suggest that in some organizations, policies were linked to the diversity business case with a focus on improving staff engagement and productivity. In others, the focus was on increasing the recruitment pipeline and delivering improved gender diversity. In all cases, policies appeared to be linked to organizational strategy. Further, leadership teams and boards of directors were reported to be engaged in setting the strategy direction and supporting gender-based HR and WL policies via organizational communication. For instance, senior managers engaged in roadshows, workshops and diversity training. Diversity statements from CEOs and the board members were also found in organizational documents. Contrary to previous research suggesting compliance-based approach to the selection and adoption of gender-based equality and diversity policies ([French and Strachan, 2015](#); [Baker and French, 2018](#), [Baker et al., 2021](#)), this study reports a more strategic organizational approach in decision-making related to the outcomes in practice of the gender-based HR and WL policies, which could be due to an increased focus in recent times.

The quality of policies was also assessed, based on the types offered. The case study PBOs typically didn't seem to offer gender-conscious policies that explicitly considered structural and cultural influences in their design and that were targeted at specific social groups ([Konrad and Linnehan, 1995](#); [O'Leary and Sandberg, 2017](#); [Strachan et al., 2010](#)). Identity-conscious policies are positively associated with increased numbers of women and people of color in management and across organizational levels ([Ali, 2016](#); [French, 2001](#); [Konrad and Linnehan, 1995](#)). The case study PBOs offered mainly gender-blind initiatives that encourage identical decisions for all individuals, supporting equal treatment based on individual merit ([Galea et al., 2015](#); [Konrad and Linnehan, 1995](#); [Windscheid et al., 2017](#)). Those gender-blind initiatives in PBOs fall short in delivering significant or innovative outcomes, due to traditional workplace cultures that remain a long-term barrier to the entry, retention and progression of women ([Galea et al., 2015](#)). The quality of the practices implemented has been ineffective. Decision-makers, including senior leaders and HR managers, may be

guided by good intentions but continue to adapt policies based on equal treatment and merit principles that lack consideration of any historic and systemic disadvantage that in practice are associated with women's participation. While generally perceiving their policies to be successful, perceptions were based mainly on the presence of equality and diversity policies rather than the analysis and measurement of effective implementation to increase gender diversity in practice.

The research revealed that in the third and fourth stages of implementation, there was lack of consistency and quality in the implementation of policies in practices. As noted by prior researchers, line managers have primary responsibility for implementation of HR practices at the operational level ([Gratton and Truss, 2003](#); [Marchington, 2001](#)). In PBOs this is even more critical, as line managers have responsibility for care for their teams ([Huemann, 2006](#); [Raiden et al., 2004](#); [Turner, 1999](#)). The present study found that line managers displayed uneven awareness and focus on equality and diversity management, something perhaps explicable in terms of limited commitment, capability or capacity in fulfilling the diversity management function in projects. Prior research suggests that line managers fail in this function due to their reluctance to perform what they describe as an HR responsibility and function ([Hall and Torrington, 1998](#); [Harris et al., 2002](#); [Kulik and Bainbridge, 2006](#)). In this case, findings suggest that line managers encountered multiple challenges in executing equality and diversity management strategy. They seemed to lack sufficient capacity to focus on both HR as well as operational responsibilities simultaneously ([McGovern, 1999](#)); they experienced financial constraints; held traditional views about work roles; had workplace expectations of long hours and presenteeism, as well tending to recruit and promote people similar to themselves ([Powell, 2012](#)). As part of the challenge for meeting equality and diversity targets and KPIs the pipeline issue, relating to lack of suitable women for project roles, was also raised.

Support for line managers in fulfilling their implementation role seemed to be limited and patchy. The support most discussed was limited to general communication by CEOs and senior management about company strategy and focus on gender equality and diversity policies in terms of practices. Most translation of policies into practice relied on delivery by line managers, particularly leaving them to negotiate and manage many informal arrangements directly with their staff. Yet, research suggests that line managers need content-related advice and coaching from HR teams on how to perform HR activities ([Hall and Torrington, 1998](#)). Further, the outcomes of the policies were mainly measured by tracking workplace gender composition required for annual reporting to WGEA or measuring performance against KPIs. Most organizations also conducted employee engagement tracking through annual employee engagement surveys. However, none of the organizations purposely tracked and regularly reported on the outcomes of their policy implementation for organizational performance. None of the organizations had their own business case for diversity, with participants showing awareness only of its premise. The evidence from stages three and four indicates that quality and effective implementation of policies in practice poses challenges in PBOs. Therefore, the major finding from this study is that even having a wide number of gender-based equality and diversity policies that are strategically aligned and supported by senior management will make little difference to the effective implementation of these policies in improving gender diversity if they are poorly implemented in practice.

5.1. Contributions to theory and research

This study addressed a research gap related to the effective implementation of gender-based HR and WL policies in PBOs and makes the following contributions. It extends the application of [Guest and Bos-Nehles's \(2013\)](#) four-stage analytic framework by broadening understanding of effective implementation of human resource management practices. Following [Woodrow and Guest \(2014\)](#), this study shows that [Guest and Bos-Nehles's \(2013\)](#) framework is a useful tool for assessing

the effective implementation of gender equality and diversity management practices specifically and is well positioned to highlight different factors that can impact the implementation process. The findings extend previous research by providing additional insights into how implementation affects the outcomes of gender equality and diversity initiatives in PBOs. The implementation of gender equality and diversity policies has been underexplored (O'Leary and Sandberg, 2017; Pitts et al., 2010; Ricco and Guerci, 2014; Trullen et al., 2020), particularly in PBOs (Galea et al., 2015; Baker et al., 2021). Finally, this research suggests that the multi-case study method is effective in examining issues related to the implementation of gender equality and diversity policies, as it can highlight the causes and consequences of implementation, as well as the context in which it occurs (Woodrow and Guest, 2014).

5.2. Future research

Several areas are available for further exploration within gender equality and diversity practices implementation research in PBOs. Following Bondarouk et al. (2018), more research is needed that investigates the introduction of new gender equality and diversity policies, from their inception to their routinization within the organization. More longitudinal research with mixed research methods may better acknowledge the multi-actor and complex nature of some implementation processes in projects and PBOs (Bondarouk et al., 2018). Further, given their crucial roles in implementation, more research is needed that focuses on different levels of management and team structures, as well as the line manager–team member relationship (Bondarouk et al., 2018; Steffensen et al., 2019). More research investigating the role of team leadership in effective implementation is also needed.

In addition, broader forms of investigation could add more nuance to the data by investigating the effective implementation from a sociological perspective, incorporating theoretical lenses such as discourse analysis (Grant et al., 2004), power relations and micro-politics (Clegg, 2023), as well as a focus that connects institutional work and strategy as practice (Lounsbury et al., 2021; Greenwood et al., 2017; Smets et al., 2015) may offer future areas for investigation (Bondarouk et al., 2018). Further, knowledge about HR implementation measures is still in its infancy and requires additional research focus on how effective implementation can be better measured, for instance (Sikora and Ferris, 2014).

5.3. Practical implications

The findings of this research raise several implications for practice in the implementation of gender-based equality and diversity policies in PBOs. If the presence of those policies is not delivering results improving organizational gender diversity, it appears that different approaches are needed. First, the importance of the quality of design or selection of policies has been highlighted. To achieve better diversity outcomes, PBO practitioners can draw on both gender-blind and gender-conscious types of gender equality and diversity policies. The quality of gender-based HR and WL policies could be improved by exploring the opportunity for special measure strategies in practice implemented to ensure a substantive change in diversity outcomes (O'Leary and Sandberg, 2017). Second, more attention on the factors that may help, or hinder implementation of those policies is required. PBO practitioners may consider adopting the Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) four-stage analytic framework to analyze the effective implementation of their individual gender equality and diversity management policies; doing so should serve to maximise benefits deriving from organizational investment in these practices. Third, this study highlights the important role of line managers in implementing gender equality and diversity policies in practice. In PBOs, line managers who manage large project teams experience unique challenges and problems that are additional to traditional management duties (Bredin and Soderlund, 2006), which may impact

their ability and capacity to implement gender equality and diversity policies in practice. This requires consideration in terms of training, support and the evaluation of outcomes. There may be organizational processes and structures that hinder, instead of supporting them, in policy implementation.

5.4. Limitations

Some limitations of the study must be considered when interpreting its results. The study adopted an exploratory approach using qualitative case studies and interviews, which led to limitations related to the sample size, data collection and number of participant perspectives. While depth and breadth were achieved by using interviews and document analysis, a larger sample size would allow for statistically representative comparison, potentially enhancing the generalizability of the findings. The responses consist of accounts based on the interviewees' interpretation of the interview questions and their perceptions of the purpose of the research. It is possible that the participants did not wish to advise anything detrimental to the image of their organization, for instance, that implementation of gender equality and diversity practices was unsuccessful. Finally, the interview data derives from the workplace experiences recounted by interviewees and their various overall perspectives were not fully explored or reported in the findings selected as relevant to the case (Neuman and Kreuger, 2003).

6. Conclusion

The research demonstrates that quality implementation in practice is more important to gender equality and diversity policies as the quality of their design. The application of the Guest and Bos-Nehles (2013) four-stage analytic framework for HR implementation in this study demonstrates that implementation in practice requires assessment by a systematic framework. The findings reveal that in PBOs, diversity implementation is patchy and that without proper implementation, even high-quality policies count for little. Greater focus on implementation will help improve gender equality and diversity outcomes. Policies are readily proclaimed and inscribed on websites and in organizational documentation but what is proclaimed in policy does not necessarily dictate what is implemented in practice.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

Appendix 1

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Profile questions

1. What is your current position and how long have you held this position?
2. How long have you been with your current organization?
3. How long have you been working in this industry?
4. Are you personally involved with the development or selection of:
 - a. HR practices
 - b. Work-Life practices
5. Are you personally involved in implementation of:
 - a. HR practices

b. Work-Life practices

HR practices in your organization

1. Does your organization have any formal gender-based HR practices, related to:
 - a. Recruitment
 - b. Retention
 - c. Performance Management processes
 - d. Promotions
 - e. Talent identification/identification of high potential
 - f. Succession planning
 - g. Training and development
 - h. Resignations
 - i. KPIs for managers relating to gender equality.
2. Are those practices aligned with the broader business strategy? How?
3. How are those practices implemented in your organization?
4. What do you see as key challenges in implementing them?
5. How does your organization support managers in implementing and managing those practices?
6. Do you think they are effective? How are the outcomes measured and reported?

W-L practices in your organization

7. What W-L practices are offered in your organization?
8. Are those practices aligned with the broader business strategy? How?
9. How are those practices implemented in your organization?
10. What do you see as key challenges in implementing them?
11. How does your organization support managers in implementing and managing those practices?
12. Do you think they are effective? How are the outcomes measured and reported?

This concludes our interview. Thank you for your time.

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