

THE GENDER GAP IN HIRING VIEWED THROUGH THE LENS OF A COMPANY'S ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

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Abstract

Gender disparities in hiring persist even when organizations formally endorse equal opportunity and merit-based selection. This article examines the gender gap in recruitment through the lens of organizational culture and argues that hiring outcomes are shaped not only by individual prejudice, but also by shared assumptions, routines, symbols, language, and informal definitions of the 'ideal' employee. Drawing on research on gender stereotypes, cultural matching, job-advertisement wording, evaluation bias, and systemic discrimination, the paper develops a conceptual framework linking organizational culture to four stages of hiring: attraction, screening, interviewing, and final selection. The analysis shows how apparently neutral practices may reproduce gendered expectations when cultural fit is interpreted narrowly, evaluation criteria remain ambiguous, or masculine-coded norms are treated as indicators of competence and leadership potential. The article also identifies practical mechanisms for reducing gender bias, including structured criteria, standardized interviews, transparent decision rules, inclusive recruitment communication, diverse evaluation panels, and continuous monitoring of hiring outcomes. The central conclusion is that narrowing the gender gap requires cultural and procedural change to operate together rather than relying exclusively on individual-level bias training.

Keywords: organizational culture, gender gap, hiring, recruitment, gender bias, cultural fit

JEL Classification: J16, J71, M14, M51

1. Introduction and context of the study

Recruitment is one of the first organizational processes in which potential employees encounter a firm's values, expectations, and informal rules. Although hiring is often represented as a rational exercise in matching skills to job requirements, research in organizational sociology, psychology, and personnel economics shows that selection decisions are also influenced by social categories, stereotypes, and judgments about whether a candidate 'fits' the organization. Gender therefore enters the hiring process not only as an individual characteristic of applicants but also as a social meaning embedded in occupations, leadership models, work practices, and organizational cultures.

The gender gap in hiring should not be reduced to explicit discrimination. Contemporary organizations generally operate under formal equal-opportunity principles, yet unequal outcomes can emerge through apparently neutral mechanisms. A job advertisement may emphasize competitiveness and dominance; a recruiter may value an assertive presentation style; an interview panel may reward uninterrupted career trajectories; or a hiring manager may interpret similarity with existing employees as evidence of cultural fit. None of these practices necessarily contains an explicit intention to exclude women, but together they can produce cumulative disadvantages when the dominant image of the successful employee is implicitly masculine.

Organizational culture provides a useful analytical lens because it connects individual judgments to institutionalized routines. Culture can be understood as a system of shared assumptions and

meanings that guides how organizational members interpret appropriate behavior, competence, commitment, and success. In hiring, these cultural assumptions influence which qualifications are emphasized, which behaviors are interpreted as professional, who is perceived as leadership material, and what types of biography or self-presentation are considered compatible with the firm. Rivera (2012), for example, demonstrates that hiring in elite professional service firms involves cultural matching as well as skills sorting, with evaluators frequently favoring candidates whose experiences and presentation resemble those of current organizational members.

Gendered cultural mechanisms can arise before the first interview. Gaucher, Friesen and Kay (2011) show that gendered wording in job advertisements can influence applicants' perceived belonging and attraction to jobs. At later stages, ambiguous evaluation standards create room for stereotypes to affect judgments. Experimental evidence from science-related selection contexts has shown that otherwise comparable male and female candidates can be evaluated differently (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). More recent research also emphasizes systemic discrimination, where disparities are generated across interconnected organizational decisions rather than through a single discriminatory act (Bohren, Hull and Imas, 2022; revised 2024).

The purpose of this article is to analyze how organizational culture can contribute to the gender gap in hiring and to identify organizational practices capable of reducing that gap. The paper adopts a conceptual and integrative approach. It does not claim new primary empirical results; instead, it synthesizes established and recent findings to build a framework connecting culture to recruitment outcomes. The analysis is organized around four questions: how culture shapes the definition of the ideal candidate; how recruitment communication influences self-selection; how cultural fit and evaluation ambiguity affect screening and interviews; and what institutional practices can make hiring more inclusive without weakening performance standards.

2. Organizational culture, gender stereotypes and the construction of the “ideal” candidate

Organizational culture is commonly treated as a source of internal coherence, but it also establishes boundaries between behavior that is considered normal and behavior that is perceived as atypical. These boundaries matter for gender because many occupations and organizational roles have historically been associated with gendered expectations. Leadership, technical competence, availability, toughness, mobility, emotional restraint, and competitiveness have often been culturally coded as masculine traits, whereas care, cooperation, empathy, and relational skills have been coded as feminine. When organizations treat one side of these culturally constructed distinctions as inherently more valuable, hiring criteria can reproduce gender inequality even when job descriptions are formally gender-neutral.

The concept of the 'ideal worker' is particularly relevant. Organizations may implicitly prefer employees who can demonstrate uninterrupted availability, geographic mobility, long working hours, and minimal visible caregiving constraints. Such expectations can disadvantage individuals whose careers or time allocation do not conform to this model. Because caregiving responsibilities remain unevenly distributed in many societies, apparently neutral expectations about availability may have gendered consequences. The cultural problem is therefore not simply that recruiters hold stereotypes; it is that organizational definitions of commitment can themselves be built around historically gendered life patterns.

A second mechanism concerns status beliefs and stereotype congruence. Women may face a double standard when organizational roles are associated with stereotypically masculine attributes. Behavior that is interpreted as confident and decisive in a man may be interpreted as overly aggressive in a woman, while behavior consistent with feminine stereotypes may be judged insufficiently leader-like. This creates a narrow corridor of acceptable self-presentation. The result can be lower assessments of fit or potential even when objective competence is comparable.

Cultural matching can intensify these effects. Rivera (2012) shows that evaluators often use shared experiences, leisure interests, communication styles, and personal similarity as signals of fit.

Such judgments are attractive because they appear intuitive and efficient, especially under time pressure. Yet they also risk converting the existing demographic composition of an organization into a selection criterion. When the current workforce is male-dominated, similarity-based hiring can reproduce that pattern through homophily rather than explicit exclusion.

The distinction between 'culture fit' and 'culture add' is consequently important. A narrow fit model asks whether candidates resemble successful incumbents. A culture-add perspective asks whether candidates can perform effectively while contributing different experiences, perspectives, and ways of working that remain compatible with core organizational values. This reframing preserves legitimate attention to values and teamwork while reducing the risk that familiarity is mistaken for merit.

Recent research on systemic discrimination reinforces this institutional perspective. Bohren, Hull and Imas argue that unequal outcomes can accumulate through sequences of decisions, meaning that a small disadvantage at one stage can affect the probability of reaching the next stage and obtaining the experience later used as a credential. From this perspective, gender inequality in hiring is not adequately measured by examining only the final offer decision. Organizations need to observe the entire recruitment funnel, from applicant attraction to screening, interviews, salary negotiations, and acceptance.

3. How organizational culture enters the hiring process

Organizational culture influences hiring through multiple stages. The mechanisms differ in form, but they share a common feature: cultural assumptions transform into concrete decisions through language, criteria, interaction patterns, and informal interpretations. Table No. 1 summarizes the main mechanisms discussed in the literature and their potential gender effects.

Table No. 1. Cultural mechanisms that may generate gender disparities in hiring

Hiring stage	Cultural mechanism	Potential gender effect	Organizational response
Attraction	Gender-coded language; images and messages about who belongs	Different perceptions of fit and willingness to apply	Audit job advertisements; use inclusive, job-relevant language
Screening	Ambiguous criteria; assumptions about career continuity and commitment	Unequal interpretation of equivalent experience	Define criteria before reviewing applications; structured scoring
Interview	Informal cultural-fit judgments; similarity and affinity	Preference for familiar communication styles and backgrounds	Standardized questions; behavior-based rating scales; diverse panels
Final selection	Unstructured discussion; status beliefs; unequal advocacy	Small biases accumulate into differences in offers	Document reasons; compare ratings; monitor selection rates
Offer and negotiation	Cultural expectations about assertiveness and negotiation	Different interpretations of identical negotiation behavior	Transparent salary bands and standardized offer rules

Source: Author's contribution

3.1. Attraction and recruitment communication

The first gendered filter may operate before an application is submitted. Recruitment messages communicate more than tasks and qualifications; they also communicate who is expected to feel comfortable in the organization. Gaucher, Friesen and Kay (2011) provide evidence that masculine-coded wording is more frequent in advertisements for male-dominated occupations and can reduce women's anticipated sense of belonging. This is important because an organization can produce a gender gap in its applicant pool without rejecting a single woman: culture can affect who chooses to enter the competition in the first place.

Recruitment communication also includes photographs, descriptions of employee benefits, statements about working style, references to competitiveness, and the visibility of women in senior roles. These elements form an implicit cultural signal. If organizational branding consistently presents success through a narrow masculine archetype, formal diversity statements may have limited credibility. Conversely, inclusive communication can widen the pool without lowering job requirements, provided that the wording remains accurate and tied to genuine organizational practices.

The effect of wording should not be overstated as a universal solution. A large field experiment reported by Leibbrandt and List and related work on competitive environments suggests that features of the job itself, including compensation design and competitive intensity, can influence entry decisions. More recent field evidence on job advertisements also indicates that removing unnecessary qualifications can increase applications overall but does not automatically generate a larger female share. The practical lesson is that inclusive wording works best as part of a broader redesign of recruitment rather than as a cosmetic change.

3.2. Screening, interviews and cultural-fit judgments

Once applications enter the recruitment system, ambiguity becomes a central risk factor. Unstructured screening allows evaluators to change the relative weight assigned to credentials after observing the candidate. A criterion such as 'leadership potential' can be interpreted through different behavioral signals, and those interpretations may be influenced by gender stereotypes. Structured scoring reduces this flexibility by requiring evaluators to assess the same dimensions for all candidates and to record the evidence supporting each score.

Interviewing amplifies the role of culture because it is an interpersonal setting. Rapport, humor, communication style, leisure interests, and biographical similarity can create a strong impression of fit. Rivera's (2012) findings are especially relevant here: cultural similarity can become a substantial hiring criterion even when evaluators describe themselves as meritocratic. This does not mean that interpersonal compatibility is irrelevant, but it does mean that organizations should separate job-relevant collaboration behaviors from vague impressions such as 'I can see myself working with this person.'

The design of selection procedures can also create systemic disadvantages. A 2024 study in Labour Economics shows that a recruitment component framed around common culture could produce an unintended disadvantage for women even in a process that otherwise appeared procedurally fair. This finding illustrates why organizational culture should be examined not only as employee attitudes but also as something encoded in assessment instruments. A criterion can be administered identically to everyone and still be weakly related to job performance while generating group differences.

Gender effects may also intersect with occupational gender composition. Recent correspondence and field experiments indicate that penalties can depend on whether an applicant's gender is congruent with the dominant gender of the occupation. Therefore, the organizational culture of a male-dominated engineering team and that of a female-dominated care occupation may generate different forms of exclusion. The broader issue is that recruitment can become a mechanism through which organizations preserve occupational gender segregation.

4. From awareness to institutional redesign: reducing the gender gap in hiring

Organizations often respond to gender bias by providing awareness or unconscious-bias training. Such programs can be useful, but the evidence on organizational change suggests that awareness alone is insufficient. Bias operates under conditions of ambiguity, discretion, time pressure, and accountability gaps. Sustainable change therefore requires modifications to the decision environment. Correll (2017) argues for a 'small wins' approach in which organizations introduce concrete, measurable changes to evaluation processes and build broader transformation through accumulated improvements.

A first intervention is to define selection criteria before candidate identities are evaluated. Hiring teams should distinguish essential from desirable qualifications, specify behavioral indicators, and agree on weighting. This reduces the possibility that evaluators unconsciously redefine merit around a preferred candidate. Structured interviews should ask comparable questions, use anchored rating scales, and require independent ratings before group discussion. These practices do not eliminate judgment; they make judgment more transparent and more closely tied to job-relevant evidence.

A second intervention is to redesign cultural-fit evaluation. Instead of asking whether candidates feel familiar, recruiters can assess concrete behaviors linked to organizational values: collaboration, ethical decision-making, customer orientation, learning, or conflict management. This changes culture from an intuitive similarity test into an explicit performance-relevant construct. Organizations can also ask evaluators to identify what a candidate may add to the team, which encourages attention to complementary perspectives rather than demographic or lifestyle resemblance.

A third intervention is transparency. Salary bands, clear promotion pathways, realistic job previews, and explicit flexibility policies reduce the importance of informal negotiation and insider knowledge. Transparency is culturally significant because it changes the balance between informal networks and formal rules. Where access to information depends heavily on existing relationships, employees and applicants who are less represented in the organization may face a systematic disadvantage.

A fourth intervention is measurement. Companies should track the representation of women and men at each recruitment stage, not only among final hires. Useful indicators include application rates, screening pass rates, interview scores, offer rates, offer acceptance, starting salary, and time to promotion. Differences do not automatically prove discrimination, but persistent stage-specific gaps identify where further analysis is necessary. Data can also reveal whether an intervention improves outcomes or simply shifts the bottleneck to another stage.

Finally, accountability must be collective. Gender-equitable hiring should not be delegated exclusively to human resources or diversity specialists. Hiring managers, senior leaders, recruiters, and interviewers all shape the cultural signals and decision rules that candidates encounter. McKinsey's Women in the Workplace 2024 report notes that organizations have expanded debiasing practices, but comprehensive implementation remains uneven. This gap between formal commitment and managerial practice is precisely where organizational culture becomes decisive: values matter only when they are translated into routines and consequences.

4.1. Organizational diagnostics and the measurement of cultural bias

An effective response to gender disparities in recruitment begins with organizational diagnosis. Companies need to identify not only whether women and men are hired at different rates, but also where differences emerge across the recruitment funnel. A useful diagnostic approach compares application, screening, interview, offer, acceptance and early-retention rates by gender while also considering job level, occupational family and managerial responsibility. These indicators should be interpreted carefully: a numerical gap does not automatically demonstrate discrimination, but repeated disparities at the same decision point can signal that selection criteria, evaluator discretion or organizational expectations require closer examination. Qualitative evidence is equally important. Candidate feedback, interview notes, recruiter debriefs and descriptions of the 'ideal candidate' can reveal whether apparently neutral standards are connected to gendered assumptions about leadership, availability, assertiveness or commitment.

The measurement of organizational culture should therefore extend beyond employee-satisfaction surveys. Recruitment-related culture is visible in the language used to describe success, in the examples chosen during interviews, in the degree of tolerance for different communication styles and in the informal criteria used to decide whether a candidate 'fits'. Organizations can audit job advertisements for unnecessarily gender-coded expressions, review whether interview questions are standardized, and examine whether panel members use comparable evidence when assessing candidates. When hiring decisions are documented through explicit competency-based criteria, it becomes easier to distinguish a legitimate requirement from an intuitive preference. Such documentation also creates a learning mechanism: recurring patterns can be discussed across hiring teams and used to improve future selection processes.

4.2. Leadership, accountability and inclusive recruitment practices

Leadership plays a decisive role because organizational culture is sustained by repeated signals about which behaviors are rewarded and which practices are tolerated. Senior managers influence recruitment even when they do not participate directly in interviews: they determine performance expectations, resource allocation, promotion norms and the degree to which diversity objectives are treated as operational priorities. If leaders endorse gender equality rhetorically but continue to reward managers exclusively for speed of hiring or short-term staffing targets, recruiters may rely on familiar profiles and informal referrals. By contrast, when leaders require evidence-based selection, diverse candidate pools and documented decisions, inclusion becomes part of managerial accountability rather than an optional human-resources initiative.

Inclusive recruitment is strongest when interventions are embedded in the architecture of the hiring process. Structured interviews can reduce the opportunity for evaluators to shift criteria from one candidate to another. Work-sample tests and clearly defined competency assessments can focus attention on job-relevant behavior. Diverse interview panels may broaden perspectives, although diversity of panel composition is not sufficient if evaluators still rely on vague notions of similarity or personal chemistry. Calibration meetings can further improve consistency by requiring panel members to justify evaluations using the same standards. The central objective is not to eliminate human judgment, but to make judgment more transparent, comparable and accountable.

Recruitment should also be connected to broader organizational practices after hiring. Candidates interpret information about flexibility, career progression, parental leave, hybrid work, leadership representation and performance evaluation as signals of the organization's real culture. A company may successfully attract women through inclusive recruitment communication yet lose credibility if internal career systems continue to reward uninterrupted availability or informal sponsorship networks. For this reason, reducing the gender gap in hiring requires alignment between external employer branding and internal employment practices. The credibility of inclusion depends on whether the experience promised during recruitment is reflected in daily organizational life.

4.3. Implications for organizations and future research

From a managerial perspective, the analysis suggests that organizations should treat gender-equitable recruitment as a process-design issue rather than as a one-time diversity campaign. Periodic audits of job descriptions, sourcing channels, shortlist composition and interview outcomes can help identify structural bottlenecks. Organizations should also review referral programs and informal talent pipelines, because these mechanisms can reproduce the demographic composition of existing networks even without discriminatory intent. Where large differences appear, managers can test alternative procedures and compare outcomes over time. Such an approach is consistent with incremental organizational change: small adjustments to decision architecture may produce cumulative improvements when they are maintained, evaluated and revised.

Future research could examine these mechanisms in the Romanian labor market, where organizational cultures are shaped by sectoral differences, firm ownership, multinational influence and changing expectations regarding work and family roles. Comparative studies could investigate whether gendered hiring patterns differ between public and private organizations, small and medium-sized enterprises and large corporations, or traditionally male- and female-dominated occupations. Mixed-method designs would be especially valuable because quantitative hiring data can identify where disparities occur, while interviews with recruiters, managers and applicants can explain how cultural expectations enter decision-making. Longitudinal research could also determine whether changes in recruitment procedures translate into more balanced hiring outcomes and, subsequently, into more equitable promotion and retention.

As a subsequent stage of this research, the conceptual framework developed in the present article will be extended through an empirical investigation based on questionnaires. The responses collected

from participants will be analyzed in order to identify how organizational culture is perceived in recruitment contexts, whether gender-related differences emerge in candidates' and employees' experiences, and which organizational practices are most strongly associated with perceptions of fairness and equal opportunity. The empirical findings will allow the proposed relationships to be tested and will provide a stronger basis for practical recommendations addressed to organizations.

5. Conclusions

The gender gap in hiring is not produced by a single mechanism and cannot be explained solely by explicit prejudice. Organizational culture shapes recruitment by defining what competence looks like, which behaviors signal commitment, who appears to belong, and how much discretion evaluators have when applying criteria. These cultural meanings operate from the first contact with a job advertisement to the final discussion of an offer.

The literature reviewed in this article supports three main conclusions. First, hiring is simultaneously a process of competence evaluation and social-cultural matching. When similarity is confused with fit, organizations risk reproducing their existing demographic composition. Second, apparently neutral procedures can generate unequal outcomes when they incorporate gendered assumptions or criteria weakly related to performance. Third, individual awareness is unlikely to be sufficient unless organizations reduce ambiguity and discretion through structured, transparent and measurable selection practices.

For managers, the practical implication is that gender-equitable hiring does not require abandoning organizational culture. It requires distinguishing core values from historically contingent images of the ideal employee. A culture can be strong without being homogeneous, and a rigorous selection process can be inclusive without lowering standards. In fact, clearer criteria and more structured decision rules can improve both fairness and the quality of hiring decisions.

Future empirical research could test this framework across Romanian companies and sectors with different levels of gender segregation. Particularly useful designs would combine analysis of job advertisements, recruiter interviews, candidate-level recruitment data, and measures of organizational culture. Such research could identify which cultural dimensions are most strongly associated with gender differences in application, evaluation, and hiring, and whether interventions such as structured interviews or culture-add criteria reduce these gaps over time. In particular, the next stage of the study will focus on the analysis and interpretation of results obtained through questionnaires, thereby complementing the present theoretical approach with empirical evidence.

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