

WOMEN IN POWER: HOW WOMEN CAN HOLD THEIR OWN IN BUSINESS AND INCREASE THE PROPORTION OF WOMEN AT THE SAME TIME

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 crisis, many women were either underemployed or unemployed, which limited their participation in the labor market. Since then, the number of women in companies across Europe, the US, and the Asia-Pacific region has risen again. Companies now need straightforward ways to track and support this progress. Tools like gender targets and the Women Process Performance Management (WPPM) Index can help measure how women move up within organizations. This paper introduces the WPPM Index as a proposed measurement instrument and uses real-world examples from Europe, the United States, and the Asia-Pacific region to demonstrate how companies can report on gender equality.

Keywords: Gender quota; Women on management boards; Women on supervisory boards; Management reporting; Women Process Performance Management Index; Key Performance Indicators.

1. Introduction

The current legal landscape surrounding gender diversity in corporate leadership in the United States is marked by both progress and significant regress. Political and legal forces have increasingly challenged and curtailed many mechanisms once designed to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace. Although executive orders and administrative policies in the United States have not directly altered private-sector obligations, the ensuing political pressure discourages companies from openly championing women and minority representation in leadership. In the absence of

governmental support for DEI initiatives, companies must increasingly develop and implement their own strategies for promoting women's development opportunities (Cook & Glass, 2014).

Recent litigation reinforces the trend away from state efforts promoting board diversity. California, for example, made headlines in 2018 with Senate Bill 826 (the Bill), requiring corporations headquartered in the state to appoint at least one female director by the end of 2019 (California Senate Bill 826 (SB 826), 2018; Schipani, Dworkin, & Binder, 2023, pp. 144–145).¹ Female representation on boards rose in the years that followed, demonstrating the policy's immediate effect (Schipani, Dworkin, & Binder, 2023, p. 145). However, in 2022, the Superior Court of California struck down the Bill as unconstitutional (*Crest v. Padilla*, 2022).² A related challenge remains pending, highlighting the unresolved constitutional questions at the heart of such mandates (*Meland v. Weber*, 2021). Similarly, the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals recently invalidated the National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations (NASDAQ) board diversity rules in *Alliance for Fair Board Recruitment v. Securities and Exchange Commission* (United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, 2024). The NASDAQ rules required listed companies to include at least two diverse directors, including one female, on their boards (NASDAQ Rule 5605(f)). In a closely divided 9–8 en banc decision, the court held that the Securities and Exchange Commission exceeded its authority under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, concluding that the rules were not a disclosure requirement but were instead an impermissible “public-shaming penalty” (United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, 2024). NASDAQ has since announced it will not appeal, signaling an end to one of the most ambitious market-based board diversity measures to date. Other states continue to experiment with target legislation, but these laws remain vulnerable to constitutional scrutiny.

By contrast, many European jurisdictions have adopted far more robust regulatory frameworks to advance gender equality in corporate leadership. Gender quotas for boards, mandatory pay transparency, and other affirmative measures have significantly increased women's representation in senior positions (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021).³

Still, against an international backdrop whereby some countries are resisting legal efforts to provide women with leadership opportunities, it is increasingly clear that companies must take initiative on their own terms. The importance of developing internal strategies that recognize both the business and moral imperatives of gender-balanced leadership has arguably never been more apparent. This Article provides an eight-step framework to give corporations a practical roadmap for embedding women's equality into leadership structures regardless of the prevailing legal environment. This framework first appeared in Schipani, Dworkin, and Binder (2023, pp. 144–145). The first step—deciding upon the strategic relevance of women on boards—strikes a particularly strong chord in

¹ The bill also required corporations with six or more directors to have at least three females on the board by 2021, and corporations with five directors to have two women. The bill imposed a \$100,000 fine for companies' first failure to meet this quota, and a \$300,000 fine for a second violation.

² This court found that Corporations Code § 301.4 violated the Equal Protection Clause of the California Constitution by mandating a certain numeric structure on corporate boards on pain of a significant fine.

³ In the six quota countries considered in this analysis, the average share of women on boards is 37.6%. In countries without quotas, the share of women on boards is 24.3%.

today's discourse. To continue advancing gender equality and building corporate boards that reflect the populations they serve, we must first confront and articulate why women's presence in leadership is not only valuable but essential (Sandretto et al., 2025).

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Why Gender-Balanced Leadership Matters: Three Theoretical Foundations*

The case for gender-balanced leadership rests on three complementary theoretical perspectives. First, the upper-echelons theory holds that an organization's strategic choices and outcomes reflect the cognitive frames, values, and experiences of its top decision-makers (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Broadening the gender composition of leadership widens this cognitive base, producing decisions that better reflect the perspectives of an organization's entire workforce rather than those of men alone (Glass & Cook, 2018).

Second, the resource-based view treats a diverse leadership team as a valuable and difficult-to-imitate resource capable of generating sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Diversity of experience and professional networks expands the strategic options available to the firm and improves the quality of its decision-making.

Third, critical-mass theory specifies when these benefits appear: the performance effects of women in leadership tend to materialize only once representation surpasses a threshold—commonly identified as roughly 30 percent—rather than through token appointments (Kanter, 1977; Konrad, Kramer, & Erkut, 2008). This threshold logic directly motivates the 30 percent women's target that recurs throughout this paper.

2.2 *Embedding Women's Advancement*

Research consistently shows that gender-diverse leadership teams are associated with stronger financial performance, greater innovation, and enhanced corporate responsibility (Lakhal et al., 2024; Moreno-Gómez et al., 2018; Post & Byron, 2015; Sandretto et al., 2025). Women in leadership roles have been shown to drive sustainability initiatives, elevate customer engagement, and foster healthier workplace cultures (Srivastava et al., 2023).⁴ More balanced leadership produces decision-making processes that better reflect the perspectives of an organization's entire workforce, not merely those of men (Glass & Cook, 2018).

Beyond business, the moral imperative is also undeniable. It is indefensible for half of humanity to remain systematically underrepresented in decision-making spaces that shape economies, societies, and lives. Achieving gender-balanced leadership is not only a matter of competitive advantage but also of justice and dignity.

Charting this course requires both a recognition of why gender equality in leadership matters and a commitment to making it strategically central to corporate governance. Our study, highlighting the internal actions of international corporations and outlining eight steps for companies to follow, offers a way forward.

⁴ "Female leaders are more inclined to prioritize strong customer relationships compared to their male counterparts in similar roles. We believe this customer-centric approach can enhance a company's ability to satisfy customers, ultimately leading to improved financial outcomes."

This focus also defines the paper's contribution. Existing tools for tracking gender equality—representation counts, board-quota compliance, and diversity ratings such as the Bloomberg Gender-Equality Index or EDGE certification—capture how many women hold senior roles, but not how deeply gender equality is embedded in a company's core processes and value creation. This paper addresses that gap in two ways. First, it introduces the Women Process Performance Management (WPPM) Index, a process-based key performance indicator that ties women's advancement to strategic controlling systems such as the Balanced Scorecard. Second, it proposes an eight-step roadmap for embedding that indicator into corporate governance. In doing so, the study shifts the emphasis from measuring representation to managing the processes that produce it.

This article therefore examines how companies can embed women's advancement into the core processes that create value—rather than tracking representation alone—and whether a process-based indicator integrated into strategic controlling systems can make that progress measurable across the differing regulatory environments of Europe, North America, and the Asia-Pacific region. Because this study is exploratory and conceptual in nature, these questions are pursued through two guiding hypotheses, examined illustratively rather than through formal statistical testing. The first hypothesis (H1) is as follows:

H1: Companies with attractive career opportunities for women increase the proportion of women and become more successful.

This paper aims to highlight the gap that can arise in reality. Large companies offer interesting career opportunities for women. Nevertheless, the proportion of women does not always increase accordingly, and the company's success, measured in terms of EBIT (earnings before interest and taxes), is therefore not sufficiently increased.

The second hypothesis (H2) concerns the difference in business performance associated with more gender-balanced teams:

H2: Companies with an equal number of men and women on their teams generate higher profits.

This hypothesis draws on the premise that gender-balanced teams can be strategically advantageous in pursuing company goals (Sandretto et al., 2025). Both hypotheses are examined here illustratively, through cross-case comparison rather than statistical testing; establishing them as causal claims would require dedicated longitudinal data and remains a task for future research.

3. Methodology

This study uses a comparative international approach, analyzing six multinational corporations across Europe, North America, and the Asia-Pacific region: BioNTech SE and the BMW Group (Europe), Apple Inc. and The Coca-Cola Company (North America), and Alibaba Group and Toyota Motor Corporation (Asia-Pacific). Company initiatives were examined via sustainability reports, diversity statements, business literature, and rankings, focusing on mentoring and training programs. The proposed Women Process Performance Management (WPPM) Index evaluates how well companies integrate gender equality into

processes and leadership. This method allows comparison across regions and highlights best practices for promoting women in leadership.

3.1 Theoretical Foundations: Performance Measurement Concepts (PPM)

The Women Process Performance Management (WPPM) Index proposed in this study does not stand alone; it extends an established body of performance measurement and management concepts (hereafter “PPM concepts”) that translate strategy into measurable, controllable indicators. To situate the index within that tradition, Table 1 compiles twenty general performance measurement concepts together with their principal references, and Table 2 distils the ten that bear most directly on the premises of this paper—namely, that women’s advancement can be expressed as a process-based, value-creating and controllable performance measure.

Table 1 – twenty general Performance Measurement Concepts (PPM Concepts) and their principal references

No.	Concept / Framework	Principal reference(s)	Core focus
1	Balanced Scorecard	Kaplan & Norton (1992, 1996)	Translates strategy into balanced financial and non-financial measures across four perspectives
2	Strategy Maps	Kaplan & Norton (2004)	Visualises cause-and-effect links between strategic objectives and outcomes
3	Performance Prism	Neely, Adams, & Kennerley (2002)	Stakeholder-centred model built on five interrelated facets of performance
4	SMART Performance Pyramid	Cross & Lynch (1988)	Hierarchy linking corporate vision to operational measures
5	Results and Determinants Framework	Fitzgerald et al. (1991)	Separates results measures from their performance determinants in services
6	Performance Measurement Matrix	Keegan, Eiler, & Jones (1989)	Classifies measures as cost / non-cost and internal / external
7	PMS Design Framework	Neely, Gregory, & Platts (1995)	Process and criteria for designing performance measurement systems
8	EFQM Excellence Model	EFQM (1991; rev. 2013)	Self-assessment across enabler and result criteria
9	Malcolm Baldrige Criteria	Baldrige / NIST (1987)	Total-quality performance-excellence criteria
10	Tableau de Bord	Epstein & Manzoni (1998)	Multidimensional management-dashboard tradition
11	Activity-Based Costing (ABC)	Cooper & Kaplan (1988)	Assigns overhead to products via activities and cost drivers

No.	Concept / Framework	Principal reference(s)	Core focus
12	Process Cost Accounting (Prozesskostenrechnung)	Horváth & Mayer (1989); Horváth et al. (2020)	Costs overhead processes through cost drivers and process-cost rates
13	Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)	Parmenter (2015)	Selects and manages the critical measures of success
14	Critical Success Factors	Rockart (1979)	Identifies the few areas decisive for competitive success
15	Six Sigma (DMAIC)	Harry & Schroeder (2000)	Reduces process variation to improve quality
16	Total Quality Management (TQM)	Deming (1986)	Continuous, system-wide improvement of quality
17	Economic Value Added (EVA)	Stewart (1991)	Value-based residual-income measure of performance
18	Benchmarking	Camp (1989)	Systematic comparison against best-in-class references
19	Intellectual Capital (Skandia Navigator; Intangible Assets Monitor)	Edvinsson & Malone (1997); Sveiby (1997)	Measures and reports intangible, knowledge-based assets
20	Objectives and Key Results (OKR)	Doerr (2018)	Aligns goals with measurable key results on short cycles

Source: Own compilation.

Table 2 identifies the ten PPM concepts most directly implicated by the premises of this paper and maps each to its underlying premise and to the role it plays in the WPPM Index.

Table 2 – The ten performance measurement concepts most relevant to this article

Rank	PPM concept	Underlying premise	Relevance to the WPPM Index
1	Balanced Scorecard	Strategy must be translated into balanced financial and non-financial measures	Hosts the women's target and WPPM Index as an internal-process / diversity perspective
2	Process Cost Accounting	Value and overhead are best understood at the process level	Supplies the male / female process-cost rates in the index denominator
3	Activity-Based Costing	Costs should be traced to activities via cost drivers	Enables separation of female and male process costs per activity

Rank	PPM concept	Underlying premise	Relevance to the WPPM Index
4	Key Performance Indicators	What gets measured gets managed	Women's target and WPPM Index are defined and tracked as KPIs
5	Stakeholder / customer-value view (Performance Prism)	Performance must satisfy key stakeholders, above all customers	Customer-importance and customer-satisfaction scores form the index numerator
6	Strategy Maps	Objectives are linked causally to value creation	Positions women's advancement within the firm's value-creation logic
7	Critical Success Factors	Management should focus on the few factors decisive for success	Frames gender balance as a strategic success factor, not a side metric
8	Objectives and Key Results (OKR)	Goals should align with measurable key results on short cycles	Operationalises the incentive scheme (Step 7) around the index
9	Total Quality Management / continuous improvement	Processes should be improved iteratively over time	Justifies tracking the index trajectory across successive planning periods
10	Economic Value Added / value-based management	Performance is value created above a benchmark	An index above 1 signals value-creating, benchmark-beating processes

Source: Own compilation.

3.2 Research Design and Company Selection

The study adopts an exploratory, multiple-case design, with the individual company as the unit of analysis. Companies were selected against three criteria: (1) status as a large, internationally listed corporation subject to public disclosure requirements; (2) coverage of the three focal regions, with two firms drawn from each; and (3) sufficient publicly available reporting on workforce composition and gender-equality measures to permit cross-case comparison. The resulting sample spans distinct regulatory environments and industries – including biotechnology, automotive, technology, consumer goods, and e-commerce – so that the framework can be examined under varied conditions rather than within a single national or sectoral context.

3.3 Data Sources

The analysis draws on secondary data published between 2021 and 2025: corporate sustainability and diversity reports, annual reports, official statistics, and reputable industry rankings. Because these sources are largely self-reported and follow different national reporting conventions, the figures are not always directly comparable across firms or years; they are therefore used to establish patterns and relative positions rather than precise point estimates. Where possible, company disclosures were cross-checked against independent statistical sources.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

Each company was assessed against the eight steps of the proposed framework (Section 7) and rated on a three-level scale—fully implemented (++), partially implemented (+), or not evident (0)—according to how far the relevant practice was documented in its public reporting. A step was coded as fully implemented only where a firm reported a concrete, operational measure (for example, a quantified women’s target tied to management accountability); as partial where intent or isolated initiatives were reported without systematic integration; and as not evident where no relevant disclosure was found. The resulting profiles are summarized in Tables 8 and 9.

3.5 Limitations

Three limitations follow from this design. First, the small, purposively selected sample supports analytical rather than statistical generalization: the findings illustrate how the framework applies but cannot establish how widespread such practices are. Second, reliance on self-reported disclosure may overstate the activities of firms with more sophisticated reporting functions. Third, because the study does not link implementation to longitudinal performance data, it identifies associations and patterns rather than causal effects – a limitation that also bounds the profit relationship discussed in the conclusion.

4. General Overview of the European Labor Market and Women in Management Positions

The principle of equality between women and men is a fundamental value of the European Union and indeed was already enshrined in the Treaty of Rome in 1957. The EU has been actively combating gender-based discrimination for nearly 70 years (Bundesregierung, 2024). Furthermore, the “Strategy for Gender Equality 2020–2025” (Strategy) by the European Commission defines goals and measures to improve the work-life balance of female employees. This Strategy offers the opportunity to eliminate gender-related differences in the labor market (Sandretto et al., 2025). For example, it is essential that both parents feel responsible and accountable looking after the family. The directive on work-life balance is relevant in this respect (European Commission, 2020).

To enable a well-founded assessment of the current situation on the European labor market, the distribution of men and women across various sectors is analyzed. Based on this analysis, reliable conclusions can be drawn about the current state and potential future developments.

Looking at the employment rates in the member states of the European Union, it is observed that, as of 2024, 80.1 percent of men and 70.8 percent of women are employed (Statista, 2024b). Reducing this gap is also an objective of the European Commission’s Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025. This program aims to support structural reforms and assist Member States in mainstreaming gender equality within public administration, state budget planning, and financial management (European Union, 2020). A closer look at the distribution of management positions between women and men reveals a significant disparity. In the EU, women were expected to occupy only 35.2 percent of all management positions by 2023. Luxembourg has the lowest percentage, with women occupying only 22.3 percent, while Sweden has the highest figure at 44.3 percent. With a quota of 29 percent, Germany falls below the average (Statista, 2023).

Table 3 – Proportion of Women in Management Positions in Europe, by Age Group (2023)

Age (from ... to ... years)	Percentage of women in management positions in Europe (2023)
25 to 34	33.6%
35 to 44	29.7%
45 to 54	28.6%
55 to 64	26.1%
65 to 74	23.8%

Source: Statistisches Bundesamt (2024).

4.1 *Examples of Business Initiatives*

Several companies have taken steps to increase female representation in top management. Well-known companies that are also listed in country-specific indices (such as the DAX in Germany) were analyzed and reviewed based on their proportion of female employees. Measures that companies are already implementing to increase the proportion of women were collected. This section focuses on BioNTech SE and the BMW Group, both listed in the DAX. Many other companies also pursue similar goals. German firms are required to meet a 30 percent gender quota on boards, making them a useful case for examining strategies. Yet, despite legal frameworks and equality initiatives, women remain underrepresented in senior leadership. Programs to improve this vary by industry, ownership, and cultural context.

4.1.1 BioNTech SE

BioNTech SE is a German biotechnology company based in Mainz that has been listed on the stock exchange since the end of 2019 and specializes in the development and production of active immunotherapies for the treatment of cancer and other serious diseases. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the development of the BNT162b2 vaccine, the company became a worldwide sensation (Serrar, 2023). The Turkish-born couple Ugur Sahin and Özlem Türeci, who founded BioNTech in 2008, are still active in the company today as CEO and Medical Director. Ms. Özlem Türeci, with her twenty years of professional experience, is a respected figure in her field and serves as President of CIMT, the largest European association for cancer immunotherapy (Hannover Messe, 2023).

BioNTech's first sustainability report in 2021 provided insight into corporate governance. Employee diversity is a key aspect of BioNTech's corporate culture. BioNTech employs people from over 60 countries, with 54 percent women and 45 percent in top management. According to the company, BioNTech's successful development is proof that different cultures and perspectives are an enrichment for the company and an important success factor. In November 2018, BioNTech signed the "Diversity Charter" to further promote diversity within the company (BioNTech, 2021).

4.1.2 BMW Group PLC

Bayerische Motoren Werke Aktiengesellschaft, or BMW for short, is a listed automobile and motorcycle manufacturer based in Munich. In the 2022 financial year, the company generated sales of 142.6 billion euros and employed around 149,500 people. BMW is one

of the largest commercial enterprises in Germany and produced 2.52 million cars and 118,900 motorcycles in 2012 (Statista, 2025).

There is only one woman on the male-dominated board of management of the Bavarian car manufacturer: Ilka Horstmeier, Member of the Board of Management for Human Resources. In response to a request from the German Association of Women Engineers (dib) for facts and figures on women in management positions at the company in 2020, the BMW Group provided the following key figures. The proportion of females who were science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) students in management positions and in top management is only 5.3 percent (Kegel, 2020). The BMW Supervisory Board has set ambitious targets. The goal is to increase the proportion of women in the overall workforce and in management positions to 20 to 22 percent by 2025. To achieve this goal, existing measures and programs were reviewed for their effectiveness in the reporting year, optimized in a targeted manner and new measures were derived. The option of filling management positions in tandem (joint venture) was introduced for the targeted short-term promotion of female junior managers, and the company also guarantees a smooth return to work after parental leave. In the medium and long term, the BMW Group aims to ensure a high proportion of women in its own junior management programs and to promote interest in technology at an early stage with a wide range of measures. Events such as Girls' Day and internships aim to encourage young women into STEM fields (BMW Group, 2024).

5. General View of the US labor market and women in management positions

In the United States, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as amended prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (42 U.S.C. § 2000e et seq.). In contrast to the EU, where there is a binding quota of at least 40 percent of supervisory board positions or 33 percent of management and supervisory board positions for the underrepresented gender, Title VII has no requirement for female representation on boards (European Commission, 2018). It simply provides that employers may not discriminate on the basis of sex. Only California enacted a gender mandate for boards of large companies, but as discussed above, this law was found unconstitutional.

An overall analysis of the proportion of women in management positions in the US shows a share of just 29 percent for 2021. This puts the US 6.2 percentage points below the EU average of 35.2 percent (Statista, 2023). In 2021, only 8 percent of the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies in the US were women. This corresponds to 41 women, compared to just 11 percent in 2011 and 3 percent in 2001 (BDAE, 2024).

Table 4 – Women in management positions and Fortune 500 company leadership in the US, compared with the EU average

Metric	Year	Value	Comparison / Note
Women in management positions (USA)	2021	29%	6.2 pp below EU average
EU average, women in management positions	2021	35.2%	Comparison benchmark
Female Fortune 500 CEOs	2011	11%	—

Metric	Year	Value	Comparison / Note
Female Fortune 500 CEOs	2021	8% (41 women)	Decline vs. 2011
Female Fortune 500 CEOs	2001	3%	—

Source: Statista (2023); BDAE (2024).

5.1 Examples of companies that illustrate the current state of women in leadership positions in the US include Apple Inc. and The Coca-Cola Company.

5.1.1 Apple Inc.

Apple Inc. is an international technology company headquartered in Cupertino, California. Apple develops electronics and software such as iPhone, iPad, and Mac, and services like the App Store. In the 2023 financial year, the company generated revenue of USD 383.3 billion and a profit of USD 97 billion (Statista, 2024a).

According to the Forbes Global 2000 list, Apple employs over 161,000 people at the end of the 2023 financial year (Forbes, 2024). A look at the total number of employees in 2022 shows that 35.3 percent of Apple employees are female and 64.6 percent are male. It is worth noting that there are significant differences in the percentages depending on the respective area of activity. In the technical areas of the company, the proportion of women is comparatively low at just 24.9 percent, while it is significantly higher in the non-technical areas at 44.6 percent. At management level, the company averages 44 percent women and 56 percent men. For management positions in sales, however, the distribution differs significantly from the company average for management positions. In sales, the proportion of women in management positions is 55 percent, which is almost 10 percentage points higher than the company average for women in management positions (Apple, 2024a). Apple finds its promotion of women in management positions sustainable, and it manifests itself in the support of networks such as the “Women at Apple” network, which networks and empowers female employees. In this context, events, mentoring sessions and discussion rounds are held to promote the career development of women (Apple, 2024b).

5.1.2 The Coca-Cola Company

The Coca-Cola Company is an American corporation founded in 1892 and today is engaged primarily in the manufacture and sale of syrup and concentrate for Coca-Cola beverages. In 2024, the company achieved a turnover of USD 46.89 billion (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025). With a workforce exceeding 80,000 employees operating in over 200 countries, Coca-Cola continues to maintain its global influence while actively promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the company. The company sees diversity and inclusion not just as fairness, but also as a way to improve business performance. The company aims for 50 percent female senior leadership by 2030 (The Coca-Cola Company, 2018). In 2021, Coca-Cola reported that 42.9 percent of its workforce was female, with women holding 50.5 percent of middle management positions and 38.7 percent of senior leadership roles. These figures highlight the company’s progress toward its 2030 goal of 50 percent female representation in senior leadership positions (GlobalData, 2022). The 5by20® program (2010) economically empowered over 6 million women worldwide (UN Women, 2021). Coca-Cola promotes gender equality internally through mentoring, flexible schedules, childcare support and equal pay (The Coca-Cola Company, 2025).

6. General Overview of Women in Leadership Positions in the Asia-Pacific Region

It is difficult to make a universally valid statement on gender equality and the proportion of women in management positions due to the different cultural, political, legal, social and economic conditions. Even the two leading countries, China and Japan, show extreme differences in the distribution of women in top management. Progress is being made in countries such as the Philippines and New Zealand: women already make up over 30 percent of managers here. The Philippines is often highlighted as a positive example, as it is one of the world's leading countries in this area with 41 percent of management positions held by women (as of 2023). New Zealand also shows a relatively high level of female participation at the management level and is striving to further promote gender equality in companies and politics. These countries benefit from an open culture and comprehensive gender equality initiatives that encourage women to participate more in the labor market (Kopietz & Winkscha, 2015).

China and Singapore are positioned in the median range of the region with regard to the percentage of women in management positions. In China, the proportion of women in management positions is approximately 20 percent, a figure bolstered by government-sponsored programs and initiatives aimed at integrating women into the economy. Singapore, in contrast, has exhibited a stable yet gradual rise, with females occupying 29 percent of management positions.

Japan is confronted with a challenging scenario concerning women's quotas and the representation of women in managerial roles. Despite the existence of high educational standards for women and general economic growth, their actual participation in political and economic leadership roles remains low by international standards (Mae & Lenz, 2023). For example, the proportion of women in management positions in Japanese companies is less than 15 percent, while women only hold around 9.5 percent of seats in the Japanese lower house of parliament (Crotti et al., 2021).

Across the Asia-Pacific region, binding gender quotas for boards and senior management remain the exception, with many jurisdictions instead relying on voluntary targets or internal company policies. They are usually only applied in the form of voluntary, internal regulations (OECD, 2022). Australia and New Zealand are among the few countries in the region that have introduced gender reporting regulations requiring companies to demonstrate their progress in achieving gender equality (OECD, 2022; Workplace Gender Equality Agency [WGEA], 2024). These regulations could serve as a model for other countries looking to increase women's participation in management roles sustainably.

6.1 *Examples of companies that reflect these differences include Alibaba Group and Toyota Motor Corporation.*

6.1.1 Alibaba Group

The Chinese company Alibaba was founded in 1999 and is now the market leader by revenue in the Chinese e-commerce market. Alibaba's 2023 sales amounted to USD 126.5 billion, mainly in China. Alibaba now employs around 235,000 people and includes various subsidiaries such as AliExpress (Lohmeier, 2024).

In an international comparison, China is one of the countries with the highest proportion of women in management positions. The proportion of women in top

management is 38 percent. It is particularly noteworthy that no official quota for women has been introduced in China. The high proportion of women is mainly the result of family support and social recognition and shows that the promotion of women does not need to be based on legal requirements (Tödtmann, 2018). In 2022, almost half of all Alibaba Group employees were women. However, women only accounted for 28.15 percent of managerial roles. The situation is quite different in executive management positions, where there is a 50/50 split between women and men (Global Data, 2024). In general, many Chinese women opt for a career in the internet sector. In fact, 55 percent of entrepreneurs in the internet sector are women. Many of them have been able to benefit from the Chinese promotion of women. For example, the All-China Women's Federation trained 15 million women from poor areas in e-commerce in 2020. Training courses, demonstration training for online moderation and live stream shopping were also offered. In addition, a chapter on "promoting the comprehensive development of women" was introduced in China's 13th and 14th five-year plans for social and economic development. This makes it clear that targeted efforts are being made to further promote women and prevent gender discrimination (Hui, 2023).

6.1.2 Toyota Motor Corporation

Toyota Motor Corporation is a multinational company based in Toyota, Japan. With 11.23 million vehicles produced in the 2023 financial year, it is the world's largest car manufacturer in terms of production figures.

In no other industrialized country are the opportunities for women to rise to management positions as poor as in Japan. This is demonstrated by the proportion of women in top management at Toyota. Teiko Kudo is the only woman on the board of directors of the world's largest car manufacturer, and there are no women on the board of the Japanese company (Frankfurter Allgemeine, 2023). Although women in Japan are legally equal to men, there are still major differences in social life and in the world of work. For example, it is difficult to reconcile family and career, and the average income of women in Japan is significantly lower than that of men. According to a study from 2023, Japan has fallen to 104th place out of 190 in terms of gender equality, putting it in last place among OECD countries (Fritz, 2024). The government in Tokyo now wants to remedy this situation and require companies in the country's top stock market segment to have a quota of 30 percent in management bodies by 2030. Toyota is also increasingly promoting women in scientific and technical professions with various programs and initiatives. The new "Girls STEM the Future" program brings schoolgirls together with female role models from the company. Such contacts are intended to arouse interest in STEM and show what is possible. In order to reach as many schoolgirls as possible, Toyota cooperates with JA Europe, the largest provider of educational programs on the continent, and "Inspiring Girls International". This initiative is committed to supporting young girls. In addition, various celebrations and public expressions of appreciation with experiences and impressions from the company were held to mark International Women's Day (Toyota Media, 2024). Table 5 shows the increase in the number of women at Toyota compared to the numbers in Japan between 2021 and 2023. Table 6 compares the percentage of women across the companies examined in this Article.

Table 5 – Key figures on diversity at Toyota, global and Japan (2021–2023)

Key figures for the Toyota company	2021	2022	2023
Global workforce Toyota: Women	25%	26%	27%
Workforce in Japan: Women	17%	18%	19%
Management in Japan: Women	10%	11%	12%
Toyota Board (Japan): Women	8%	9%	10%

Source: Toyota Motor Corporation (2024).

Table 6 – Women’s representation by company across workforce, management, and board / top-management level, by region

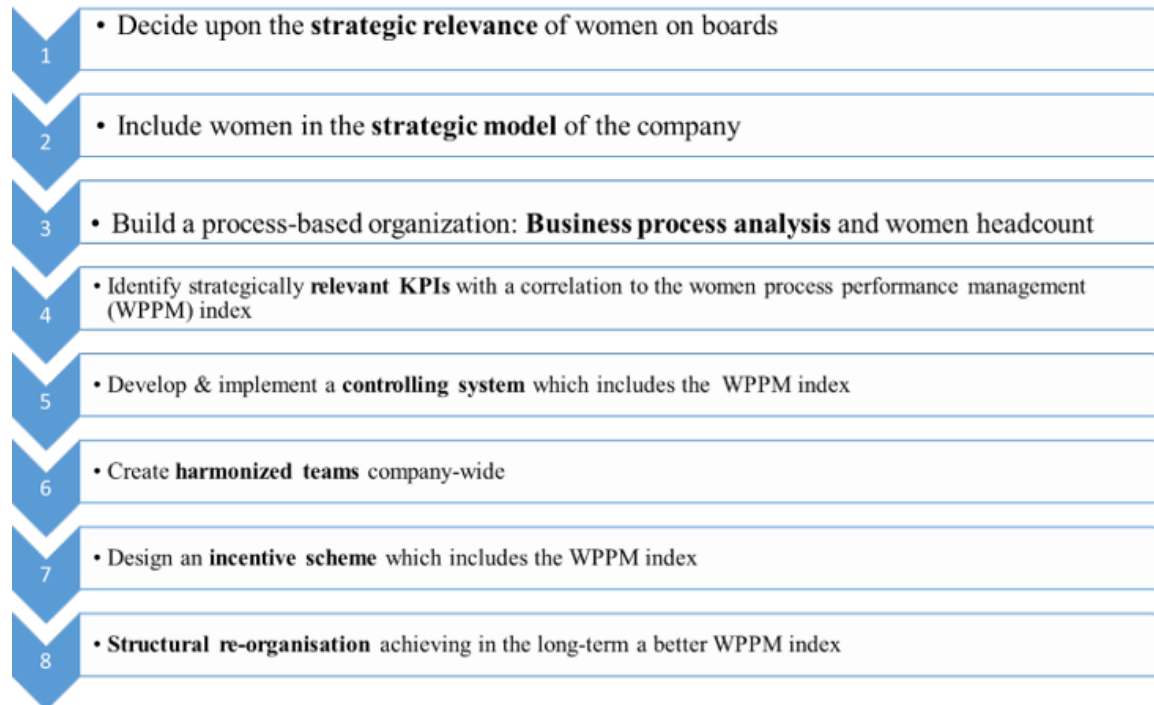
Company	Region	Workforce – Women (%)	Management – Women (%)	Board / Top Mgmt – Women (%)
BioNTech SE	Europe · Germany	54% (2021)	45% (top mgmt, 2021)	n/a
BMW Group	Europe · Germany	Target: 20–22% by 2025	5.3% (STEM mgmt & top mgmt, 2020)	1 of 8 Board members
Apple Inc.	North America · USA	35.3% (2022)	44% (2022)	n/a
The Coca-Cola Company	North America · USA	42.9% (2021)	50.5% (middle mgmt, 2021)	38.7% (senior leadership, 2021)
Alibaba Group	Asia-Pacific · China	~50% (2022)	28.15% (managerial, 2022)	50% (executive mgmt, 2022)
Toyota Motor Corp.	Asia-Pacific · Japan	27% (global, 2023)	12% (Japan, 2023)	10% (Japan board, 2023)

Source: Own compilation based on company sustainability and diversity reports; see Sections 4 to 6 for individual sources.

7. A Potential Roadmap for Business: Eight Steps

In this part we propose an eight-step process which companies might utilize to increase women’s presence in top leadership positions. As identified in Figure 1, these are: (1) decide upon the strategic relevance of women on boards; (2) include women in the strategic model of the company; (3) build a process-based organization and through a process analysis take stock of the headcount of women; (4) identify strategically relevant key performance indicators (KPIs) with a correlation to a women’s process performance (WPPM) index; (5) develop and implement a controlling system which includes the WPPM index; (6) build and foster harmonized teams; (7) design an incentive scheme which includes the WPPM index; and (8) implement any needed structural reorganization to achieve a better score on the WPPM index.

Figure 1 – The Eight-Step Company Process Aimed at Increasing Women’s Presence at All Levels of a Company



Source: Own creation.

Keeping in mind the visual representation of the process as presented in Figure 1, each step and its relevance is described in the following sections.

7.1 Step 1: strategic relevance

Many companies nowadays are interested in integrating more women in management or supervisory boards not only in countries where legislation imposes a women’s quota but also in countries where it is (still) optional. Therefore, achieving a target number of women (women’s target) is strategically relevant for most companies.

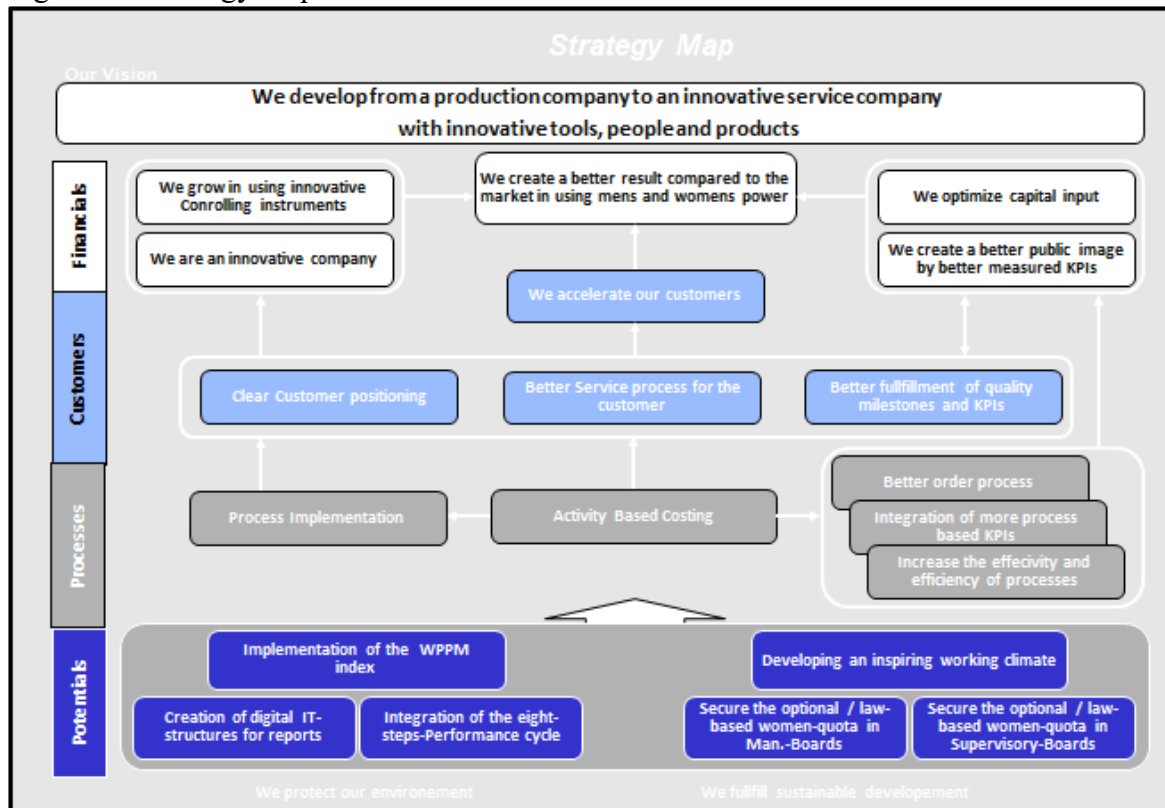
In addition to strategic planning in the tactical planning phase, women should appear in the organization charts by name, to show that the realization of 30 percent women is not just a faraway dream. In the operating planning and budgeting process, more women should be hired as responsible line managers who report planning figures for their departments. Moreover, the KPI women’s target should be included in strategic performance management tools such as the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) or into a KPI Dashboard. The women’s target could be, for instance, included in the internal perspective of the BSC and thus increase the focus on this critical area. In a financial dashboard, the women’s target can be included as a qualitative measure and reported operationally at least once a month. For individual departments and management teams and for the supervisory board, the percentage of women should be reported at least once a year.

7.2 Step 2: strategic model

The next step is defining the strategic model. If the 30 percent women’s target is not reached, measures such as increased recruitment of women or better training of women to

reach the next management level can be defined. In order to implement a strategy after its development, one needs appropriate tools. One possible tool is the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) (Stoi & Dillerup, 2022). In the BSC, four perspectives can be defined, such as strategic goals, measures, target values and actions (see Figure 2) (Kaplan, 2010).

Figure 2 – Strategy map of a Balanced Scorecard



Source: Adapted from Kaplan and Norton (1993).

A strategic model for a period of five to ten years should be developed and evaluated. Such a model could contain several strategic KPIs such as earnings before taxes (EBT),⁵ the women's target, early warning indicators, and scenario targets including worst case, best case and trend scenarios.

Moreover, a women's target can be a goal also at departmental level. The business model could stipulate that managers are only eligible for a performance bonus (perhaps 20 percent) if their department or team has attained a women's target of higher than 30 percent. This model could be used to increase the number of women in the long term across all aspects of the business, including the management level.

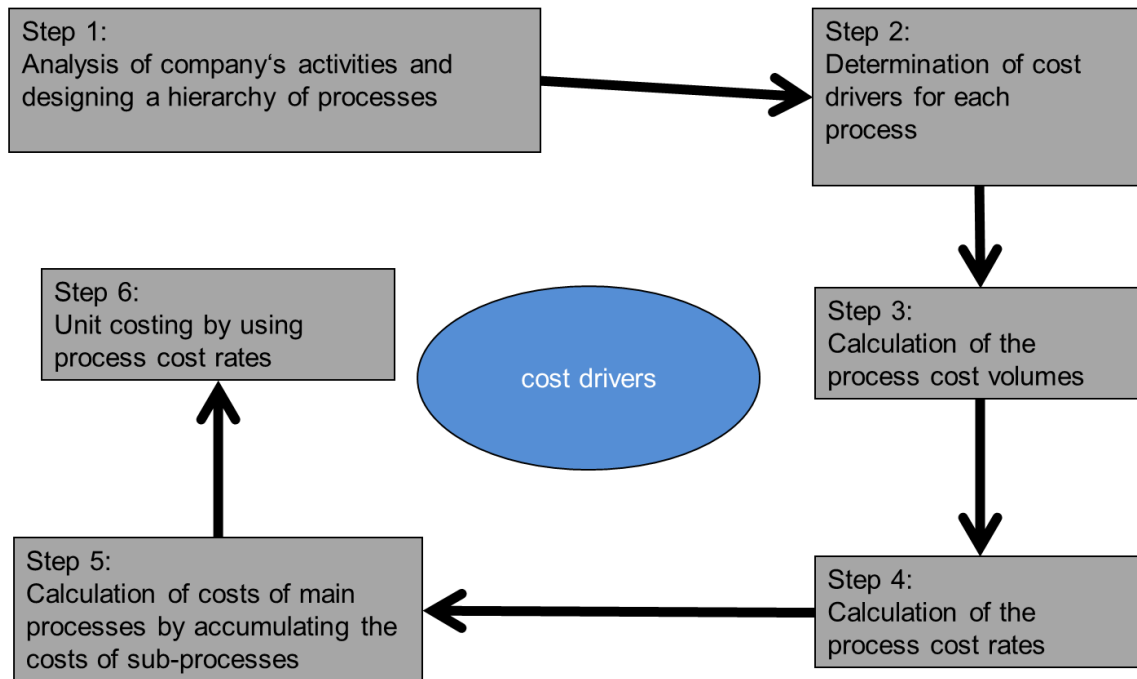
7.3 Step 3: Business Process Analysis

The third step requires a business process analysis. To do this, six steps must be implemented, for which the cost driver is the starting point (see Figure 3). For example, the cost driver in the purchasing process can be determined by the number of order items.

⁵ EBT is an abbreviation for earnings before taxes (also pre-tax profit), a key business figure that results from the income statement of a company.

The more order items can be carried out within the purchasing process at a given capacity and cost, the more favorable the one-time order processing of an order item is.

Figure 3 – Six process steps for a Business Process Analysis



Source: Lorenz (2018).

First, activities, sub-processes and main processes of different departments or of the company as a whole should be identified. This business process analysis can be conducted using anonymous interviews about the total headcounts in the cost centers. To know how many women work in these processes, the interviewers should keep a separate recording of male and female headcounts. The headcount data remain anonymous, but male and female capacities are distinguished for calculating the women's target for each individual activity, sub-process and main process. Second, cost drivers of the processes such as number of orders, number of male or female recruitments, number of women in management positions, etc. are identified. Third, the total process costs should be calculated for the main processes, for the sub-processes and finally for the activities. Fourth, the process cost rate must be calculated so that finally it can be said what the process costs for one order execution amount to. Fifth, the allocation of activities to sub-processes and finally to main processes can show the male process costs and the female process costs, e.g., for one order. In companies with a low percentage of women, the female process costs over all activities will seem low compared to the male process costs. Sixth, the process cost rates, e.g., for the sales process costs, the maintenance process costs, or the security process costs provide interesting information when they are integrated in a product calculation. Divided into male and female process costs, additional information becomes available.

7.4 Step 4: relevant KPIs

For increasing the women's target, it is necessary to measure a KPI, which we call the "women process performance management (WPPM) index." This KPI should increase over a long strategic planning period and is defined in formula (1):

$$WPPM = \frac{\text{Customer Importance} \times \text{Customer Satisfaction}}{\text{Process Cost Rate (Women Capacities)} \div \text{Benchmark Cost Rate (Women Capacities)}} \quad (1)$$

With the help of a customer survey, two KPIs are to be measured: (1) the customer importance related to one process and (2) the customer satisfaction attributed to it. It is important to measure both these KPIs because the customer should be able to evaluate whether an order process is important for them and whether they are satisfied with the order fulfillment time.

The rationale for this construction is that it reframes women's advancement as a driver of value creation rather than as a stand-alone headcount. By expressing the women's target through process-cost accounting (Horváth et al., 2020), the index links the proportion of women in a process to two dimensions the firm already manages: the efficiency of that process (through the male and female process-cost rates) and the value customers place on its output (through the customer-importance and customer-satisfaction measures). An index above one therefore signals that a more balanced allocation of qualified women coincides with efficient, customer-valued processes, giving the measure an interpretive meaning that a simple representation ratio lacks. Because the index depends on internal cost data and survey inputs that differ by firm, its thresholds require empirical calibration before cross-company comparison; this study therefore treats it as a conceptual instrument whose validity is to be established through empirical application.

If the WPPM index is higher than 1, the strategic performance and value creation is good. If the index is lower than 1, then the qualitative and quantitative premises should be optimized. A better position in comparison with the main benchmark competitor should be achieved, for instance, by improving the process cost rate via better recruitment of qualified women or improving the customer experience. The following strategic KPIs can be measured beyond the WPPM index to show the proportion of women in the teams and departments as well as in the management and supervisory board (see Figure 4).

7.4.1 An Illustrative Calculation

To show how the index works in practice, consider a single order-fulfillment process. The figures used here are hypothetical and serve only to illustrate the mechanics of formula (1); they do not represent any company in the sample. Suppose that, on a benchmark-indexed scale where 1.0 denotes parity with the reference competitor, a customer survey returns a customer-importance score of 1.0 and a customer-satisfaction score of 0.90 for the process, while the process-cost rate for women's capacities stands at 1.20 times the benchmark competitor's rate (that is, twenty percent more costly). The index is then $(1.0 \times 0.90) \div 1.20 = 0.75$ —a value below one, signaling that the process does not yet create value efficiently and that its qualitative and quantitative premises should be optimized.

Figure 4 – Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the presentation of the women's target

Number	Input KPI	Definition
1	Benchmark process cost rate on basis of female capacities	
2	Customer satisfaction	How satisfied is the internal customer with the work of women e.g. in a management team.
3	Customer importance	How important is the internal customer with the work of women e.g. in a management team.
4	Number of women	Amount of female persons
5	Number of women in management board	Amount of female persons in management board
6	Number of women in supervisory board	Amount of female persons in supervisory board
7	Number of female recruitments	Amount of female persons already recruited
8	Number of mentors for women from different companies	Amount of female mentors in leadership in a different company
9	Number of established parent/ child-offices	Amount of offices in which a women can work in occupying her children
10	Number of positive female recruitment reports	Amount of recruiting reports after a positive job interview with a woman
11	Number of qualified women	Amount of female qualified persons
12	Portion of women	Women target
13	Process costs on basis of female capacities	Calculated process costs in a main process only considering female staff
14	Process cost rate on basis of female capacities	Calculated process cost rate in a main process only considering female staff
15	Women capacities	Full time equivalents (FTEs)
16	Women headcounts	Amount of female persons
17	Women target	Portion of women
18	Women target on a department level	Portion of women for a department in %
19	Women target on a team level	Portion of women for a team in %
20	WPPM-Index	Women Process Performance Management-Index

Source: Own creation.

Suppose the firm now acts on that signal: targeted recruitment and mentoring of qualified women reduce the women's-capacities process-cost rate to 0.95 of the benchmark, and the resulting service improvements lift customer satisfaction to 1.05. The index rises to $(1.0 \times 1.05) \div 0.95 = 1.11$ —now above one, indicating that a more balanced allocation of qualified women coincides with an efficient, customer-valued process. What the controlling system tracks across successive planning periods is this trajectory rather than any single figure. This example shows how the index can be operationalized within an existing controlling system, while calibrating its inputs and thresholds against real cost and survey data remains the task of the pilot studies noted above.

Figure 4 – Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the Presentation of the Women's Target

Number	Input KPI	Definition
1	Benchmark process cost rate on basis of female capacities	
2	Customer satisfaction	How satisfied is the internal customer with the work of women e.g. in a management team.
3	Customer importance	How important is the internal customer with the work of women e.g. in a management team.
4	Number of women	Amount of female persons
5	Number of women in management board	Amount of female persons in management board
6	Number of women in supervisory board	Amount of female persons in supervisory board
7	Number of female recruitments	Amount of female persons already recruited
8	Number of mentors for women from different companies	Amount of female mentors in leadership in a different company
9	Number of established parent/ child-offices	Amount of offices in which a women can work in occupying her children
10	Number of positive female recruitment reports	Amount of recruiting reports after a positive job interview with a woman
11	Number of qualified women	Amount of female qualified persons
12	Portion of women	Women target
13	Process costs on basis of female capacities	Calculated process costs in a main process only considering female staff
14	Process cost rate on basis of female capacities	Calculated process cost rate in a main process only considering female staff
15	Women capacities	Full time equivalents (FTEs)
16	Women headcounts	Amount of female persons
17	Women target	Portion of women
18	Women target on a department level	Portion of women for a department in %
19	Women target on a team level	Portion of women for a team in %
20	WPPM-Index	Women Process Performance Management-Index

Source: Own creation.

These KPIs can be measured before the implementation of measures to increase the number of women and afterward. For example, they should be measured before the introduction of, e.g., a parent-child office and the implementation of mentors for women as well as after the implementation of these measures.

7.5 Step 5: controlling system

The controlling system consists of the planning process, the cost accounting process and the reporting process (Horváth et al., 2020). The WPPM index can be integrated into a planning system. This means that the yearly budgeting process includes the women's target and the WPPM index and incorporates these two KPIs for the next fiscal year for each department of an enterprise.

When a process cost rate and a benchmark cost are identified, the WPPM index can be calculated and planned. The relevant KPIs should be integrated in the monthly reporting process. A special chapter for important qualitative KPIs in each month-end report ensures that the women's target and the WPPM index are continuously measured and a development trend can be registered. This is important when these two figures are also considered in determining the management variable remuneration.

7.6 Step 6: harmonized teams

Once the processes are identified and KPIs are defined in a controlling system, the employees should be aware of them and consider them in their daily work. Harmonized teams where women and men work together can make the defined KPIs like EBT, the cost target and the women's target easier to achieve.

Especially in today's digital age, Scrum Teams could be formed to ensure agile work in time-limited blocks (sprints) (Denninger & Stoi, 2020). A Scrum Team is a collection of individuals (typically between five and nine members) working together to deliver the required product increments (International Scrum Institute, 2023). The Scrum framework encourages a high level of communication among team members, so that the team can follow a common goal and adhere to the same norms and rules.

To design a harmonized team, it must be clear that management supports these teams formed by both men and women. Mentoring programs in particular should be included in harmonized teams. Furthermore, the number of women in harmonized teams can be measured by project (short term) or process (long term).

7.7 Step 7: incentive scheme

The women's target and the WPPM index should be measured and based on target achievement, and a variable part of the annual remuneration could be introduced. One instrument that should be included in an incentive system is an Objectives and Key Results (OKR) model. Here, operational goals are planned for a department in a three-month cycle, such as, for example, increasing sales by 5 percent. This goal is anchored in an OKR plan and tracked with the help of a weekly measurement. Scrum Teams with male and female team members are suitable for this, as they can work out overarching measures to increase sales. At the end of the week (sprints) (Denninger & Stoi, 2020), an OKR review could take place in which the Scrum Team manager adopts the results.

7.8 Step 8: structural re-organization

The result of a process-based analysis should be to obtain better effectiveness and higher efficiency company-wide. The KPIs women's target and the WPPM index can be measured based on processes at the team level, at the departmental level, and for the entire enterprise. Process optimization teams (POTs) can be created to design the actual order process, the ideal process flow and the optimized standard process cycle (Römer, 2009).

Table 7 reviews the eight steps of the WPPM cycle described above, setting out for each step its objective, the process steps it entails, and the principal implementation options available to a company.

Table 7 – Review of the eight WPPM steps: objectives, process steps, and implementation options

WPPM Step	Objective	Process steps	Implementation options
1. Strategic Relevance	Establish the women's target as a strategic priority of the firm	Set a target number of women; name women in organisation charts; carry the target into tactical and operational planning and budgeting	Embed the women's target in the internal perspective of the Balanced Scorecard or a KPI dashboard; report monthly to departments and annually to the supervisory board
2. Strategic Model	Anchor the target in a multi-year strategy supported by proper tools	Define strategic KPIs (EBT, women's target, early-warning and scenario targets) over a 5–10 year horizon	Use a Balanced Scorecard with four perspectives; make manager bonuses conditional on a departmental women's target above 30%
3. Business Process Analysis	Make women's capacities visible at the process level	Identify activities, sub-processes and main processes; record male / female headcounts; determine cost drivers; compute process costs and process-cost rates; split male and female process costs	Conduct anonymous interviews per cost centre; integrate male / female process costs into product calculation
4. Relevant KPIs / WPPM Index	Quantify women's advancement as a driver of value creation	Measure customer importance and customer satisfaction per process; compute the WPPM Index using formula (1)	Run customer surveys; benchmark against the main competitor; add supplementary representation KPIs (see Figure 4)
5. Controlling System	Integrate the index into routine controlling	Include the women's target and WPPM Index in annual budgeting, cost accounting and monthly reporting	Add a dedicated qualitative-KPI chapter to the month-end report; feed the figures into variable remuneration
6. Harmonized Teams	Embed the KPIs in day-to-day teamwork	Form mixed male / female teams aware of the EBT, cost and women's targets; include mentoring	Use Scrum teams of five to nine members; measure women per team on a project or process basis
7. Incentive Scheme	Reward achievement of the targets	Link the women's target and WPPM Index to variable pay through three-month OKR cycles	Maintain OKR plans with weekly tracking and sprint / OKR reviews in mixed Scrum teams
8. Structural Re-Organization	Raise effectiveness and efficiency and improve the score	Measure the targets at team, department and enterprise level; redesign the actual, ideal and optimised process flow	Create Process Optimization Teams (POTs); restructure processes to lift the WPPM score

Source: Own compilation.

7.9 Qualitative Feasibility Demonstration of the Model

The companies discussed in this paper can be placed into the eight cycles of the WPPM. In Table 8, the completed cycles and those yet to be completed are shown.

This mapping is a qualitative feasibility demonstration rather than an empirical test of the index. It shows that the eight steps can be traced in the public conduct of real, diverse companies and that the framework distinguishes between firms at different stages of integration. Computing the WPPM Index as a numerical value would require internal process-cost data and customer-satisfaction inputs that lie outside publicly available reporting; establishing the index's predictive validity is therefore left to future pilot studies with company-level access (see Section 3.5, Limitations).

Table 8 – WPPM Index: company findings across the Eight-Step Framework

WPPM Step	BioNTech SE (DE)	BMW Group (DE)	Apple Inc. (US)	Coca-Cola (US)	Alibaba Group (CN)	Toyota Motor (JP)
Step 1: Strategic Relevance – women's quota as strategic priority; embedded in BSC / KPI dashboard	++	++	++	++	+	+
Step 2: Strategic Model – 5–10 year model incl. EBT, women's target, scenarios; linked to BSC	+	++	+	++	0	+
Step 3: Business Process Analysis – headcount mapped by gender across activities, sub-processes, main processes	+	+	+	+	+	0
Step 4: Relevant KPIs / WPPM Index – KPIs correlated with WPPM Index (customer importance $\times$ satisfaction $\div$ process cost rate)	+	++	++	++	+	+
Step 5: Controlling System – WPPM Index integrated into planning, cost accounting and monthly reporting	+	+	+	+	0	0
Step 6: Harmonized Teams – mixed-gender teams; mentoring and Scrum formats introduced	++	+	++	++	+	+
Step 7: Incentive Scheme – women's target and WPPM Index linked to variable remuneration (OKR model)	0	+	0	+	0	0
Step 8: Structural Reorganization – Process Optimization Teams; structures redesigned to improve WPPM score	0	+	0	0	0	+

Note. ++ = full: step clearly implemented and documented; + = partial: step mentioned or partially in place; 0 = none: no evidence in the sources consulted.

Source: Own compilation.

8. Discussion

Achieving gender equality in leadership requires more than quotas or laws. It also needs cultural change, supportive environments, and clear strategies.

Culture remains the main barrier. Stereotypes persist, and quotas like Germany's 30 percent rule only work when paired with programs that shift workplace culture.

Structures also matter. Leadership pathways must be open, and progress measurable. The Women Process Performance Management (WPPM) index helps track diversity and integrate it into systems like the Balanced Scorecard, making gender equality part of core strategy (Bravi et al., 2026).

Table 9 – implementation pattern of the WPPM Eight-Step Framework across the six companies

WPPM Step	Full (++)	Partial (+)	None (0)	Pattern across companies
1. Strategic Relevance	4	2	0	Consistently strong
2. Strategic Model	2	3	1	Mostly partial
3. Business Process Analysis	0	5	1	Broadly partial
4. Relevant KPIs / WPPM Index	3	3	0	Consistently strong
5. Controlling System	0	4	2	Partial, gaps emerging
6. Harmonized Teams	3	3	0	Consistently strong
7. Incentive Scheme	0	2	4	Clear gap
8. Structural Reorganization	0	2	4	Clear gap

Source: Own compilation based on Table 8.

Read across the six companies, the pattern in Table 9 is uneven in an informative way. Implementation is strongest at the visible, strategic end of the framework: nearly all firms treat gender balance as strategically relevant (Step 1), report the kind of representation data on which the KPIs of the WPPM index build (Step 4), and invest in mixed, harmonized teams (Step 6). It thins out markedly at the operational end. No company fully implements the incentive scheme (Step 7) or the structural reorganization (Step 8), and four of the six show no evidence of either. The middle steps—translating strategy into a model, analyzing processes, and embedding the measures in a controlling system (Steps 2, 3, and 5)—are reached only partially.

The implication is that commitment currently outpaces integration. Firms are willing to declare the goal and measure it, but few tie it to the accountability mechanisms—compensation, budgeting, and governance structure—that would make progress self-sustaining. This gap helps explain why the representation figures in Table 6 remain modest even at firms with strong public commitments: without Steps 7 and 8, diversity targets stay aspirational rather than operational. It also locates the practical contribution of the framework, which is precisely to carry gender equality from strategic intent through to the incentive and structural changes where most of the sampled firms stop short.

8.1 *Practical Implications*

For practitioners, the framework is designed to be adopted incrementally, using management systems most companies already utilize. A firm need not build new machinery: the WPPM Index can be added as a diversity perspective within an existing Balanced Scorecard, and the eight steps sequenced into the annual planning cycle. The companies discussed above illustrate concrete entry points. BioNTech and the BMW Group, for example, already publish quantified women's targets and run structured mentoring and training programs (Steps 1 and 6); for such firms the marginal step is to connect those targets to the controlling system (Step 5) so that progress is reviewed with the same regularity as financial KPIs.

The greatest practical leverage lies in the two steps where the sampled firms consistently fall short. For the incentive scheme (Step 7), companies can tie a defined share of management bonuses to progress on the women's target, as a growing number of firms now do for ESG metrics, so that diversity goals carry the same weight as cost or revenue targets. For structural reorganization (Step 8), practical measures include assigning explicit accountability for the women's target to a named executive, embedding diversity checkpoints into promotion and succession-planning processes, and reporting WPPM results to the supervisory board. Such changes convert diversity from a reported aspiration into a managed outcome.

A workable sequence, therefore, would be to confirm the strategic relevance of women in the company and set a quantified target, map the processes through which women advance, introduce the WPPM Index as a scorecard measure, and reinforce it with incentives and structural accountability. Because each step draws on tools already present in most controlling systems, the model scales from the large multinationals studied here to smaller firms that lack dedicated diversity functions.

Finally, the firm's strategy must set concrete goals—mentorship, leadership training, and flexible work. Companies like Apple, BioNTech SE and Alibaba Group show that solutions must fit organizational culture and industry. Tailored approaches work best.

It could be argued that the first hypothesis (H1) above—"Companies with attractive career opportunities for women increase the proportion of women and become more successful"—finds preliminary support in this exploratory study of six comparable companies. For the second hypothesis (H2)—"Companies with an equal number of men and women on their teams generate higher profits"—the study can only illustrate the link: the WPPM analysis and the representation figures across the six companies suggest that a more gender-balanced organization is associated with stronger performance. Given the small, exploratory sample and the absence of a direct profit comparison, this relationship is suggested rather than proven.

9. Conclusion

Although the progress made over the past fifty years is undeniable, the journey toward true gender parity in leadership remains incomplete. Continued female representation in influential roles—in corporate leadership as well as in government—is not only a matter of fairness but also helps ensure that decisions, policies, and regulations are shaped by a broader range of perspectives. Encouragingly, there are visible strides in this direction.

Waiting for legislative action to drive change is neither necessary nor advisable. Companies possess the power to act proactively, as demonstrated by the initiatives outlined above. The eight-step framework offered here provides a practical, though as yet empirically untested, guide for organizations seeking to elevate women into leadership roles and to foster inclusivity throughout their structures; its effectiveness in practice remains an open question for future evaluation.

9.1 Verification of the Hypotheses

Taken together, the cross-case evidence assembled in Sections 4 to 8 allows a first, illustrative verification of the two hypotheses. Hypothesis 1—that companies with attractive career opportunities for women increase the proportion of women and become more successful—receives preliminary support in direction: the firms that pair explicit women’s targets with structured recruitment, mentoring and development programs (for example, BioNTech SE, the BMW Group and Apple) also tend to report higher female representation. The link to financial success is weaker and uneven, however; attractive opportunities do not automatically raise the proportion of women or produce a measurable EBIT effect, which confirms the gap anticipated at the outset. H1 is therefore supported as a tendency but cannot be established as a causal relationship within this exploratory design.

Hypothesis 2 – that companies with an equal number of men and women on their teams generate higher profits – can only be illustrated rather than confirmed. The WPPM mapping and the representation figures across the six companies are consistent with the view that more gender-balanced, harmonized teams accompany stronger performance, in line with prior research (Sandretto et al., 2025). Yet, because the study rests on secondary, self-reported data, a small purposive sample and no direct profit comparison, the relationship is suggested rather than proven. Confirming H2 would require the dedicated, longitudinal data called for above, and remains a task for future empirical work.

Excluding women from leadership, whether intentional or not, is not only unjust but may also be strategically costly. Organizations thrive when diverse perspectives inform decision-making. By ignoring the insights and experiences of women, firms risk forfeiting valuable data and innovative solutions. Prior research linking gender-diverse leadership to stronger financial and organizational outcomes lends support to the business case for inclusivity, although establishing that relationship within a given firm would require dedicated, longitudinal data beyond the scope of this exploratory study. On the evidence assembled here, the trajectory is encouraging: companies have good reason to treat gender diversity not as an obligation but as an opportunity to pursue both excellence and equity—a proposition this exploratory study develops and that future empirical work should test directly.

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