

MOVING TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE ORGANIZATION: THE LINK BETWEEN GENDER-FOCUSED HUMAN RESOURCES POLICIES AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY AND IMAGE

Uzoma H. ONONYE

Dennis Osadebay University, Delta State, Nigeria

ononye.uz@gmail.com

Shedrack MOLUNO

Delta State University of Science and Technology, Nigeria

molunosh@gmail.com

Marilena-Oana NEDELEA

Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania

marilena.nedelea@usm.ro

Abstract

This research investigates the link between gender-focused human resources (HR) policies and organizational performance, considering the mediating roles of organizational identity and image. Cross-sectional data were collected from 151 mid-level managers in commercial banks located in Delta State, Nigeria. Data analysis and hypothesis testing were conducted using the partial least squares (PLS) method. Results indicate that gender-focused HR policies have positive and significant impact organizational performance, with this effect mediated by organizational identity and image, both independently and sequentially. The study concluded that the link between gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance is shaped by the interplay between organizational identity and image. Practical recommendations were provided to strengthen these linkages and enhance organizational performance.

Key words: *Gender diversity; human resources policy, organizational identity; organizational image; organizational performance*

JEL Classification: *M10, M14, L25*

I. INTRODUCTION

Female talent remains significantly underutilized and underestimated across most organizations because of weak diversity practices. To address this challenge, firms often implement policies to reduce gender gaps, which may include preferential treatment for women in promotion, remuneration, training and development, recruitment, and succession planning. While such policies are an essential step toward increasing women's participation, achieving full gender equality in human resource management (HRM) practices remains an ongoing goal necessary for sustainable development. In patriarchal societies like Nigeria, organizations may embrace discriminatory practices that provide more access to rewards, resources, and opportunities to men than women. This cultural norm poses challenges for firms seeking to implement effective gender-focused human resources (HR) policies that foster inclusive environments (Ononye & Aloamaka, 2025). Additionally, Nigeria's low ranking (125th out of 16 countries) in the 2024 Global Gender Gap report suggests that Nigerian organizations may have ineffective gender-based HR policies (Pal et al., 2024). Consequently, the transformative contributions that women bring to work processes are often not fully realized because they are more likely to feel uncommitted to and disengaged from an organization with an unsupportive HRM. While empirical studies on the performance benefits of a gender-diverse workforce have yielded mixed findings (Zhang, 2020), research increasingly demonstrates that gender diversity enhances firm performance metrics, including financial, social, and environmental outcomes (Idris Adamu et al., 2024). It is therefore imperative for firms to develop and implement gender-focused policies that harness women's intellectual potential at management and non-management levels, thereby advancing performance outcomes (Yan et al., 2024).

Additionally, there may be a close link between diversity policies and firm performance; however, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how this relationship is formed (Ononye & Aloamaka, 2025). This is because of the limited focus on the nuanced interplay between gender-focused HR initiatives and firm-level outcomes (Lee & Jung, 2024). Mixed empirical findings on the gender-diversity and firm-performance nexus further highlight the need for clarification. The study contends that organizational identity and image may function as intermediaries in this process. Organizational identity refers to employees' perceptions of the organization's core values, which define their actions and achievements. Organizational image refers to employees' perceptions of how other stakeholders perceive the organization's core values. These constructs

provide a framework for interpreting organizational and employee behaviours over time. Gender diversity policies can function as core elements that shape organizational members' perceptions of organizational actions. These policies also provide a shared reference point aligned with external demands and expectations for a gender-inclusive workplace, thereby enhancing organizational image among stakeholders (Hossin et al., 2021). The organizational identity-image link underscores the significance of women's contributions and recognizes their significant role in the workplace. When women develop a strong, collective sense of identity within the organization and perceive that their contributions are valued, they are more likely to engage and perform at higher levels. As a result, transforming organizational identity and image can improve firm performance by fostering a positive perception of the organization among both employees and stakeholders (Bankins & Waterhouse, 2019).

The findings of this study are particularly relevant for Nigerian organizations, where prevailing cultural orientations may limit organizational diversity potential. Clarifying the outcomes of gender-focused HR practices is essential, as firms may otherwise remain reluctant to implement policies that enhance female participation and workplace opportunities. Consequently, this study investigates the relationship between gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance, with particular attention to the mediating roles of organizational identity and image.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender-focused HR policies are formal statements that guide actions to increase female representation, participation, and opportunities in the workplace. The goal is to attract, motivate, develop, and retain highly competent women through affirmative measures to ensure fair access to promotions, career development, pay, and jobs. According to Ali (2016), organizations achieve different outcomes depending on how effectively these policies are implemented and monitored in practice. The supportive environment created by such policies makes women feel valued and appreciated. It also shows a clear commitment to organizational sustainability as a way to achieve competitive advantage. Gender diversity has featured prominently as a driver of creativity, knowledge sharing, collaboration, problem-solving, and innovation – critical antecedents of organizational performance. Studies have reported the positive association between gender diversity and organizational performance (Galletta et al., 2022; Khatri, 2023; Pareek et al., 2023). Women are often recognized for their collaborative dispositions; their valuable knowledge contributions to work processes enhance resource efficiency, innovation, and productivity. Accordingly, women are well-positioned to improve organizational effectiveness by making firms more economically and socially responsible (Idris Adamu et al., 2024; Trireksani et al., 2024). Since gender diversity affects organizational performance, gender inclusivity policies can foster a supportive environment where both men and women can thrive and perform (Lee & Jung, 2024). However, diversity policies can sometimes be controversial, with concerns that they might undermine competence and merit (Fine et al., 2020). Therefore, adopting equality policies that do not sacrifice competence is crucial to fostering change that enhances performance (Ononye & Aloamaka, 2025). Based on the above, the first hypothesis was formed.

H₁: Gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance are positively related.

Organizational identity refers to employees' perceptions of their subordination to the organization (Miao et al., 2022). This cognitive self-definition connects employees to the organization, where commitment, satisfaction, and loyalty are essential to creating value for the organization. Employee identification indicates the strength of the psychological connection to the organization. Furthermore, the alignment of organizational values with employees' self-concept predicts work attitudes, behaviours, and performance. Employees who demonstrate a strong organizational identity often develop a strong sense of belonging, responsibility, commitment, and dependence on the organization. Drawing from the social identity theory, when gender equality is established as a core organizational value, it can serve as a motivator, intrinsically encouraging women to contribute to organizational growth and development. These employees feel that they share attributes and values with other members of the organization and, ultimately, fulfil their identity needs, including self-enhancement, self-continuity, and self-distinctiveness. (Chang et al., 2022). McMillan (2019) demonstrated that strategic choice shapes and reinforces employees' internal mindsets. Additionally, organizational support for individual consideration significantly influences organizational identity (Dinc et al., 2022). Leicht-Deobald et al. (2021) suggested that organizations should manage demographic faultlines to emphasize similarities and improve alignment with members' attributes, thereby strengthening organizational identity. High organizational identity, in turn, enhances organizational performance. Yang and Mostafa (2024) found that high-performance human resource practices, comprising policies designed to attract, retain, motivate, and develop employees, foster

employee commitment and performance through organizational identity. These findings suggest that women employed in organizations with effective gender-based HR policies are more likely to be psychologically invested in the organization, which increases their efforts to ensure organizational success. Based on this reasoning, the second hypothesis was developed.

H₂: Organizational identity mediates the positive relationship between gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance.

Organizational image refers to employees' perceptions of how others view the organization, which are influenced by tangible and intangible organizational elements and values. This externally constructed image shapes the impressions, knowledge, and beliefs individuals or groups hold about an organization and its members. It is modulated by direct interactions with the organization and by symbolic representations that convey insights into the firm's operations, sometimes in comparison with the competition. Image, as an evolving concept, can be developed and sustained when organizational policies align with stakeholders' demands and expectations, thereby fostering positive social exchanges between employees and organizations (Yan et al., 2022). In this way, an organization can build its image through deliberate efforts to communicate with and influence stakeholders (Aledo-Ruiz et al., 2022). A positive image is essential to an organization's ability to survive, compete, and succeed in dynamic environments. Gender diversity policies help manage the image-building process by signalling that the organization values gender inclusivity, thereby fostering a gender-diverse workforce (Rusu et al., 2023). A positive image of diversity contributes to organizational performance by attracting, retaining, and optimizing strategic resources (Yan et al., 2022). Studies have shown that organizational image mediates relationships involving firm performance. For instance, Hossin et al. (2021) found that organizational image mediates the link between perceived organizational support and sustainable organizational performance. Similarly, Arendt and Brettel (2010) indicated that corporate image building mediates the relationship between corporate social responsibility and corporate success. Arguably, firms are concerned with stakeholders' perceptions and may adopt supportive practices to build a positive image and promote firm performance. This argument led to the formulation of the third hypothesis.

H₃: Organizational image mediates the positive relationship between gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance.

A primary challenge for firms aiming to enhance organizational performance is maintaining a consistent image among key stakeholders. Organizational identity provides the foundation for building organizational image (Bidin et al., 2014; Foroudi et al., 2025). This link underscores the need for firms to implement strategies that reinforce their identity to build a favourable image among stakeholders. According to signalling theory, the adoption of gender-focused HR policies by firms communicates to employees, particularly women, that the organization provides equal opportunities, which serves the interests of all genders. External stakeholders also seek out signals that provide credible information regarding the firm's unobservable attributes. These signals shape stakeholders' perceptions of the firm, creating an image that can subsequently influence organizational performance in a dynamic business environment. Therefore, the serial mediation argument holds that organizational identity and image contextualize the link between gender-diversity HR policies and firm performance. The fourth hypothesis was put forward:

H₄: Organizational identity and image mediate the positive relationship between gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance.

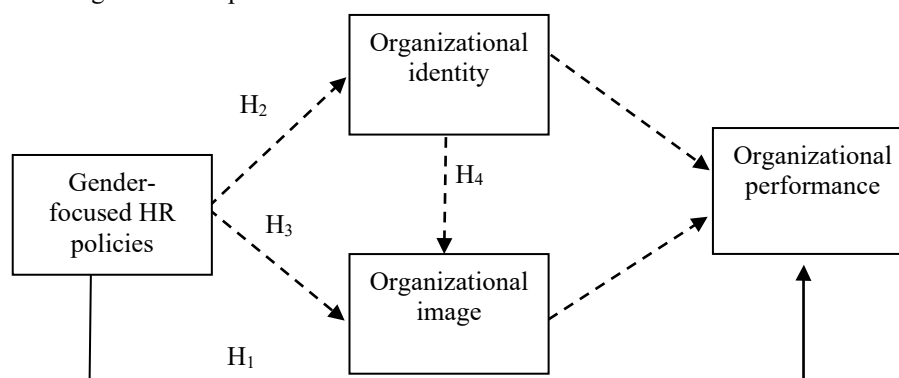


Figure 1 – Hypothesized Research Model

Figure 1 illustrates the link between gender-diversity HR policies and organization, with organizational identity and image acting as mediators, independently and sequentially. Here, the independent variable is gender-diversity HR policies, the dependent variable is organizational performance, and the mediating variables are organizational identity and image. The plain line represents the main effect, while the dashed lines represent the mediating effects.

III.METHODOLOGY

The main aim of the study was to investigate the link between gender-diversity HR policies and organization, with organizational identity and image acting as mediators, independently and sequentially. This quantitative cross-sectional survey collected data from mid-level management employees in commercial banks in Delta State, Nigeria, using a well-structured questionnaire. This was necessary to collect perceptual data in a sector that has a policy framework that supports gender diversity. Presumably, mid-level managers are familiar with top management's policy direction and cascade it to lower levels. A sample size of 176 was derived from a population of 313 using the Taro Yamane formula. Convenient sampling, a nonprobability sampling method, was used to select employees who had time to respond to the survey due to their demanding schedules. The limited available resources further justified the choice of this sampling method. It yielded 151 responses. Informed consent was obtained before questionnaire administration, which was conducted by the researchers from February to April 2025. The questionnaire cover letter stated the study's purpose, the anonymity of responses, and the voluntary nature of participation. The demographic characteristics of the 151 participants revealed that 85 were males (56.3%) and 66 were females (43.7%), with a mean age of 39.8 years and a mean tenure of 14.7 years. Regarding educational background, the minimum academic qualification was a graduate degree. The job position of the participants includes senior bank officer (76), assistant manager (41), deputy manager (23), and manager (11).

Previously validated scales were used to develop the 20-item questionnaire, rated on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The 7-item scale of gender-diversity HR policies was taken from Ali (2016) and Rusu et al. (2023). The study developed a 6-item scale to measure organizational identity, using questions from Leicht-Deobald et al. (2021) and Park and Back (2020). The 3-item scale for assessing corporate image was adapted from Aledo-Ruiz et al. (2022). Organizational performance was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from Udofia et al. (2021). A pilot study was conducted to evaluate the questionnaire's psychometric properties. Face validation was performed by a professor of business management and two managers from the target organization to assess comprehension, relevance, and conciseness. Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha. The scales for gender-focused HR policies (0.761), organizational identity (0.803), organizational image (0.775), and organizational performance (0.829) all exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70, demonstrating adequate construct reliability. See Appendix A for measurement items.

The partial least squares (PLS) method implemented in SmartPLS 4 was employed for data analysis and hypothesis testing. PLS is a suitable multivariate technique for studies with small sample sizes and predictive objectives about hypothesized relationships. A two-step procedure was applied: first, assess the measurement model for reliability and validity, and then test the structural model. The interpretation of results adhered to the guidelines established by Hair et al. (2021).

IV.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A preliminary assessment of the dataset's factorability was performed. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity (BTS), conducted using SPSS 20, confirmed the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Specifically, gender-focused HR policies (0.739, $p < 0.05$), organizational identity (0.673, $p < 0.05$), organizational image (0.684, $p < 0.05$), and organizational performance (0.714, $p < 0.05$) all exceeded the threshold of 0.60, indicating statistical significance. Reliability and validity of the measurement model were evaluated through confirmatory factor analysis.

In table 1, the mean values offer insights into employees' perceptions of the measured constructs. Agreement was notably high regarding the adoption of gender-focused HR policies (3.842). Employees reported a strong sense of organizational identity (3.771) and a favourable impression of organizational image (3.980). Additionally, organizational performance was rated highly (4.294) among the surveyed banks. All factor loadings (FLs) exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating strong item reliability. Composite reliability (CR) scores for each construct were above 0.70, confirming acceptable construct reliability. The average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct surpassed the recommended cut-off of 0.50, demonstrating adequate

convergent validity. According to the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the AVEs for each construct (bolded values) were higher than their interconstruct correlations (non-bolded values), supporting discriminant validity. The variance inflation factor (VIF) was used to assess multicollinearity among constructs. Hair et al. (2021) recommend VIF scores below 5 as acceptable, while Kock (2015) suggests that scores below 3.3 indicate insignificant common method bias. The results met these criteria, indicating no significant multicollinearity or common method bias.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and measurement model results

Items	M	SD	FL Range	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	VIF
1. Gender-focused HR policies	3.842	1.074	0.737 – 0.842	0.714	0.691	0.831				1.235
2. Organizational identity	3.771	0.948	0.793 – 0.869	0.752	0.644	0.252	0.802			1.086
3. Organizational image	3.980	0.877	0.762 – 0.801	0.786	0.711	0.387	0.409	0.843		1.808
4. Organizational performance	4.294	1.129	0.785 – 0.857	0.822	0.638	0.126	0.382	0.397	0.799	1.360

Note: M = mean, SD = standard deviation, FL = factor loadings, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted, VIF = variance inflation factor

Table 2. The structural model results

Paths	Std. β (p-value)	Remarks
Gender-focused HR policies \rightarrow organizational performance	0.161 (0.002)	Significant
Organizational identity \rightarrow organizational performance	0.405 (0.000)	Significant
Organizational image \rightarrow organizational performance	0.324 (0.000)	Significant
Gender-focused HR policies \rightarrow organizational identity	0.278 (0.000)	Significant
Gender-focused HR policies \rightarrow organizational image	0.350 (0.000)	Significant
Organizational identity \rightarrow organizational image	0.391 (0.000)	Significant
<i>Mediating effects</i>		
Gender-focused HR policies \rightarrow organizational identity \rightarrow organizational performance	0.117 (0.000)	Significant
Gender-focused HR policies \rightarrow organizational image \rightarrow organizational performance	0.102 (0.000)	Significant
Gender-focused HR policies \rightarrow organizational identity \rightarrow organizational image \rightarrow organizational performance	0.093 (0.003)	Significant
R^2	0.613	Moderate

Table 2 presents the structural model estimates for both direct and indirect effects. The bootstrap method, utilizing 5000 subsamples, was employed to determine the significance of the hypothesized paths. The partial least squares (PLS) results indicate that gender-focused HR policies are positively and significantly associated with organizational performance ($\beta = 0.161$, $p < 0.005$), thereby supporting H₁. The effective adoption of gender-focused HR policies may enhance organizational performance by fostering an environment in which women feel appreciated and valued, which in turn can motivate increased effort and resource commitment toward organizational goals. This finding aligns with Lee and Jung (2024), who reported that the implementation of gender equality HR policies positively affects firm performance. It is also consistent with previous studies (Galletta et al., 2022; Khatri, 2023; Pareek et al., 2023) that identified a positive relationship between gender diversity and firm performance, as gender diversity policies facilitate the development of a gender-diverse workforce. To examine the mediating roles of organizational identity and image, their relationships with gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance were first assessed. The results demonstrate that organizational identity ($\beta = 0.405$, $p < 0.005$) and organizational image ($\beta = 0.324$, $p < 0.005$) both contribute to enhanced organizational performance, and that gender-focused HR policies strengthen organizational identity ($\beta = 0.278$, $p < 0.005$) and image ($\beta = 0.350$, $p < 0.005$). The specific indirect effects further indicate that organizational identity mediates the positive relationship between gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance ($\beta = 0.117$, $p < 0.005$), leading to the acceptance of H₂. This result is consistent with Yang and Mostafa (2024), who found that high-performance HR practices improve organizational performance by developing and sustaining organizational identity. Thus, the implementation of gender inclusivity policies as a high-performance HR practice enables women to identify with the organization, as their values align with organizational objectives, thereby increasing their motivation to contribute to the achievement of desired goals.

Furthermore, the specific indirect effect demonstrates that organizational image mediates the positive relationship between gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance ($\beta = 0.102$, $p < 0.005$), thereby supporting H₃. The creation of a gender-diverse workforce remains a prominent societal concern. Organizations that address these evolving issues in practice tend to experience improvements in their externally constructed image, which in turn enhances their performance capacity. This finding is consistent with prior research highlighting the contextual significance of organizational image in the relationship between supportive organizational practices and firm performance. The sequential mediation of organizational identity and image was also examined. Prior to this analysis, the relationship between the two mediating constructs was assessed.

The results indicate that organizational identity serves as a foundation for organizational image ($\beta = 0.391$, $p < 0.005$), in agreement with Bidin et al. (2014) and Foroudi et al. (2025). Subsequent analysis confirmed that organizational identity and image sequentially mediate the relationship between gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance. This finding is consistent with signalling theory, which posits that gender-focused HR policies communicate the organization's commitment to gender diversity at both management and non-management levels. Such signals enhance employees' organizational identification by fostering a sense of support. Additionally, external stakeholders develop perceptions of the firm's supportiveness regardless of gender and disseminate them, thereby shaping the firm's externally constructed image. A positive external image is crucial for firms seeking strong performance, as it ensures alignment between organizational activities and evolving stakeholder expectations. Based on the R^2 value, the relationship between gender-focused HR policies, organizational identity, and organizational image moderately accounted for 61.3% of the variance in organizational performance, suggesting a good predictive power (Hair et al., 2021).

V.CONCLUSION

The study examined the link between gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance through the mediation of organizational identity and image. The results from the PLS analysis revealed that gender-focused HR policies positively and significantly elevate organisational performance, and this effect is mediated by the development and maintenance of organisational identity and image, independently and sequentially. The study concluded that the link between gender-focused HR policies and organizational performance can be explained by the interplay between organizational identity and image. The findings contribute to theoretical advancement by demonstrating that gender-focused human resource policies can enhance organizational performance. Previous research has primarily examined the relationship between board gender diversity and firm performance (Lee & Jung, 2024). Despite the ubiquity of this research, there remains a limited understanding of how this relationship develops in the Nigerian context (Ononye & Aloamaka, 2025). This study addresses this gap by providing contextual empirical evidence. Drawing on signalling theory, the research emphasizes the significance of organizational identity and image, highlighting that the perceptions of employees and stakeholders are crucial for fostering a positive relationship.

The findings contribute to practice by indicating that Nigerian firms, particularly commercial banks, should implement actionable gender-focused human resource policies that are consistently monitored and reviewed in line with global diversity and inclusivity standards. Management should engage with women employees to obtain insights on how to enhance support and foster organizational identification. Periodic training should be implemented to cultivate a culture that encourages inclusive behaviors. Additionally, recognizing gender diversity as a sustainable development goal in Nigeria, organizations should prioritize gender diversity initiatives to strengthen their organizational image, which is critical for sustaining high performance. As employees interact with a range of external stakeholders, collecting employee-perceived data can help identify areas for improvement. Treating this data collection as a strategic necessity is essential for firms aiming to enhance their competitive advantage in the Nigerian business environment.

Several limitations were identified in this study. The reliance on cross-sectional data restricts the ability to establish causal relationships, in contrast to longitudinal approaches. Future research should employ longitudinal or mixed method research designs to deepen analysis. Additionally, the use of convenience sampling introduces potential bias, which was addressed by informing participants of the survey's voluntary nature and by applying statistical controls. Employing probability sampling in future studies would further reduce bias. The organizational focus was confined to commercial banks in Delta State, Nigeria. Subsequent research should broaden the geographic scope and include both financial and non-financial institutions.

VI.APPENDIX A

Measurement Items

Gender-focused HR policies

1. My organization has an equal opportunity policy statement.
2. Formal HR policies are in place to promote anti-discriminatory practices (in terms of gender).
3. My organization implements HR initiatives designed to foster an inclusive workplace culture.
4. Diversity and inclusion training is provided to all members of my organization.
5. Employees in my organization generally perceive HR policies as fair and equitable.
6. In my organization, the HR policies reflect the interests of a gender-diverse workforce.
7. My organization regularly monitors and reviews HR policies to ensure alignment with best diversity

practices.

Organizational identity

1. I feel a strong sense of belonging to this organization.
2. Working for this organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me.
3. I have a lot in common with others in my organization.
4. I find that my values and the values of my organization are very similar.
5. I consider myself an integral member of this organization.
6. I am proud to tell others that I work for this organization.

Organizational image

1. I believe our stakeholders are quite satisfied with the way my organization operates.
2. Most people have a favourable opinion about our working environment.
3. My organization is a responsible member of the community.

Organizational performance

1. My organization has been profitable over the past 3 years.
2. There has been appreciable growth in market share over the past 3 years.
3. We have introduced innovative products to the market over the past 3 years.
4. Over the past 3 years, the products we have offered have been highly competitive.

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