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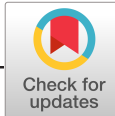
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The HR lady is on board: Untangling the link between HRM's feminine image and HRM's board representation

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Abstract

In this paper, we untangle the relationship between the HRM occupation's feminine image and the representation of the HRM function on executive boards. A Monte Carlo simulation analysis of 172 executive boards in Austria, Germany, France, Spain, and Sweden shows that women on boards are disproportionately often responsible for HRM and having a woman on the board corresponds to HRM being represented on the board. Additional exploratory analyses of country contexts indicate that this relationship is not universal. Considering several explanations for these country differences, we propose that institutional pressures promoting women's integration into boards is the main reason for the differences. Organisations yield to this pressure and reduce the anticipated performance risks by appointing women with function-specific experience to board positions responsible for HRM—a function perceived as matching women's stereotypically assumed talents.

KEYWORDS

executive board recruitment, gender, human resource manager, institutional pressure, women on boards

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1 | INTRODUCTION

For decades, a seat on the board has been considered the Holy Grail for HR managers as it signals a successful transition from an administrative to a more professional, strategic HRM function (Caldwell, 2011; Guest & King, 2004), higher status in work organisations, and potential power to influence strategic decisions (Brandl, Mayrhofer, & Reichel, 2008; Kochan, 2007; Provan, 1980). HRM also has a strikingly large share of women working in the field (Cohen, 2015; Kochan, 2007; Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2013). As the female presence has increased over the last decades (Reichel, Brandl, & Mayrhofer, 2010, 2013), HRM is seen as a female stronghold in male dominated management (Legge, 1987) and construed as women's work (Monks, 1993). Female-dominated gender demography and feminine image have consistently been shown as detrimental to gaining influence and power in organisations (Blau & Kahn, 2007; England, 2010; Pfeffer & Davis-Blake, 1987; Ridgeway, 2009). Thus, HRM's female domination and image limit its ability to attain status as a legitimate field, gain the desired seat on the board, and be strategically integrated as an organisational function (Pichler, Simpson, & Stroh, 2008; Reichel et al., 2013; Reichel, Brandl, & Mayrhofer, 2009).

Institutional pressure on organisations, however, can impact women's prospects for attaining powerful positions. Particularly, the literature discussing women on boards (WOBs) reveals that institutional pressure to enhance gender equality in top management confronts the exclusion of women from board positions and encourages organisations to appoint women to executive boards (Grosvold, Rayton, & Brammer, 2016; Iannotta, Gatti, & Huse, 2016; Mölders, Brosi, Bekk, Spörrle, & Welppe, 2018; Ng & Sears, 2017; Sheridan, Ross-Smith, & Lord, 2014; Terjesen, Aguilera, & Lorenz, 2015; Terjesen & Singh, 2008). Surprisingly, the WOB debate has largely neglected the potential dynamics between pressure for gender equality and gender distribution in specific organisational functions on the board. Nor does current WOB literature discuss how the gendered division of work among organisational functions affects the board representation of these functions. However, initial empirical findings hint at a concentration of WOB in the HRM function (Reichel et al., 2010), a pattern mirrored in media discourses addressing whether WOBs are concentrated in the supposedly stress-free HRM function as opposed to more demanding board functions (Handelsblatt, 2016).

For HRM, as a female-dominated function aiming at board representation, uncovering systematic links between institutional pressures, WOB, and a HRM presence on the board is highly relevant. If institutional pressures truly direct women into HRM positions on boards, this could challenge the widespread conviction of a generally negative relationship between the feminine image of the HRM occupation and the status of its members (Legge, 1987; Pichler et al., 2008; Roos & Manley, 1996; Scarborough, 2017). Against this background, we seek to untangle the link between the HRM's feminine image and HRM's board representation and to explore if and how contextual factors shape this relationship.

We examine a sample of 172 executive boards from five European countries (Austria, Germany, Spain, France, and Sweden) to quantitatively explore potential links between WOB's and HRM's board representation in varying contexts. Following an abductive research approach (Bamberger & Ang, 2016; Van de Ven, 2016), we first depict the patterns of female representation in the HRM function and the HRM function itself on boards across countries. After exploring possible explanations for these patterns, we argue that high gender-equality pressure can lead board selection committees to reduce perceived hiring risks by elevating HRM to a board function and assigning a woman into this position.

Our analyses display a robust statistical linkage between WOB and HRM representation on boards in all countries except Austria, where institutional pressure is comparatively low. Exploring country variations in board recruitment, we discover that hiring mechanisms for WOB strikingly differ between countries with high and low institutional pressures. Where institutional pressure is high, considerable numbers of WOB in HRM tend to have previous HRM experience and are promoted from a lower management level *within* the organisation. Appreciating this pattern in light of alternative explanations for board hiring, we develop the idea that institutional pressure compels

board selection committees to pay particular attention to reducing perceived performance risks arising from the institutionally demanded appointment of a female board member.

Our study makes three main contributions. *First*, we add to the research that socio-economic contexts for HRM in general and for the relation between large numbers of women in HRM and its status in particular (Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Brandl et al., 2008; Reichel et al., 2010). To achieve this, we explore the interaction of three factors: (a) Institutional pressure for WOB, (b) HRM as a traditional stronghold for women in management, and (c) Hiring considerations of board selection committees. *Second*, we complement research on factors facilitating an HRM presence on the executive board (Caldwell, 2011; Mullins, 2018; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005; Wächter & Müller-Camen, 2002) by theorising and providing data on why institutional pressure for gender equality can also contribute to HRM's board representation. *Third*, this is, to our knowledge, the first study that shows how institutional pressures to integrate WOB lead to horizontal segregation in particular board functions and offers a plausible explanation for how this outcome is produced.

2 | WOMEN ON BOARD—HRM ON THE BOARD?

The rise of institutional pressures promoting gender equality has been accompanied by policies that punish discriminatory action and encourage women's integration at the workplace (Chang, 2000). Policies targeted at women's participation in the highest levels of organisational decision-making appear effective for women's access to boardroom positions, as shown by WOB research that finds a positive association between institutional pressure on organisations to include women and their actual representation on boards (Doldor, 2017; Gabaldon, Mensi-Klarbach, & Seierstad, 2017b; Terjesen et al., 2015). WOB literature, however, is primarily concerned with female board membership in general and rarely goes into detail about which specific functions these WOB actually take over.

Both sociocultural and regulative factors proved significant for the positions women can reach in top management (Brieger, Francoeur, Welzel, & Ben-Amar, 2017; Gabaldon, Mensi-Klarbach, & Seierstad, 2017a; Inglehart & Norris, 2009). Drawing from literature on horizontal segregation and occupational ghettos (Charles & Grusky, 2004), one may well suspect that WOB are confined to certain board functions. There is strong evidence that institutional pressure can decrease vertical segregation (i.e., women and men being concentrated in different hierarchy levels) although we still find—partly exacerbated—horizontal segregation (i.e., women and men being concentrated in different fields). This is true for fields of study in tertiary education (Charles & Bradley, 2002), white collar occupations, and professions (Charles & Grusky, 2004; Correll, 2004; England, 2010; Ridgeway, 2009). These studies assert that horizontal segregation by occupations and academic fields is preserved by male and female stereotypes, that is, allocation of people to jobs is based on women's and men's assumed talents.

The HRM occupation is heavily female stereotyped. It is widely considered “an ideal job for women” (Gooch & Ledwith, 1996, p. 99) because as a “function dedicated to the management of people” (Gooch & Ledwith, 1996, p. 99), it is seen to match typical female qualities (Monks, 1993). For most of its existence since the early 20th century, HRM has been perceived as people-centred or even dedicated to employees' welfare. Thus, it is “a traditional stronghold of female employment” (Marshall, 1984, p. 115) characterised by a female-dominated gender demography (Roos & Manley, 1996; Ulrich et al., 2013). HRM is a function that strongly lends itself to female concentration not only on the employee level but also on the otherwise male-dominated management level (Legge, 1987).

At the same time, HRM is a function aiming for a seat on the board. This raises a question: In a context of institutional pressure, is the HRM's feminine image a possible path to both integrating women into top management and advancing the HRM function onto executive boards? Preliminary empirical data reveal a parallel increase in the number of women in HRM management positions and the HRM function's board representation (Reichel et al., 2010). There is complementary anecdotal evidence, for example, Adidas in 2017, for boards changing from no-women-no-HRM to a WOB responsible for HRM. Recognised media, such as the German F.A.Z.,

even cynically remark, “if women are appointed to executive boards at all, they are preferably entrusted with the personnel function, on the assumption—of course only expressed behind closed doors—that there they could cause the least harm”¹ (Löhr, 2015).

To theorise the relationship between women's and the HRM function's board representation, we asked whether organisations use the HRM function for promoting women onto boards in order to satisfy growing demands for enhancing gender equality in top management without giving up the traditional division of female and male work. Reichel et al. (2010) labelled this possibility the “strongest link” (p. 347). If the strongest link is truly an explanatory mechanism for appointing WOB, it could provide a possible pathway to how the HRM function gains board access. This is because organisations, in response to institutional pressures demanding WOB, might even create a seat responsible for the HRM function to accommodate a female board member “adequately,” that is, assigning her to a function that fits talents presumably found mainly in women. In the following section, we present results from an explorative quantitative analysis to provide further clues on whether the HRM's feminine image and female domination can actually be a path for HRM to come onto executive boards.

3 | EMPIRICAL EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S AND HRM'S BOARD REPRESENTATION

3.1 | Sample

We sampled 172 boards and 1,543 board members (including 240 women) from all companies listed in the main stock indices at the national stock exchanges in Austria (ATX prime),² France (CAC 40), Germany (DAX 30), Spain (IBEX 35), and Sweden (OMXS 30). We chose five countries from one geographical and political context (European Union), where gender equality is subject to public discourse and political debates. Even though the corporate governance systems differ among the countries (one-tier, two-tier and mixed), the legal regulations for board size and tenure³ are strikingly similar in the countries of our sample.

All these European countries have implemented anti-discrimination laws, and the majority of people share socio-cultural norms of equal opportunities for men and women. Table 1 sums up the countries' characteristics on institutional pressure and other board-related characteristics. To capture regulative pressures, we describe whether countries have quota regulations or not and how severe possible sanctions are. Austria and Sweden do not have any legal requirements for WOB, whereas Spain has a legal requirement without sanctions, and Germany has a legal regulation but only for the supervisory board. In France, if the quota set is not reached, board attendance fees are not paid out to the board members.

For depicting sociocultural pressures, we calculated the gender egalitarianism scale by Pampel (2011) using 2011–2015 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) data (ISSP, 2016), the jobs item from the gender equity score following Inglehart and Norris (2009) with data from the 2008/09 European Values survey (EVS, 2016), and the latest Eurobarometer's (2012) leadership item. In sum, all the countries show substantive levels of gender egalitarian values with some variation. Especially Sweden achieves very high values, followed by France. In Austria, on the other hand, the norm of gender equality is less pronounced. Germany's and Spain's values constitute the middle range in our sample.

3.2 | Method

Information on executive board members was collected through the stock exchanges' and the companies' official web pages in the first half of 2017. As we were interested only in board members with executive powers, we excluded independent and supervisory board members. We collaboratively developed a coding system that identified

TABLE 1 Institutional country characteristics

Context	Criteria	Source	AT	DE	ES	FR	SE
Regulative context	Corporate governance	Gabaldon, Mensi-Karbach, and Seierstad (2017)	Two-tier	Two-tier	One-tier	Mix	One-tier
	Statutory quota	Terjesen et al. (2015)	No	Yes 30% in supervisory board	Yes 40% by 2015	Yes 20% by 2014, 40% by 2017	No
	Introduction		-	Self-appointed targets by 2017 in executive board 2015	2007	2011	-
Sociocultural context	Sanctions	Terjesen et al. (2015)	None	Empty seat	None, companies that comply are favoured for public contracts	Empty seat, board attendance fee not paid out	None
	Gender egalitarianism scale (GES)	Following Pampel (2011) using ISSP 2011–2015 data (1 = low to 5 = high)	2.93	3.41	2.18	3.37	3.57
	Jobs item (reversed)	Following Inglehart and Norris (2009) Using EVS 2008/09 data	80.23%	85.14%	83.44%	86.66%	97.50%
	Leadership item	Eurobarometer, 2012	81%	89%	90%	90%	94%

Abbreviations: AT, Austria; DE, Germany; ES, Spain; EVS, European Values Study; FR, France; ISSP, International Social Survey Programme; SE, Sweden.

26 different categories of functional responsibilities on boards. The categories inductively emerged from the information collected on female executive board members' present and prior functional responsibilities. We coded the information using two independent coding processes with an intercoder agreement of 100%. The descriptive statistics in Table 2 reveal that given the considerable number of functions represented on boards, an extraordinarily high number of WOB are responsible for HRM.

For finding out if women are systematically taking over HRM in boards more frequently than by chance, we first had to create a distribution function representing assignment by chance. A function measuring statistical significance is necessary because we have to allow for each organisation in the sample having its own probability of a woman being responsible for HRM *by chance*, depending on board size and the number of WOB. We created the function with a stochastic simulation using the Monte Carlo method of grouped sampling with repetition, employing firm-specific probabilities (Hodges & Le Cam, 1960; Sawilowsky, 2003). The Monte Carlo method is a simulation procedure established for statistical testing when other methods are not possible due to restrictions in the data or when variables are interdependent by design (Dezsó, Ross, & Uribe, 2016). It has been applied to small data sets in management research (Preacher & Selig, 2012) and to account for the role of context (Fletcher, Bailey, & Gilman, 2018; Peretz, Fried, & Levi, 2018). Using the firm-specific probabilities that a woman is responsible for HRM (which equals the proportion of WOB), we randomly drew one board member for representing HRM from each organisation and calculated the sum of women drawn from all organisations. Repeating this procedure 10 million times for the whole sample creates a distribution function of the probabilities of a woman on the executive board being responsible for HRM when the assignment is just as likely as for any other member on the board.

3.3 | Results

Figure 1 illustrates the probability distribution of WOB responsible for HRM when the function is assigned randomly to a board member, that is, each person on the board (woman or man) had the same chance of being responsible for HRM, assuming HRM is represented on the board. The corresponding summary statistics are below the graph. The x-

TABLE 2 Sample characteristics

Country	Index	AT	DE	ES	FR	SE	Total
		ATX Prime	DAX 30	IBEX 35	CAC 40	OMXS 30	
Organisations	Total	38	30	35	40	30	
	Boards ⁷	38	30	35	40	29	172
	Board members	138	198	303	571	333	1543
	Board size (median)	3	7	8	12	10	8
WOB (executive positions)	Total	7	27	36	92	78	240
	In percentage	5.07%	13.64%	11.88%	16.11%	23.42%	15.55%
	Median	0	1	1	2	2	1
	In percentage	0.00%	14.29%	9.09%	14.84%	22.22%	12.50%
WOB in HRM	Total	2	9	8	13	13	45
	In percentage	28.57%	33.33%	22.22%	14.13%	16.67%	18.75%

Abbreviations: AT, Austria; DE, Germany; ES, Spain; FR, France; SE, Sweden., WOB, women on board.

^aThe OMXS 30 includes 30 organisations and 29 executive boards, as one company is listed twice in the index.

axis depicts the number of WOB responsible for HRM; the y-axis gives the probability shown as a count in 10 million trials. The simulated distribution (grey bars) shows the probability for each value. The median value of WOB responsible for HRM (dotted line) represents the expected value, contrasted with the dashed line representing the actually observed value of WOB responsible for HRM. An approximated normal distribution is shown with a line matching the simulated distribution.

For testing if WOB are significantly over-represented in the HRM function, we compare the expected number of women being responsible for HRM (if women's likelihood of being responsible for HRM was just as high as being responsible for any other function), with the observed number of WOB doing HRM. The observed value of 45 WOB responsible for HRM appeared only four times in 10 million trials! The probability that 45 or more WOB are responsible for HRM by chance is tiny ($\text{prob}_{\text{sim}} = 8.00\text{e} - 06$). The effect is very strong (Cohen's $d = 5.37$) and robust (we conducted an exact binomial test using the parameters of our simulation, approximated the p -value using the normal distribution, and conducted a one-sided t -test with the values of the simulation and all three tests confirmed the results).

To account for contextual variation, we repeated the simulation with one million replications for each country. Figure 2 depicts the probability distributions for each country analogous to Figure 1. For all countries except Austria, the median value is at least twice as high as the observed value. In France ($\text{prob}_{\text{sim}} = 0.005$, $d = 2.968$), Sweden ($\text{prob}_{\text{sim}} = 0.005$, $d = 2.934$), and Germany ($\text{prob}_{\text{sim}} = 0.006$, $d = 3.086$), WOB are significantly over-represented in the HRM function. For Spain ($\text{prob}_{\text{sim}} = 0.03$, $d = 2.151$), the effect is less pronounced. For Austria, the median value equals the observed value ($\text{prob}_{\text{sim}} = 0.638$, $d = 0.052$) indicating that women in Austrian boards are not found in HRM to a higher extent than through random assignment.

As a robustness check, we ran the analysis excluding boards where HRM is currently not represented. The probabilities that the observed number of women in HRM is happening by chance are even smaller in this simulation ($\text{prob}_{\text{sim}} = 0.000$, $d = 7.632$), indicating that boards without HRM might be without women and vice versa. We therefore investigated the relationship between WOB and HRM represented on boards, using a logistic regression with HRM on board as the dependent variable and a dichotomous WOB variable as an explanatory variable, controlling for country fixed-effects and board size. Austria became our reference country, as it is the country that did not show a disproportionately high number of WOB in HRM. From the sample of 172 boards in the five countries, 31 boards had to be excluded, as information on HRM board representation was either missing or unclear. The results in Table 3 show a strong relationship between the two variables at the organisational level. One is 3.7 times more likely to find HRM on a board with at least one female board member ($p < .01$, Model 1). This direct effect is not significant when we control for country fixed-effects (Model 2), supporting the relevance of institutional contexts for both

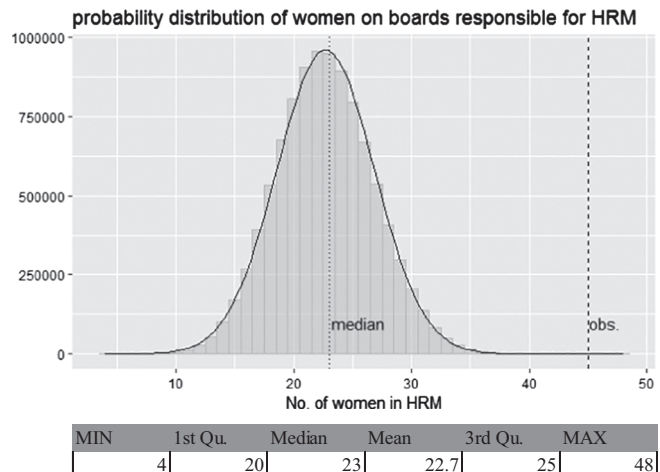


FIGURE 1 MC simulation results (full sample)

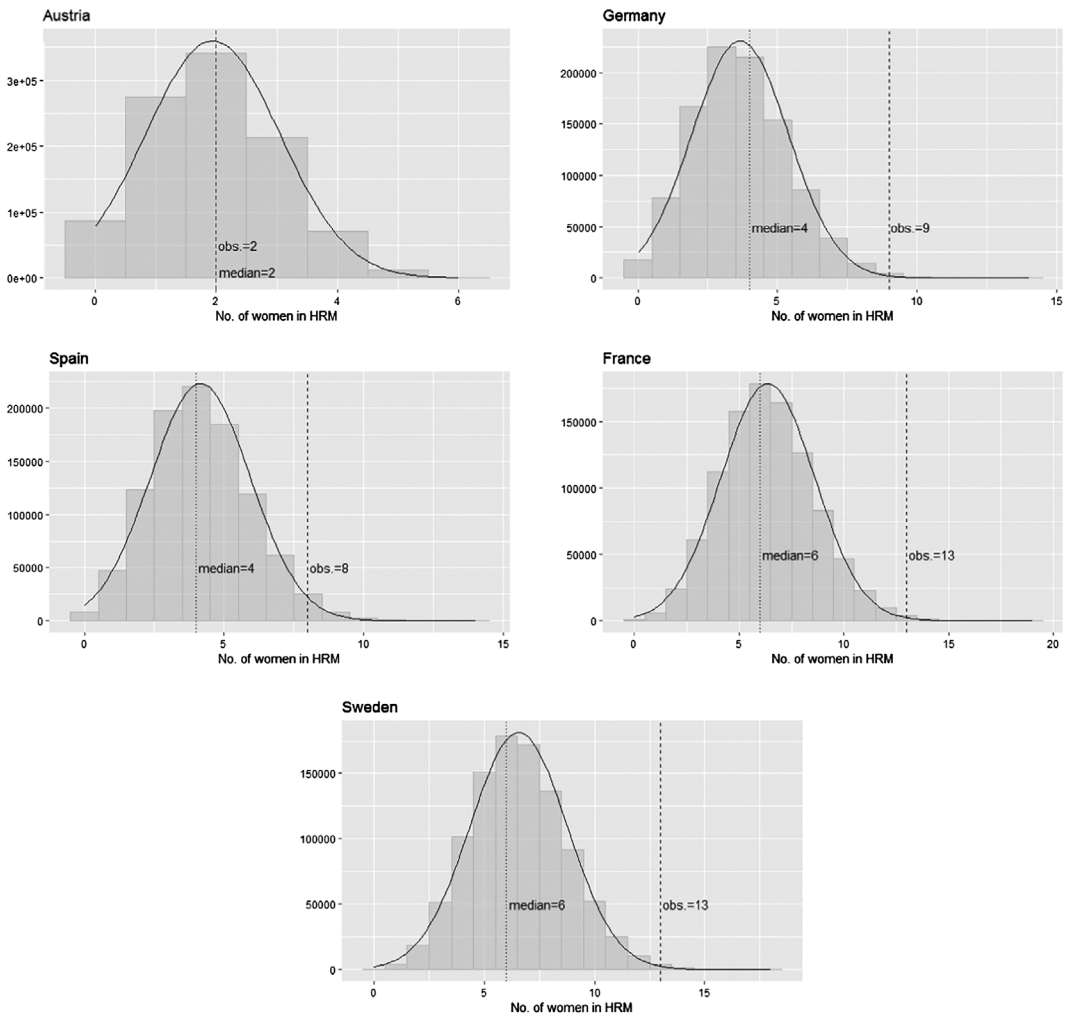


FIGURE 2 MC simulation results by country

women's and HRM's board representation. These country effects, however, are weakened when we control for board size. An increase in board size by one unit increases the odds of HRM being on the board by a factor of 1.18 ($p < .01$), whereas a woman on board increases the likelihood of HRM being on the board by a factor of 1.52 (Model 3). As a robustness check, we ran the regression using two different quota measures, the gender egalitarian scale (Pampel, 2011) and the women-in-leadership item from the Eurobarometer (2012) instead of country fixed-effects, with results similar in size and direction but with a limited model fit. We also recalculated the regression using different WOB measures: the share of WOBs and the absolute number of WOBs with similar results. Our results show that women's board representation is indeed linked to HRM's representation on the executive board and, country contexts and board size both affect the model, suggesting that an HRM board position might be created specifically for a WOB in the HRM function.

Investigating the relationship between board size and country context, we ran a number of additional robustness checks. First, we considered interaction effects of WOB and country, which show that the relationship between WOB and HRM board representation is significant for Germany ($\beta = 1.320$, $p < .05$), Spain ($\beta = 2.770$, $p < .05$), and France ($\beta = 1.890$, $p < .01$) but not for Austria and Sweden. These two countries apparently have too little variation

TABLE 3 Results of logistic regression

	Dependent variable: HRM on board		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
WOB	1.308*** (0.430)	0.654 (0.632)	0.418 (0.638)
Country DE		0.821 (0.711)	0.446 (0.737)
Country ES		2.537** (1.183)	1.550 (0.127)
Country FR		1.521** (0.734)	0.349 (0.903)
Country SE		0.348 (0.746)	-0.674 (0.899)
Board size			0.166** (0.083)
Constant	0.125 (0.354)	-0.203 (0.396)	-0.754 (0.486)
Observations	141	141	141
Log likelihood	-75.534	-70.068	-67.57
AIC	155.069	152.136	149.139

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike information criterion; DE, Germany; ES, Spain; FR, France; SE, Sweden; WOB, women on board.
* $p < .1$.; ** $p < .05$.; *** $p < .01$.

in WOB (in Austria there are not enough WOBs, whereas in Sweden there is no board without women). Second, the interaction effects of board size and country show that the board-size and HRM-on-board relationship strongly depends on the country context and is not significant for Austria. The relationship is strongest for Spain ($\beta = 0.325$, $p < .01$), followed by Germany ($\beta = 0.268$, $p < .05$) and France ($\beta = 0.232$, $p < .01$), and less strong (but still significant) for Sweden ($\beta = 0.143$, $p < .1$). These effect variations for board size by country suggest that women and HRM are more often represented on large boards, but the relationship between board size and the presence of both WOB and HRM on boards is context-dependent. Third, hierarchical linear modelling reveals that ~10% of the total variation in HRM on boards can be located at the country level (see Table 4), stressing the role of the institutional context.

The hierarchical model in Table 4 also reveals that when using country as a grouping variable, board size has a much weaker and less robust effect ($\beta = 0.010$, $p < .1$) on HRM on board than WOB has ($\beta = 0.190$, $p < .05$) compared to the models in Table 3. This difference in board-size effect between the hierarchical models in Table 4 ($\beta = 0.010$, $p < .1$) and the regression results in Table 3 ($\beta = 0.166$, $p < .05$) suggests that board size is a variable at least partly located at the country level. We therefore calculated the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for board size and found that as much as 27.21% of the variation in board size is found at the country level. Board size varies strongly by the countries in our sample and is influenced by institutional contexts (e.g., two-tier boards have much fewer members than one-tier boards).

In sum, the exploratory data analyses have revealed a complex picture. On the one hand we see a very clear and surprisingly strong representation of women in HRM at the board level, despite the low levels of representation of women in boards in general. Furthermore, we find a general effect of (at least one) woman on the board and HRM's likelihood to be represented on the board. However, these results are not universal but context-dependent. Further analysis indicates that board size, WOB, and HRM-on-board effects are partly found at the country level and even the effect magnitudes among the three is subject to country variation.

4 | UNTANGLING POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR WOMEN'S AND HRM'S BOARD REPRESENTATION

While the overall picture based on the full sample clearly shows a systematic concentration of WOB in HRM and a statistical relationship between HRM on board and WOB, our more differentiated contextual analyses reveal important country differences. Austria especially deviated from the other countries, as the very limited number of WOB

TABLE 4 Results of hierarchical linear regression

	Dependent variable: HRM on board			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Intercept	0.748*** (0.071) <i>t</i> = 10.48	0.573*** (0.090) <i>t</i> = 6.379	0.638*** (0.086) <i>t</i> = 8.386	0.502*** (0.086) <i>t</i> = 5.856
Level 1:				
WOB		0.223** (0.096) <i>t</i> = 2.317		0.190** (0.095) <i>t</i> = 2.002
Board size			0.011** (0.005) <i>t</i> = 2.129	0.010* (0.005) <i>t</i> = 1.878
Level 2:				
Level 2 variance	0.01916	0.006418	0.00987	0.002676
Residual variance	0.17137	0.17093	0.16934	0.169134
ICC	10.06%	3.61%	5.51%	1.56%
Observations	141	141	141	141
Log likelihood	-79.24	-77.323	-77.283	-75.704
AIC	164.48	162.646	162.567	161.409
BIC	173.326	174.441	174.362	176.153

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike information criterion; BIC, Bayesian information criterion; ICC, intraclass correlation coefficient; WOB, women on board.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

hold various functions not concentrated in HRM. This (unexpected) pattern leaves us with questions about the relevance of contextual variations between the countries. To generate ideas on how women's and HRM's board representation are shaped by country context, we examined alternative explanations that may account for our results. Specifically, we considered country differences in practices for board staffing and the labour supply of suitable HRM women as possible explanations for the contextual variation between countries. To this end, we collected additional data on WOB for identifying plausible explanations (see Table 5). Information on women working in and leading HRM departments was calculated using the latest Cranet survey data.⁴

Exploring board staffing, we find that in Germany, Spain, France, and Sweden, WOB responsible for HRM are mainly recruited internally from the management level below the board. Not all WOB responsible for HRM were recruited from an HRM position to the board. However, the percentage of female board members with experience in the respective function immediately before their board appointment is much higher in HRM than in other board functions.

Thus, the pattern of internally recruiting board members with experience in the respective function is fairly common for HRM board directors but rather uncommon for directors in other functions. Cappelli (2006) shows that previous work experience in the organisation and in the respective function is not central for hiring, as board positions tend to be filled through networks beyond the specific organisation. Board member characteristics reflect the organisation's external resource dependencies rather than internal functional requirements (Hillman, Shropshire, & Cannella, 2007).

Staffing decisions are generally risky—external recruitment more than internal. Quigley, Hambrick, Misangyi, and Rizzi (2019) argue that externally hired board members are more likely to generate extreme performance outcomes, so organisations see them as risky hires compared to internally hired candidates. Based on these findings, we argue that board selection committees are concerned about the performance of a female board member. The perceived risk is especially pronounced because top management positions are incongruent with stereotypical, female social roles, according to role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Assigning an experienced internal female HR manager to the HRM board function helps to mitigate the risk associated with staffing WOBs in two ways. First, it matches the women's board function with their actual management experience and stereotypical roles within top management (Legge, 1987). Second, it counteracts the risk of extreme—possibly negative—performance outcomes associated with hiring board members externally. We suggest that these two considerations combined can explain how selection committees establish the HRM function on the board and why they allocate WOB to HRM.

An alternative explanation for this pattern could be that board selection committees *generally* (independent of gender issues) prefer internal candidates to external candidates when establishing the HRM function on boards (e.g., because HRM requires familiarity with the specific organisation's workforce). We can neither directly test this explanation with our data nor turn to existing literature as this issue has not been considered yet. Such an explanation (for an allocation of women to the HRM board function), however, would require that in countries with disproportionately high numbers of female HRM board members, the vast majority of organisations have female HRM department heads and this surplus is just transferred from the B- to the C-level. Country-level data on HRM department heads in Table 5, however, show that this is not the case. Our explanation instead suggests that the pattern is not specific for particular functional responsibilities, but for reducing risks related to integrating female board members. This implies that the explanation is transferable to other board functions that are linked to stereotypical female social roles (e.g., Corporate Communication).

Also, the alternative mechanism explained above does not match the findings for WOB/board staffing in Austria, where the extremely few WOB having board functions are not concentrated in HRM. Exploring whether a lack of women heading HRM departments may account for this pattern, as a labour-supply perspective suggests, we find country differences for female HRM department heads, but the share of women is *not* significantly lower in Austria than in the other countries⁵ (see Table 5). A qualified labour supply, therefore, seems insufficient to account for the differences between boards in Austria and other countries. WOB in Austria are rare and not confined to HRM, although HRM's occupational gender demography does not differ from the other countries. Thus, risk-reduction considerations for WOB do not seem to be universal. This response is plausible where organisations face institutional pressure for including WOB, that is, in Germany, Spain, France, and Sweden.⁶ In Austria, by contrast, the relatively low pressure for gender equality implies that for board selection there is no need for risk-reducing behaviour for WOB, that is, the suggested mechanism does not apply.

In sum, our reasoning and exploration of additional data strengthen the idea that the risk-reducing hiring considerations for WOB are employed in socio-economic contexts where organisations face pressure to integrate women into their boards. Strong statistical explanatory power of the country context even for firm-level variables provides additional evidence for this mechanism as the most plausible explanation for our results. In countries with high gender-equality pressure, we suggest that board selection committees reduce perceived risks by (a) choosing HRM as the board function that best fits female work stereotypes and (b) appointing an internal female candidate to the board in a function where she has already proven herself. This alleviates the committees' misgivings in appointing women as board members. The career path of Janina Kugler, Siemens' board member responsible for HRM, exemplifies this mechanism. Because HRM is one of the few (or the only) function in which women could demonstrate their management qualities in the past, allocating WOB to HRM counts as a *safe* decision concerning the performance risks of female hires while allowing organisations to numerically comply with the demands for gender equality.

TABLE 5 WOB recruitment by country

Country	AT	DE	ES	FR	SE	Total
Absolute number of WOB by country	All	27	36	92	78	240
	HRM	9	8	13	13	45
Previous experience in the same function	All	37.8%	27.3%	31.1%	42.7%	34.7%
	HRM	77.8%	62.5%	61.5%	53.8%	62.2%
Internally recruited	All	74.1%	55.6%	58.7%	43.6%	54.2%
	HRM	77.8%	62.5%	38.5%	38.5%	51.1%
Recruitment from executive board level	All	42.9%	19.4%	19.6%	7.7%	18.3%
	HRM	100.0%	11.1%	37.5%	38.5%	26.7%
Recruitment from politics or other non-business context	All	0.0%	3.7%	7.6%	5.1%	6.3%
	HRM	0.0%	0.0%	15.4%	0.0%	4.4%
Recruitment from head of department	All	14.3%	25.9%	23.9%	34.6%	29.2%
	HRM	0.0%	44.4%	30.8%	46.2%	40.0%
Women's proportion in HRM departments	Mean	70.9%	69.6%	63.7%	72.6%	72.0%
	CI 95%	64.5%–77.2%	64.0%–75.1%	53.6%–73.8%	64.2%–81.0%	69.1%–74.9%
Women's proportion of HRM department heads	Mean	40.5%	28.2%	32.8%	52.8%	48.4%
	CI 95%	32.6%–48.5%	21.1%–35.3%	21.0%–44.6%	42.4%–63.2%	45.3%–51.6%

Abbreviations: AT, Austria; CI, confidence interval; DE, Germany; ES, Spain; FR, France; SE, Sweden; WOB, women on board.

5 | DISCUSSION

Board membership is important for facilitating the HRM's influence on strategic decision making. In the past, women were largely excluded from board positions due to the board's lack of fit with female work stereotypes. Now institutional pressures for gender equality could cause a break with the long-standing exclusion of WOB (Gros vold et al., 2016; Iannotta et al., 2016; Terjesen et al., 2015; Terjesen & Singh, 2008). However the division of work between men and women continues even in highly gender-egalitarian socio-economic contexts (Busch & Holst, 2011; Charles & Grusky, 2004). With these factors in mind, we explored the data of 172 executive boards from five European countries for revealing patterns between the board function to which WOB are assigned and HRM's board representation. We showed that women are not only very strongly and systematically often represented in HRM board level positions, but also that the presence of a woman on board is strongly associated with the inclusion of the HRM function on the board. We collected additional data on board hiring. These revealed that WOB tend to be recruited internally, and their previous work experience was in HRM positions.

Appreciating this pattern, we developed the idea that institutional pressure directs board selection committees to reduce their perceived risk by appointing a woman they know to the board in a function where she has already proven herself. Perceived performance risks from appointing a female board member are thus believed to be minimised. Such risk-reducing hiring considerations and the supporting data plausibly explain how boards respond to institutional pressure for WOB and why institutional pressure can stimulate the HRM's board representation.

Concerning contributions to the literature, our study strengthens doubts about universalistic explanations for the relation between HRM as a traditional female stronghold and HRM's status in organisations. It notes the importance of the socio-economic context for shaping this relationship and adds to the emerging body of research that has started to investigate the influence of institutional pressure on HRM's status (Brandl et al., 2008; Gooderham, Mayrhofer, & Brewster, 2019; Reichel et al., 2010). It further elaborates the argument that organisations tend to comply with regulative and sociocultural pressure for gender equality by assigning women to functions that fit female work stereotypes (strongest-link effect). Although HRM is strongly perceived as feminine and thus offers the strongest functional link between women and boards, our analysis of WOB profiles suggests that board selection committees do not simply follow female work stereotypes when they align WOB to the HRM function but also draw on women's previous work experience. We therefore suggest that the strongest-link effect is based on the board selection committees' risk-reducing hiring approach, handling concerns with the WOB's individual performance by assigning her to a board function in which she already has a proven record at a lower management level. Importantly, this mechanism does not rule out the influence of role congruity for filling board positions. Instead it gives more weight to the historically-grown occupational composition that emerged from stereotypes of female work.

Our study also enriches the debate on enablers and constraints of HRM's formal power in organisations and its presence on the executive board. The discussion has mainly looked at the importance of HR (Caldwell, 2011; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005) and codetermination regulation in specific industries (Wächter & Müller-Camen, 2002). By suggesting and providing evidence that board selection committees handle performance doubts by matching female board candidates to their previous responsibilities, we propose that HRM board representation is also a (possibly unintended) consequence of how organisations respond to uncertainties in specific socio-economic contexts.

Moreover, we believe our findings of the functional allocation of women are also relevant to WOB research more broadly. As the first effort, to our knowledge, to integrate institutional pressures for WOB with the functional specialisation of WOB, our study gives evidence and suggests an explanatory mechanism of how work division between men and women manifests itself in the boardroom. In doing so, our study builds a much-needed bridge between the literature on horizontal segregation, women's access to top management, and recruiting processes in contexts of institutional pressure. Our suggestion that board selection committees may respond to institutional pressures for gender equality by a risk-reducing approach to hiring female board members differs from board hiring processes in the United States, where scholars find that organisations hire board members externally (Cappelli, 2006) or argue that organisations employ women to strengthen external ties (Hillman et al., 2007). In our study, the latter

hiring mechanisms are not in place where organisations face institutional pressure to accommodate WOB. This result suggests further that *prima facie* firm-level aspects (e.g., board size) might have to be considered at the national level when part of the variation can be explained by the contexts studied here.

Concerning limitations, like much WOB literature, we have biases in our sample, because we concentrated our analysis on five countries and organisations publicly listed in the main index of the stock exchange to obtain the necessary information. The country-cases studied were handpicked to represent variation in institutional contexts; we recommend replication using larger samples (countries and organisations). Because publicly listed organisations tend to receive more media attention than other organisations and such attention influences board committees in multiple ways, we cannot draw any general conclusions (e.g., that organisations generally apply a risk-reducing hiring response where institutional pressure prevails or that the HRM function generally benefits from this mechanism). Additionally, we are aware that we elaborated the explanatory mechanisms for HRM's board representation based on the statistical relationship between WOB and HRM on board in certain institutional contexts and the exploration of additional data on the hired WOB. Therefore, we cannot infer any causal links but only offer what we regard as the most plausible explanation for the underlying mechanisms that caused these outcomes.

Our study yields several fruitful avenues for follow-up research. First, we suggest studying the underlying mechanisms in the appointment of board members more directly by analysing the decision-making processes of board selection committees. If our expectation of risk-reduction being a response to pressures for gender equality is plausible, we would find this mechanism in committee members' examinations on female board candidates, but less on male ones. And, we would find differing organisational paths for female board candidates in settings with high and low institutional pressures. Such research would benefit from qualitative study designs in the tradition of ethnomethodology (e.g., Bolander & Sandberg, 2013). There is a second avenue to use our theoretical ideas. That is to address the question, In which *other* occupations is the negative link between female functional dominance and the function's organisational status eroding? The strongest-link effect can be useful for explaining women's career prospects in top management, for example in the field of marketing and communication, and in legal affairs/compliance. Such studies could also inform research aiming to explain how organisations respond to pressures when allocating WOB into certain functions. A third avenue emerging from the prominent role of institutional pressures is investigating the consequences of assigning women to the HRM function on the executive board. If organisations intend to minimise perceived performance risks by matching WOB with traditionally female management functions, classic research on tokenism (e.g., Kanter, 1977) could help develop alternative scenarios on how realistic this objective is. Aside from the performance of the individual WOB herself, it is interesting to examine employee reactions to a female-work-stereotypical functional assignment. Elaborating on experimental research of how employer attractiveness varies with the function female executives hold (Iseke & Pull, 2017) is a good starting point here, as this research suggests that female HR board members send negative (!) signals about equal career opportunities to men and women in the organisation.

The patterns of women on executive boards identified in our study also have practical implications. For HRM occupational associations, our finding that institutional pressures help the HRM function to get a seat on the executive board implies that it is wise to support political initiatives for gender equality in the top management of business organisations. HRM could then influence corporations' employment strategies more profoundly. For WOB, the predominance of female managers in HRM over other functions suggests that specialising in areas relevant to HRM is a good choice for female students and practitioners who are considering a position on the executive board. Finally, for policymakers, our findings suggest that oftentimes heavily disputed regulations decrease vertical segregation, but horizontal segregation by gender is found even at the top-management level. If policy makers aim for equal opportunity vertically *and* horizontally, constraining selection committees' discretion by also regulating the functions women must take over on the board would very likely meet strong resistance from organisations. Thus, providing incentives to decrease the stereotypical staffing of femininely construed work is probably the more promising way to decrease horizontal segregation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no conflict of interest to declare.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Original quote: "Auch Frauen werden, so sie denn mal in einen Vorstand berufen werden, bevorzugt mit dem Personalressort betraut, in der—natürlich nur hinter vorgehaltener Hand geäußerten—Annahme, dort könnten sie am wenigsten Schaden anrichten." Löhr (2015).
- ² Including the Austrian Traded Index Prime market due to the small sample size
- ³ Corporate governance codes concerning board tenure are similar—the legal maximum is 4 years (Sweden), 5 years (Austria and Germany), and 6 years (Spain and France). All countries allow re-election. Concerning board size, Germany and France set formal minima (one board member) for executive boards, Spain and Sweden set minima for the complete board with three members, and France sets a maximum for two-tier boards only—OECD (2017).
- ⁴ Cranet is an international research network dedicated to analysing developments in HRM in public and private sector organisations with more than 200 employees in a national, cross-national, and quasi-longitudinal way since 1989 (see also www.cranet.org). Sample size for the 2017 survey: Austria (229), Germany (278), Spain (98), France (158), and Sweden (291) (Cranet, 2017, p. 10).
- ⁵ In Austria about 40% of HRM department heads are women, whereas in Germany and Spain only around 30% of second level HRM directors are women. More than half of the HRM department heads are female in France and Sweden (see Table 5).
- ⁶ Austria clearly differs from the other countries in the level of institutional pressure organisations face to include WOB. Austria and Sweden are the only countries with no quota at the time of data gathering, Sweden however shows very high values on all measures of sociocultural pressure whereas Austria's values are lowest in the group of countries assessed.

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