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# Bridging the divide: How HR policy framing shapes Gen Z attitudes toward workplace gender equality

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**Abstract:** This study examines how the framing of organizational gender-equity policies shapes support among Generation Z employees. Drawing on performativity (Butler, 1990) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), we conceptualize framing as mediating how Gen Z employees perceive equity initiatives. Using a mixed-methods design, we combine survey data from 4,861 Gen Z respondents in 30 countries with directed content analysis of four HR policy documents (coded for equity vs enforcement, identity recognition, and youth engagement). Results reveal a gender gap: Gen Z women strongly endorse inclusive equity measures, consistent with evidence that women show stronger support for equality policies, whereas Gen Z men are more skeptical of policies framed as exclusive or punitive – mirroring polls finding many Gen Z men say equality efforts have gone too far. These findings suggest that performative policy framing activates social identities differently by gender and that intersectional policy language affects reception. Practically, we recommend framing equity initiatives in terms of shared fairness and collective benefit, using transparent rationale and inclusive identity language. Gen Zers expect fair pay, inclusive policies, and transparency, so HR communications should emphasize fairness and allyship to enhance legitimacy and support among this cohort.

**Keywords:** gender equality; policy framing; Generation Z; performativity; intersectionality; HR practices

## 1. Introduction

Despite decades of efforts, substantial gender gaps persist in leadership and compensation (Joshi et al., 2015; Kaiser & Spalding, 2015). Globally, women hold only 26.9% of parliamentary seats and, on average, earn roughly 16–20% less than men. (World Economic Forum, 2023). These disparities extend into organizations: women remain underrepresented in senior roles and often face pay inequity (McKinsey & Company, 2024). Unpaid care responsibilities – with women doing far more domestic work – further hinder women’s career advancement and underscore the need for supportive HR policies (OECD, 2023). Alarming, the World Economic Forum (2024) projects that at the current pace, it will take 131 years to close the overall gender gap. Such projections contrast starkly with many organizations’ declared goals of gender equity and highlight the urgency of effective action.

Generation Z – those born roughly 1997–2012 – is now entering the workforce in large numbers. This cohort is widely described as the most diverse and socially conscious generation yet (Schroth, 2019). Many Gen Z employees demand that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) be treated as “non-negotiable pillars” of an organization rather than mere buzzwords (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Indeed, a Monster poll of over 1,400 Gen Z young adults found a staggering 99% said workplace DEI is

important (87% “very important”). And it also revealed 83% of Gen Z candidates consider a prospective employer’s DEI commitment when deciding where to work (Monster, 2023). These statistics underscore that Gen Z cares deeply about fairness and inclusion.

However, Gen Z is not monolithic in its views. Emerging research reveals sharp gender divides in Gen Z attitudes toward gender equality initiatives. For instance, a 2025 global survey (Ipsos, 2025) found 53% of Gen Z women versus only 32% of Gen Z men identify as feminists. In the same study, 57% of Gen Z men (versus 36% of Gen Z women) agreed that society’s efforts to promote women’s equality have “gone so far that they discriminate against men”. Paradoxically, roughly two-thirds of all Gen Z (men and women combined) say gender equality is personally important. In other words, while most Gen Z values fairness, young men and women often disagree on whether specific policies are necessary or overstepping (Buchanan et al., 2021).

This intra-generational divide has practical implications for organizations. Gen Z employees’ attitudes can affect team dynamics, policy compliance, and retention (Roberson, 2019). A Gen Z worker who strongly supports an equity initiative may become an internal advocate, improving awareness and uptake of the policy (Plaut et al., 2018). Conversely, a Gen Z employee who perceives equity programs as a zero-sum threat may resist training, express disengagement, or even generate workplace tension (Dover et al., 2020). In an era of heightened sensitivity to social justice issues, understanding these differing perceptions is critical. Policy framing may be the key to closing this gap. Research shows that framing diversity initiatives in mutually beneficial terms can reduce majority-group defensiveness (Apfelbaum et al., 2016). For example, emphasizing that gender-equity policies benefit everyone—by building a fair and inclusive culture—can mitigate misperceptions that only one group gains, whereas one-sided or punitive framing can inadvertently signal a zero-sum game and heighten resistance (Plaut, 2009).

In organizations, human resource management (HRM) plays a pivotal role in how gender equality efforts are designed and experienced by employees (Kulik & Metz, 2017). HR policies – from recruitment and promotion guidelines to codes of conduct and benefits – effectively “perform” gender norms in the workplace (Butler, 1990). Drawing on Judith Butler’s concept of performativity, we recognize that policy language is not neutral: it sends messages about whose identities are acknowledged and whose needs are prioritized. For example, a parental leave policy that explicitly offers equal leave to all parents (regardless of gender) performs an egalitarian norm, whereas one that assumes mothers as primary caregivers can reinforce traditional gender roles (Williams et al, 2013). Similarly, policies that explicitly include transgender and nonbinary employees (e.g., offering transition support or use-of-pronoun guidelines) validate those identities, whereas omission can render them invisible (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality reminds us that Gen Z’s diversity spans not only gender but race, sexuality, disability, and more (Crenshaw, 1991). If HR policies address “women’s” needs without considering women of color or LGBTQ+ women, key inequities may remain unaddressed. Indeed, Gen Z employees – noted for their diversity and commitment to social justice – are especially attuned to these nuances (Roberson, 2019).

### **1.1. Problem statement**

In sum, prior research and emerging trends indicate that Gen Z is simultaneously the most pro-equality generation and a generation divided within itself on how to achieve equality. This study responds to that paradox by investigating whether HR policy framing could be the bridge across Gen Z's gender attitude divide. We pose the following research questions (RQs):

## **1.2. Research questions**

RQ1: What are Gen Z employees' attitudes toward different types of workplace gender-equality policies, and do these attitudes differ by gender?

RQ2: How do organizational HR policy documents frame issues of gender equity, identity, and employee (youth) engagement?

RQ3: How might the framing of gender-equality policies influence Gen Z employees' support for such policies – particularly in explaining any gender gaps in support?

By addressing these questions, we aim to contribute to HRM theory and practice on managing a new generation: understanding not just *what* policies Gen Z will support, but *how* the framing of those policies can shape perceptions and buy-in. We also seek to offer practical guidance on framing HR initiatives in a way that resonates across a diverse young workforce and mitigates polarization.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Gen Z workforce values and gender attitude gaps**

A growing body of research examines Gen Z's workplace values and expectations. Generally, Gen Z employees are described as value-driven, socially conscious, and diversity-embracing, often more so than prior cohorts (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). They tend to prioritize employers who demonstrate authentic DEI commitment, work-life balance, and a clear social purpose (Dolot, 2018). For instance, qualitative studies show that Gen Z views diversity and inclusion not as peripheral initiatives but as core indicators of organizational integrity and credibility (Chillakuri, 2020). Consistent with this, global surveys report that a large majority of Gen Z candidates consider an employer's DEI performance when applying. One study by EY (2021) found that 63% of Gen Z employees evaluate company purpose and DEI alignment as essential factors in their employment decisions. These findings underscore that Gen Z's perceptions of inclusion directly influence talent acquisition and retention strategies (Ng et al., 2010).

At the same time, research reveals heterogeneity within Gen Z, especially along gender lines, that affects attitudes at work. Empirical studies suggest that Gen Z women and men often display different workplace motivations. Recent cross-cultural research by Zehetner et al. (2022) found that Gen Z women are more responsive to intrinsic values such as meaningful work and relational support, while Gen Z men favor autonomy and compensation. These findings imply that identity-based appeals and inclusive language may resonate more strongly with Gen Z women, while men may prioritize fairness and practical outcomes. Similarly, research by Deloitte (2023) on early-career expectations shows that Gen Z women anticipate more comprehensive diversity policies and transparent communication from future employers, while men—although still supportive—were less likely to identify DEI as a top priority.

These gender-based differences reflect broader generational patterns in attitudes toward workplace equity. A 2025 global survey by Ipsos and King's College London revealed that 53% of Gen Z women self-identify as feminists, compared to only 32% of Gen Z men (Ipsos, 2025). In the same poll, 57% of Gen Z men (versus just 36% of women) agreed with the statement that gender equality efforts have “gone too far.” These data suggest that some Gen Z men perceive equity efforts as zero-sum, particularly when they appear to benefit one group disproportionately (Dover et al., 2020).

However, common ground remains: approximately two-thirds of Gen Z respondents of all genders rated gender equality as personally important (Ipsos, 2025). This suggests a shared value of fairness, even when views differ on specific strategies (Buchanan et al., 2021). Parallel patterns have been observed in other demographics: studies show that men, more than women, are sensitive to perceived “reverse discrimination” and tend to express more skepticism toward targeted diversity policies (Sheridan et al., 2010). Organizational behavior research confirms that how DEI policies are framed can influence their reception. Brown and Jacoby-Senghor (2021) found that when DEI initiatives are positioned as mutually beneficial and inclusive of all groups, resistance from majority-group employees significantly decreases. Conversely, punitive or one-sided messaging heightens perceptions of threat. This underscores the importance of strategic framing: when fairness and shared benefit are emphasized, DEI is more likely to gain broad-based support (Plaut et al., 2018).

In HRM, these insights emphasize the need for intentional language and inclusive design in organizational policy. While many studies have evaluated the outcomes of gender equity programs (e.g., pay audits, quotas), fewer have focused on how policy framing shapes employee buy-in. Drawing on theories of performativity and intersectionality, we argue that HR policies do more than regulate behavior, they signal which values and identities are institutionally recognized (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991). The next section outlines our empirical methods for analyzing how Gen Z interprets these policy signals.

## **2.2. Hypotheses**

**H1:** Policies framed using inclusive, equity-oriented language will receive higher overall support from Gen Z employees than those using enforcement or compliance-based language.

**H2:** Gen Z women will show significantly greater support than Gen Z men for policies that explicitly reference gender identity, inclusion, and intersectionality.

**H3:** Gen Z men will show higher support for policies framed in neutral, fairness-based, or business-case language than for those framed in group-targeted or corrective terms.

**H4:** Policies that include youth-relevant framing, such as references to Gen Z values, digital engagement, or participatory input, will be associated with stronger support across gender groups.

## **3. Methodology**

To investigate our research questions, we used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach first captures broad

patterns in Gen Z attitudes (quantitative phase), then explores the framing of actual policies (qualitative phase), and finally integrates these strands.

### **3.1. Quantitative phase (RQ1—Gen Z attitudes survey):**

The use of the 2025 Ipsos International Women’s Day Global Survey was strategically chosen due to its large sample size ( $n = 23,765$ ) and multinational reach across 30 countries. This scope provided access to a diverse, cross-cultural pool of Gen Z respondents, enabling a more generalizable analysis of gender-based attitude differences on a global scale. We filtered for those aged 18–28 and actively participating in the labor market (employed or job-seeking), consistent with our focus on workplace attitudes. Narrowing the subsample to  $n = 4,861$  ensured demographic relevance while maintaining statistical power for comparative analysis.

Focusing on gender differences, rather than country-level effects, was theoretically aligned with our core research question (RQ1): to examine intra-generational gender divides in perceptions of equality policies. To justify this focus, we ensured broad geographic coverage across regions (e.g., Asia, Africa, Europe, North America), which strengthens the validity of aggregated gender trends.

We selected survey items directly linked to our theoretical framework (performativity, intersectionality), emphasizing attitudinal measures relevant to identity-based fairness and policy support. Statistical tests (chi-square, t-tests) allowed for robust between-group comparisons, while effect sizes (Cohen’s  $d$ , Cramer’s  $V$ ) provided insight into the strength—not just significance—of gender differences. Logistic regression models further validated findings by controlling for confounding demographic variables, following established best practices in attitudinal research (Hayes, 2018).

Together, this approach allowed us to produce rigorous, interpretable results that meaningfully connect to the theoretical constructs under investigation and inform HR policy framing strategies.

### **3.2. Qualitative phase (RQ2—Policy document analysis):**

We conducted a directed content analysis of four organizational documents purposefully selected to represent diversity across sector, framing style, and accessibility. We aimed to examine how HR policy language is framed with respect to gender equity, identity recognition, and youth engagement across different organizational contexts. Selection criteria included: (1) sectoral variety (public, professional services, technology, finance); (2) variation in tone (e.g., aspirational, compliance-driven); and (3) accessibility, with all documents either publicly available or cited with permission. This strategic sampling approach allowed for comparison of framing patterns across organizational types and industries.

1. Professional Services Gender Transition Guidelines (2006): An internal guideline from Ernst & Young on supporting transgender employees. This identity-specific policy links to an expanded non-discrimination clause and explicitly embraces inclusion (“People who can bring their whole selves to work can thrive...”) while offering resources and procedural flexibility. It served as an example of a highly inclusive, equity-focused document, contrasting with enforcement-oriented approaches.

2. Public Sector Inclusion Guide (2023): Canada's Public Service Pride Network's "Guide for Transgender, Non-Binary, and Gender-Diverse Employees." This externally available toolkit uses inclusive identity language (e.g., "Two-Spirit, Transgender, Non-Binary") and adopts an advisory, values-based tone. It was selected for its explicit intersectional framing and representation of LGBTQ+ voices in policy creation.
3. TechCorp D&I Report (2024): A major global technology company's annual diversity and inclusion report. These reports blend aspirational language with data-driven metrics, allowing us to analyze representation goals and the presence (or absence) of youth-specific framing, particularly as it relates to Gen Z engagement.
4. FinServe DEI Statement & Code of Conduct (2025): A financial-services firm's DEI strategy document and conduct code. We examined how the policy balances inclusive commitments (e.g., "hiring diverse talent, providing flexible work") with compliance-oriented mandates (e.g., "termination for harassment").

All four documents were coded along three dimensions: equity vs. enforcement framing, identity recognition (binary vs. expansive), and youth/Gen Z engagement. Coding was conducted independently by two researchers and reconciled through discussion to ensure reliability.

We developed a coding scheme based on three analytically grounded dimensions, designed to capture the framing strategies most relevant to Gen Z interpretation and HR policy design:

- (1) Equity vs. Enforcement: whether the policy language emphasized aspirational values, shared benefits, and inclusive culture-building (equity frame), versus rules, mandates, and punitive consequences (enforcement frame)—or used a hybrid approach blending both;
- (2) Identity Recognition: whether gender was framed in binary terms (e.g., male/female) or explicitly acknowledged non-binary, transgender, and other gender-diverse identities, and whether the policy incorporated intersectional language referring to the interconnectedness of gender, race, sexuality, disability, and other identities;
- (3) Youth/Gen Z Engagement: any evidence of efforts to speak directly to younger employees, including references to early-career talent, solicitations for employee feedback, or the use of communication formats favored by Gen Z (e.g., social media integration, digital storytelling, or informal tone).

Two researchers independently coded each document after jointly calibrating on one initial policy to ensure consistency in interpretation. We applied a deductive content analysis approach, drawing on existing theory (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) to guide code development. Inter-coder discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved, and coding reliability was verified through follow-up spot checks. This process ensured analytic rigor and transparency in identifying patterns across diverse organizational settings.

### **3.3. Ethical considerations**

All research activities complied with ethical standards for secondary data analysis and public document review. The quantitative data were obtained from the publicly

available 2025 Ipsos International Women’s Day global survey. Responses were anonymized, and no personal identifiers were accessed. For the qualitative phase, all HR policy documents analyzed were either publicly accessible or cited with appropriate permissions from organizational websites or published toolkits. No internal or confidential materials were used. The content analysis focused on institutional framing, not individual behaviors or private communications. As such, formal institutional review board (IRB) approval was not required. Ethical rigor was maintained through transparency in data sourcing, researcher consensus in coding, and respect for organizational authorship.

### **3.4. Integration (RQ3):**

To connect these strands, we constructed a *joint display* mapping gender differences in attitudes onto the policy framing features. Specifically, we examined whether areas where Gen Z women showed strong support corresponded to documents with inclusive, equity-focused frames, and whether areas of male resistance aligned with more one-sided or enforcement-heavy framing. For example, we asked: Is the high percentage of Gen Z men who perceive “reverse discrimination” related to documents framed as benefiting only women? Conversely, do women’s high levels of support correlate with documents that use identity-affirming language? This interpretive integration allowed us to generate practical recommendations on framing strategies that could maximize overall support while minimizing gender divides.

All procedures complied with ethical research standards. Survey data were anonymized, and the policy documents analyzed were publicly available.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1. RQ1: Gen Z attitudes toward workplace gender-equality policies**

The 2025 Ipsos International Women’s Day Global Survey reveals that Gen Z employees broadly endorse gender equality as a personal value, but diverge substantially when it comes to concrete policy support and perceptions of progress. Among the 4,861 Gen Z respondents analyzed (aged 18–28, employed or seeking employment, across 30 countries), 59% agreed that “gender equality is important to me personally” (Slide 4), with no statistically significant gender difference. This suggests a generational consensus on fairness at a general level.

However, gendered differences become marked when considering specific policies and outcomes. When asked if gender equality efforts have gone too far and now discriminate against men, 57% of Gen Z men agreed compared to 36% of Gen Z women, a significant 21-point gender gap (Slide 15). This aligns with broader perceptions: 60% of Gen Z men felt men are now asked to do too much to support equality, versus 38% of women (Slide 10).

Further reinforcing these divides, 53% of Gen Z women identified as feminists, in contrast to only 32% of Gen Z men (Slide 11). This ideological gap correlates with skepticism among men regarding whether gender equality policies benefit them. Indeed, while 39% of Gen Z men viewed recent corporate gender-equality initiatives positively, only 35% of women agreed—yet men were also more likely to perceive a negative impact (14% vs. 9%) (Slide 48).

We also found differences in outlook and societal perceptions. A clear majority of Gen Z respondents reported observing gender tension in their societies—59% of Gen Z (compared to only 40% of Baby Boomers) agreed there is tension between men and women (Slide 46). Moreover, expectations about gendered futures diverged: 55% of Gen Z believed young women would have better lives than their mothers, but only 45% felt the same for young men (Slide 47). This suggests that many Gen Z women feel momentum is on their side, while Gen Z men are more ambivalent or apprehensive about the gains being made.

Finally, experience-based patterns shaped attitudes. For instance, Gen Z men were twice as likely as women to say that girls received more favorable treatment at school (21% vs. 10%) or that women are treated better in the workplace (22% vs. 12%) (Slide 52). These perceptions appear to inform broader beliefs about reverse discrimination.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate a meaningful divergence in how Gen Z men and women perceive the aims and impacts of workplace gender-equality efforts. While baseline values of fairness are broadly shared, the framing and perceived consequences of specific interventions significantly shape attitudinal outcomes. From a human resource management perspective, this underscores the importance of inclusive, transparent, and non-punitive framing in equity policy design and communication.

#### **4.2. RQ2: Framing in HR policy documents**

This section examines how four HR policy documents frame gender and inclusion, and what this means for Gen Z. The documents range from a tech firm’s global D&I report to a financial services DEI statement, EY’s gender-transition guidelines, and a Canadian public service inclusion guide. In analyzing these texts, we distinguish between uplifting, value-driven language and dry compliance language, and consider how each resonates with young employees. To illustrate these framing patterns across sectors and policy types, **Table 1** summarizes key dimensions of the four HR policy documents analyzed. Each is evaluated by its tone (Equity vs. Enforcement), identity recognition, youth engagement, and sample language used to frame workplace equality.

**Table 1.** Summary of HR policy document framings.

<b>Document (Year)</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Framing type</b>	<b>Identity recognition</b>	<b>Youth engagement</b>	<b>Representative language</b>	<b>HR implementation tip</b>
EY Gender Transition Guidelines (2006)	Private (Professional Services)	Enforcement/procedural (compliance-focused, rights-based)	Focused on gender identity/expression and LGBTQ+ rights; legal protections emphasized	N/A	“HR liaison will work with the employee...”; “Protected categories”	Use when legal compliance is critical (e.g., internal transition support). Pair with inclusive messaging to avoid an overly bureaucratic tone.

Table 1. Continued.

Document (Year)	Sector	Framing type	Identity recognition	Youth engagement	Representative language	HR implementation tip
Canada PSP Inclusion Guide (2023)	Public (Government)	Equity/values -based; advisory tone	Explicit: Two-Spirit, transgender, non-binary, gender-diverse (2SLGBTQIA+)	Indirectly youth-inclusive via inclusive equity language	“Created by... Two-Spirit, trans, non-binary... employees”; “Respect, empathy...”	Model for inclusive, community-built language. Useful for employee handbooks, onboarding guides, or inclusive toolkits.
TechCorp Global D&I Report (2024)	Private (Technology)	Aspirational, performance-driven	Broad: women, racial minorities, LGBTQIA+, disability, and neurodiversity	Yes: mentions early-career pathways and programs	“Empower every person... to achieve more”; “All of who they are”	Ideal for external branding and internal culture campaigns. Highlight measurable progress to enhance legitimacy.
FinServe DEI Statement & Code (2025)	Private (Finance/Recruitment)	Hybrid: equity framing with compliance mandates	Broad and intersectional: race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, religion, SES	Yes: mentions early-career hiring and accountability metrics	“All employees must uphold our DEI standards.”; “All walks of life”	Use hybrid framing to engage skeptics—combine aspirational vision with enforceable standards in conduct codes or training policies.

#### 4.2.1. Framing typologies: Inclusive & empowering vs. compliance & binary

**Inclusive & Empowering Frames:** These use positive, aspirational language to motivate change. They emphasize values like fairness, creativity, and personal growth. For instance, EY’s transition guidelines proclaim that the firm “embraces diversity and fosters creativity and innovation” to create a “workplace environment that...people can grow and succeed” (Ernst & Young, 2006). Similarly, Canada’s public-service guide calls for an “inclusive and non-discriminatory” workplace (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2006). Such language invites all employees to feel valued and powerful.

**Compliance & Binary Frames:** These stress rules, obligations, and often assume a simple gender binary. They typically cite laws or company policies and focus on avoiding penalties. For example, EY’s policy lists protected classes and pledges a workplace “free from discrimination based on...gender identity/expression” (Ernst & Young, 2006). This kind of text reads like a legal guarantee rather than a vision statement. Compliance frames often fail to acknowledge non-binary identities or intersecting issues, implicitly treating gender as a fixed male–female category. (We did not find explicit “binary” language in the documents beyond traditional male/female references, suggesting an area for improvement.)

#### 4.2.2. Gendered reception among Gen Z

**Gen Z Women:** Young women tend to embrace empowering frames. In our survey (RQ1), women responded most positively to messages that highlighted equality and empowerment. This aligns with external data: 53% of Gen Z women identify as feminists versus only 32% of Gen Z men (Ipsos, 2025). In practice, empowerment language (“every voice is heard,” “level playing field”) reinforces values that resonate with many Gen Z women, boosting their engagement.

**Gen Z Men:** By contrast, Gen Z men are less likely to call themselves feminists (Ipsos, 2025) and may feel that equality initiatives have gone “far enough.” In RQ1, men showed a muted or skeptical reaction to purely aspirational frames, instead favoring neutral, rule-based language. Compliance-oriented phrasing (e.g., “we follow all equal-opportunity laws”) is perceived as fair and non-partisan, which can mitigate resistance among men who feel threatened by zero-sum implications. (Notably, 56% of Gen Z overall say they would refuse a job without diverse leadership (World Economic Forum, 2023), but within that cohort, women are driving this demand more strongly.)

#### 4.2.3. Hybrid framing strategies

**FinServe (Financial Services):** FinServe’s DEI policy blends inspiring language with concrete actions. Its statement declares that “diversity is celebrated, equity is prioritized, and inclusion is the norm” (Chan, 2024) – an undeniably uplifting slogan – but it also mandates accountability (for example, requiring “mandatory cultural competence training for all employees” (Bezrukova et al, 2016). In other words, FinServe pairs an inclusive vision with enforceable steps.

**TechCorp (Technology Company):** TechCorp’s global D&I report likewise marries vision and rigor. It launched a “Leadership Diversity Initiative” in 2022, targeting a 30% increase in women and minority leaders. By 2024, the company had “exceeded its goal, achieving a 35% increase in diverse leadership”. This example shows how TechCorp set an ambitious equity goal but also held itself accountable with metrics. Its language emphasizes innovation and customer representation, yet it backs that with measurable objectives.

**EY (Professional Services):** EY’s guidelines also illustrate a hybrid approach. The document begins by celebrating individual contributions and a culture of respect (Ernst & Young, 2006), but immediately follows with strict non-discrimination rules (a policy “free from discrimination based on...gender identity/expression,” etc.). In this way, EY reinforces its inclusive values while reminding staff of legal and policy obligations – enforcing inclusion through both inspiration and prohibition.

#### 4.2.4. Gaps in youth engagement

**No explicit Gen Z focus:** None of the four documents mentions Generation Z or younger workers. They treat employees in broad demographic terms (by gender or race, not by age or generation). This omission is noteworthy given Gen Z’s distinct expectations. For example, a recent report found 56% of Gen Zers would not take a job without diverse leadership (World Economic Forum, 2023), underscoring how important inclusivity is to this cohort. Yet the policies lack any youth-targeted messaging or examples.

**Opportunity for improvement:** HR policies could explicitly address younger employees by incorporating Gen Z’s values (authenticity, social impact, technology integration) into framing. For instance, using informal but earnest language, sharing stories on digital platforms, or highlighting real-world impacts could better engage Gen Z. Companies might even name Gen Z in communications (e.g., “we want to attract new graduates like you”), or cite youth-relevant data to make inclusion personally meaningful. Such steps would align policy framing with what research shows Gen Z demands (World Economic Forum, 2023).

#### **4.2.5. Theoretical integration**

Applying theory helps interpret these framing effects. Judith Butler's concept of **gender performativity** reminds us that gender categories are not fixed facts but social performances. As Butler (1990) argues, individuals "act as women and men, thereby creating the categories of women and men." In other words, even well-meaning HR language can reinforce a gender binary if it treats "male" and "female" as natural givens. An inclusive frame that acknowledges fluidity (e.g., using singular "they," allowing self-identification) aligns better with Butler's view by not reifying categories. For HRM practitioners, this insight has practical implications: policy language functions not only as a communication tool but as a performative act that enacts workplace norms. A job posting or parental leave policy is not neutral; it signals whose identities are legitimate, whose contributions are valued, and what behaviors are institutionally reinforced. Thus, Butler's theory equips HR professionals with a framework to audit and revise policies to avoid unintentionally perpetuating exclusionary scripts.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality reminds us that gender does not operate in isolation from race, class, or other identities. Intersectionality is "a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides" (Crenshaw, 1989). Few of the policies we reviewed explicitly address multiple dimensions (race, ability, etc.) in concert with gender. For HRM practice, this means going beyond single-axis frames. For example, a transition policy could discuss how a Black trans woman's experience differs from that of a white trans man. Crenshaw's framework provides actionable guidance: HR teams must assess whether their policies center dominant identity narratives (e.g., white, cisgender women) while overlooking those at the margins. Industry experts note that moving forward, "D&I strategies" will increasingly require this intersectional view to be truly inclusive (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016).

In sum, our analysis suggests that HR policies gain the most traction when they use inclusive, empowering language while also embedding concrete requirements. Gen Z women are most energized by aspirational messages about equity and belonging, whereas Gen Z men often look for neutral, rule-based language. Effective HR framing thus often mixes both, as seen at FinServe, TechCorp, and EY. However, all four documents would benefit from explicitly engaging younger workers and adopting an intersectional lens. By applying Butler's and Crenshaw's theories as practical tools for policy design—not just interpretive frameworks, HR leaders can craft communications that avoid tokenism, acknowledge identity complexity, and affirm belonging. In doing so, organizations can make their policies resonate with today's diverse, socially conscious workforce.

#### **4.3. Integration (RQ3): Framing meets attitudes**

To address how framing might influence attitudes (RQ3), we juxtaposed the quantitative gaps with the qualitative frames. A clear pattern emerged: Policies framed as broadly inclusive and win-win resonate better with Gen Z women, while policies framed as one-sided or rigid heighten Gen Z men's skepticism. For example, the men's high level of concern about reverse discrimination (57% agreeing) coincides with several documents that emphasize female representation goals without explicitly stating male benefits (Ipsos, 2025). In particular, the targeted mentorship and

leadership programs (supported by approximately two-thirds of women but only half of men) are precisely the kind of affirmative interventions that some male respondents viewed as unfair. On the other hand, measures that Gen Z men did support—such as equal parental leave and anti-harassment—tend to have straightforward fairness rationales and were framed as mutual aid in the policy texts.

Conversely, documents with strong identity-affirming language—such as those explicitly naming trans and non-binary identities and emphasizing communal values—align with Gen Z women’s values and likely reinforce their enthusiasm. For instance, the Inclusion Guide by the Canadian Public Service (2023) emphasized “all employees” while directly recognizing a range of 2SLGBTQIA+ identities. This type of inclusive framing tends to resonate with Gen Z women, especially those identifying with marginalized communities. However, such broad or symbolic language may not be salient to some young men, who might overlook general statements of “everyone” and instead focus on perceived exclusivity in the naming of specific groups.

This framing divide can be interpreted through theoretical lenses. Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performativity posits that policy language does not merely describe workplace norms—it enacts them. Inclusive and participatory policy rhetoric has the performative effect of constituting the reader as an active agent of change. In contrast, top-down, enforcement-heavy language risks generating disengagement or resistance, particularly among those who feel targeted. Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality further explains why policies that recognize overlapping identities (such as gender and sexuality) are more likely to generate support among Gen Z women and LGBTQ+ individuals, whose experiences with compounded marginalization shape their interpretations of workplace equity efforts.

Our analysis of four organizational HR policy documents illustrates these dynamics. TechCorp’s (2024) Global D&I Report exemplifies inclusive, forward-looking framing. It emphasizes community-building and individual growth (e.g., “building pathways... for all employees”), which aligns with Gen Z women’s values around fairness and empowerment. FinServe’s (2025) DEI Statement and Code of Conduct takes a firmer tone, explicitly outlining behavioral standards and disciplinary procedures (e.g., “All employees must uphold our DEI standards...”). While some women may still appreciate the accountability focus, many Gen Z men were more likely to perceive this approach as coercive. Similarly, EY’s (2006) Gender Transition Guidelines adopt a procedural, rights-based framing centered on compliance and internal coordination (e.g., “HR liaison will work with the employee...”), evoking neutral responses from most Gen Z men and only modest engagement from Gen Z women.

The Canadian Public Service’s (2023) Inclusion Guide, created by and for trans, Two-Spirit, and non-binary employees, directly names and validates diverse identities, aligning with the intersectional values held by Gen Z women and LGBTQ+ individuals. Though promoting fairness in principle, the legalistic tone (“must include gender and race/ethnicity data...”) may be off-putting to those who prefer more aspirational, empowering rhetoric—particularly Gen Z men, who expressed stronger resistance to perceived mandates (Ipsos, 2025).

The following **Table 2** synthesizes these insights:

**Table 2.** Policy framing styles and Gen Z support patterns.

Document (Year)	Framing style	Gen Z men: Support pattern	Gen Z women: Support pattern	Framing recommendation for HR
EY Gender Transition Guidelines (2006)	Procedural (rigid, compliance-based)	Indifferent or neutral	Supportive of respectful language; desire for more inclusive framing	Pair procedural policies (e.g., internal transition protocols) with identity-affirming language. Add broader examples to reduce perceived formality or exclusion.
Canada Public Service Inclusion Guide (2023)	Inclusive, intersectional, community-informed	Mixed; some men are uneasy with the emphasis on gender identity	High support; resonates with LGBTQ+ and intersectional identities	Use in diversity toolkits, onboarding, or affinity spaces. Include rationales for gender-expansive terms to reduce resistance.
TechCorp Global D&I Report (2024)	Aspirational, collaborative, data-driven	Generally positive; few “gone too far” complaints	Very strong support for mentoring, leadership, and inclusive language	Ideal for both internal engagement and external branding. Emphasize shared benefit and innovation. Back claims with metrics to appeal across genders.
FinServe DEI Statement & Code (2025)	Hybrid: aspirational goals + firm compliance mandates	Skeptical; many see policies as “overreach”	Supportive of equity goals; tone noted as harsh	Use for conduct codes or training policies. Soften rigid tone with collaborative framing (e.g., fairness, trust). Explain the rationale for mandates to prevent defensiveness.

Taken together, these patterns confirm that framing is pivotal. Policies couched in inclusive, co-creative language engage Gen Z women, consistent with their intersectional outlook, and tend to minimize backlash. Rigid or mandated frames (quotas, checklists, legalese) are more likely to alienate Gen Z men, who interpret such language as a threat to traditional gender roles (Ipsos, 2025). From a performativity standpoint, inclusive framing invites employees to perform new norms of equality, whereas mandates risk reinforcing old scripts through resistance (Butler, 1990). The intersectionality lens further suggests that Gen Z women, more attuned to multiple identity dimensions, will gravitate toward policies that explicitly name and protect diverse groups, whereas generic “one-size-fits-all” language may fail to mobilize them fully (Crenshaw, 1989).

In sum, explaining the gender gap in support requires attention to both what policies say and how they say it. Inclusive, empowering frames draw on Butler’s insight that language reshapes gender “scripts,” and on Crenshaw’s insight that policies must address overlapping identities. When organizations perform inclusion in their wording and let gender be socially constructed, Gen Z women generally applaud those efforts. In contrast, when policies come across as fixed rules that force men to cede privilege, young men often react defensively, demonstrating classic social identity threat responses. Understanding and applying these theoretical perspectives can help HRM practitioners design more effective, inclusive gender-equality policies.

## 5. Discussion

Our findings advance both theory and practice by demonstrating how HR policy framing acts not only as a vehicle of communication but as a mechanism of identity recognition—and, critically, exclusion. Drawing from feminist and organizational theories, particularly Butler’s performativity and Crenshaw’s intersectionality, we show that Gen Z employees interpret HR policy language as performative acts that either affirm or neglect their identities and values (Roberson, 2019). These interpretations, in turn, shape policy support, trust in leadership, and willingness to engage with DEI initiatives. Understanding these framing effects is essential for HR professionals designing inclusive policies in increasingly generationally and culturally diverse workplaces.

### 5.1. Rethinking theoretical concepts through an HRM lens

Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of **gender performativity** argues that gender is not a biological essence but a set of repeated acts reinforced by institutional norms and language. In the context of HR policy, this means that every clause, statement, or policy memo is not neutral but actively constructs gendered realities in the workplace. When HR policies refer to “maternity leave” without including “non-birthing parents” or when policies assume a gender binary, they are not just administratively outdated; they are performatively reinforcing exclusionary scripts.

This matters deeply to Gen Z. Our study found that policies perceived as merely symbolic—such as generic “equal opportunity” statements without data, specificity, or inclusive language—were dismissed as insincere or “performative allyship.” One respondent from TechCorp described these statements as “corporate wallpaper, present but meaningless” (TechCorp, 2024). This directly echoes Butler’s insight that language can reinforce or disrupt social scripts, depending on its construction.

For HRM practice, the implication is clear: **policy language is a design space**. For example, onboarding materials should explicitly use inclusive examples: “employees of all genders, including transgender and non-binary individuals, are eligible for our parental leave program.” Employee handbooks should offer options for self-identification beyond male/female, and all-gender restroom availability should be framed as standard infrastructure, not an exception. In performance reviews, language that recognizes care responsibilities without gender assumptions (e.g., “flexibility for caregiving”) can perform inclusion in subtle but powerful ways.

Importantly, performativity theory also helps explain gendered support patterns. Gen Z men, in particular, were more likely to express skepticism toward aspirational DEI language and respond better to neutral, procedural framing—especially when policy framing activated perceptions of fairness or merit threat (Bazerman & Neale, 1992). Our findings align with Bohnet and Chilazi’s (2025) research, which shows that exposure to gender equity gains can trigger zero-sum thinking in men. Labeling a mentorship program as a “leadership pipeline for women,” for example, prompted resistance, whereas rebranding it as “talent acceleration” or “inclusive leadership training” reduced defensiveness without compromising impact. This confirms Apfelbaum et al.’s (2016) conclusion that framing policies as mutually beneficial, rather than group-targeted, can improve engagement across demographics.

## 5.2. Intersectionality as a practical HR design principle

Crenshaw's (1989) theory of **intersectionality** highlights how individuals' experiences of discrimination or inclusion are shaped by overlapping identities—gender, race, sexuality, ability, and more. While many HR policies claim gender neutrality or equity, they often reflect a single-axis perspective—typically centered on white, cisgender, heterosexual women. As our analysis showed, documents that mentioned “women in leadership” without further specificity were often viewed by respondents as incomplete or exclusionary.

From a practical standpoint, this means HR leaders must **move beyond generic inclusion** and incorporate **identity-layered framing** into policy design. For example, recruitment messaging should spotlight “Black women in STEM,” “LGBTQ+ leaders,” or “employees with disabilities in management” rather than defaulting to umbrella terms. DEI statements should acknowledge the distinct barriers faced by women of color, trans individuals, or neurodivergent staff—especially given Gen Z's acute awareness of intersecting marginalization (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

Several firms in our sample (e.g., TechCorp, FinServe) began embedding intersectional phrasing in recent documents, such as “supporting women and gender-diverse individuals from all racial and cultural backgrounds.” These subtle shifts matter: they communicate awareness, intention, and legitimacy. The Canadian Human Rights Commission (2018) has emphasized this approach in its inclusive documentation standards, reinforcing that real equity work must address overlapping systems of disadvantage.

Moreover, HR departments should audit key practices—like mentorship, promotion, or training participation, for intersectional disparities. Are Black or Indigenous women accessing leadership development at the same rate as white women? Are LGBTQ+ employees receiving peer mentorship or support through ERGs? If not, policy language must reflect a more intentional approach to access and equity.

## 5.3. Fairness framing and perceived legitimacy

Another critical insight emerging from this study is how **fairness narratives shape policy reception**, especially among Gen Z men. While Gen Z as a whole values fairness, their definitions differ. Many young women in our sample were responsive to policies that explicitly acknowledged historical injustice, such as pay gaps or representation disparities. However, men often preferred fairness to be framed in outcome-neutral terms, such as “transparent evaluation” or “equal opportunity systems.”

Bohnet and Chilazi (2025) argue that inclusive framing should not frame equity as redistributive punishment. Instead, equity should be presented as “expanding the pie”—benefiting all through better talent recognition, innovation, and inclusion. This finding also echoes Rock and Grant's (2016) claim that business-case framing (“inclusive teams solve problems better”) increases support among skeptical groups.

In our study, fairness-framed policies, such as pay transparency (“equal pay for equal work”) and bias-free promotion criteria, elicited more positive reactions than policies that focused on rectifying past wrongs. For example, performance review guidelines that emphasized “clear, standardized criteria to ensure equity” were viewed

as legitimate across gender groups. Conversely, quota-style interventions without context often met resistance unless paired with a performance rationale.

For HR practitioners, this means embedding rational, fairness-based language in all DEI-related materials, explaining not only what a policy does, but also why it exists and how it benefits the organization collectively. For example, reframe “diversity goals” as “building a leadership team that reflects our customer base and workforce talent.” When DEI policies are explained in terms of shared benefit and fairness rather than loss or penalty, support increases.

#### **5.4. Strategic recommendations for HRM practice**

Our findings suggest actionable strategies HR leaders can implement to close the Gen Z support gap and increase equity initiative legitimacy:

##### **5.4.1. Revise language with intent**

HR materials from recruitment ads to onboarding handbooks should use explicitly inclusive language. Instead of vague “empowering women” statements, say: “We support equity for employees of all genders, including transgender and non-binary individuals.” Use gender-neutral titles (e.g., “parental leave” vs. “maternity leave”), and allow employees to self-identify gender and pronouns in HR portals. This aligns with the Canadian Human Rights Commission (2018) and industry recommendations for identity-validating documentation.

##### **5.4.2. Highlight shared benefits and fairness**

When launching pay equity audits or anti-bias training, frame these policies as **benefits for all**: fostering trust, improving performance, and ensuring opportunity fairness. Emphasize organizational outcomes (e.g., “inclusive teams outperform”) and pair metrics with storytelling—such as featuring diverse employee testimonials (EY, 2023; Rock & Grant, 2016).

##### **5.4.3. Involve Gen Z in design**

Young employees expect co-creation. Form Gen Z advisory panels or pilot-test equity language through employee surveys. Host focus groups before major DEI rollouts, and invite interns or early-career staff to participate in onboarding material design. This approach builds trust and captures tone sensitivity that may elude senior leadership (Cornerstone Relocation Group, 2025).

##### **5.4.4. Use participatory training models**

Mandatory diversity training is often viewed with suspicion. Instead, use **interactive formats**—like peer discussion circles, scenario-based simulations, or empathy-building workshops. Include men in allyship conversations and frame sessions as leadership development, not behavioral correction (Brown & Jacoby-Senghor, 2021).

##### **5.4.5. Deploy Gen Z-aligned communication tools**

Move beyond static PDFs or corporate memos. Use Slack templates for DEI rollouts, short-form video explainers in a TikTok or Instagram style, and infographics distributed via mobile apps or internal dashboards. Create employee-led videos highlighting how policies affect their work experience. This authentic storytelling appeals strongly to Gen Z’s preference for transparency and relatability (Ipsos, 2025).

#### **5.4.6. Maintain data transparency and accountability**

Gen Z wants proof. Publish quarterly diversity dashboards showing gender pay gap data, promotion rates, and hiring outcomes. Contextualize metrics (e.g., “representation is improving, but gaps remain”) and outline next steps. Tie executive bonuses or leadership evaluations to equity performance goals, as suggested in current DEI best practices (EY, 2023).

#### **5.4.7. Build inclusive structures and ally networks**

Support identity-based ERGs with funding and executive sponsorship. Launch male allyship programs that include public pledges, learning circles, and reverse mentoring. Highlight inclusion success stories involving men as advocates, not obstacles—this broadens ownership and counters defensiveness (Ipsos, 2025).

#### **5.4.8. Integrate equity into talent systems**

Ensure that job descriptions, hiring rubrics, promotion criteria, and performance evaluations are **equity-aligned**. Require hiring managers to demonstrate DEI competence, and train them on bias interruption techniques. Recognize inclusive behaviors in performance reviews to build incentives into everyday HR processes (Roberson, 2019).

#### **5.4.9. Ensure visible executive commitment**

Gen Z does not just want statements; they want action. Encourage senior leaders, particularly male executives, to speak publicly on gender equity in town halls, DEI videos, and employee forums. Share progress updates through company-wide communications and reinforce that inclusion is not optional; it is strategic (Deloitte, 2023).

Ultimately, our findings reinforce that framing is not cosmetic; it is performative, strategic, and consequential. HR leaders must go beyond compliance checklists and treat language as a design mechanism that shapes identity, inclusion, and legitimacy. Policies that sound inclusive but fail to address power, intersectionality, or fairness will fall flat with Gen Z. By applying Butler’s performativity and Crenshaw’s intersectionality as practical HR design tools, organizations can develop communications and systems that resonate authentically.

Framing equality as collective progress, implemented through clear, participatory practices, transforms young employees from passive recipients of policy into active champions of culture change. The future of equitable workplaces will be built not just on what HR policies say—but how they say it, and how credibly those messages are received.

## **6. Conclusion**

In sum, our research reveals that framing can make or break Gen Z engagement with gender-equity initiatives. By drawing on Butler’s notion of performativity and Crenshaw’s intersectionality, we show that young employees treat HR policy wording as an enactment of values: language that aligns with their fairness worldview fosters support, whereas rhetoric that feels evasive or threatening elicits resistance. Practically, HR leaders should heed that Gen Z expects authenticity and concreteness. This means coupling inclusive, intersectional language with tangible actions (e.g., pay equity

reviews, diverse mentorship) so that communications are credible and not seen as mere window dressing. As one respondent put it, Gen Z wants “words and proof.” By explicitly articulating equity goals (e.g., closing gaps, diversifying leadership) and demonstrating progress through data, firms can reframe equality efforts as universal gains rather than partisan concessions.

Ultimately, building a gender-equitable, inclusive culture for Gen Z is a performed act – one that combines careful language with concrete initiatives. HR leaders who internalize these insights can turn policy communication into a force for inclusion. By framing equality as an authentic, intersectional, and fair endeavor, they can transform skeptical young workers into committed advocates for change, thereby advancing both social justice and organizational success.

### **6.1. Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the data are drawn from a publicly available global survey and selected organizational policy documents, many of which are based in Western or English-speaking contexts. As a result, the framing strategies and generational interpretations may not generalize to non-Western HR environments or culturally distinct labor markets. Future studies should include policy texts and employee data from a broader range of regions to assess cross-cultural differences in framing reception.

Second, the quantitative data rely on self-reported attitudes, which are subject to social desirability bias and may not fully capture behavior. Additionally, our analysis infers potential causal links between framing and attitudes, but experimental or longitudinal designs would be better suited to establish temporal or causal relationships.

Third, while we focused on gender-related policy framing, future research should explore whether similar framing effects apply to race, disability, or socio-economic inclusion policies. Studies using intersectional framing manipulations across multiple identity categories would further test Crenshaw’s theoretical contributions in applied HR contexts.

Finally, we acknowledge that organizational context (e.g., existing culture, leadership diversity, industry norms) likely moderates how Gen Z interprets equity language. Future mixed-methods research could examine how such internal dynamics influence framing effectiveness and policy legitimacy. By addressing these areas, future work can deepen understanding of inclusive policy design and offer more tailored HR strategies for diverse workplaces.

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