

STALLED GENDER DIVERSITY: HOW LINE MANAGERS' BOUNDARY WORK (RE)PRODUCES INEQUALITIES

INTRODUCTION

India, with its deeply patriarchal social structure, continues to face significant challenges in ensuring equal opportunities for women in the workplace, as legal protections and enforcement mechanisms remain inadequate (Chakraborty and Chatterjee, 2020; Dutta and Mishra, 2021). In response to persistent workplace inequalities and gender-based discrimination, many organizations have introduced gender diversity policies and initiatives aimed at addressing these disparities. Common measures include flexible work arrangements, career re-entry programs for women following maternity breaks, and extended maternity leave to support work-life balance (Cooke and Saini, 2010; Donnelly, 2015).

Although policy-level interventions have garnered substantial attention, the role of managerial actors, particularly line managers, in translating these policies into practice remains underexplored. This gap is critical, as the effectiveness of diversity initiatives often hinges on their implementation by these frontline actors (Chakraborty and Chatterjee, 2020; Williamson et al., 2020). Line managers are described as “cornerstones in implementing diversity practices” (Ng et al., 2021, p. 2595) due to their significant influence on day-to-day workplace dynamics. Yet, research reveals that they often hold stereotypical perceptions of women, which reinforce institutionalized gendered routines and practices (Kelan, 2018). These practices are sustained through boundaries that differentiate between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ acceptable and unacceptable, included and excluded, thus reproducing inequalities within organizations (Heracleous, 2004).

To examine how line managers perpetuate gender inequalities, we adopt the lens of boundary work, which focuses on the processes through which individuals and groups

establish, maintain, or challenge organizational boundaries (Langley et al., 2019). This lens is particularly appropriate for our research as it illuminates how formal diversity policies are interpreted, enacted, or resisted in everyday organizational life. Boundary work helps us unpack how male line managers actively construct and reinforce boundaries that shape who belongs, who is heard, and who gains access to opportunities and participation within organizations. By focusing on their boundary work, we move beyond macro-level institutional explanations and instead foreground the micro-level, taken-for-granted practices through which inclusion and exclusion are produced.

Drawing on qualitative data from microfinance institutions (MFIs) that provide collateral-free loans to rural women in India, we investigate how male branch managers, as line managers, engage in boundary work to (re)produce inequalities for female field officers. Recognizing female field officers as a distinct sociodemographic group within MFIs, often differing from other women employees in terms of socio-economic background (van Eck et al., 2024), we focus on this cohort who, despite occupying lower positions in the organizational hierarchy, play a critical role in cultivating client relationships (Bisht et al., 2025; Siwale, 2016). This organizational context offers a compelling opportunity to examine how boundary work contributes to the reproduction of gender inequalities. Despite the vital role that female field officers play in facilitating loans to rural women, particularly in patriarchal settings where gender homophily fosters trust and enables smoother financial interactions (Zacarias and Togonon, 2007; Zhao and Wry, 2016), their representation within Indian MFIs remains disproportionately low and has steadily declined over the years (Jha and Singh, 2015; HRM in MFIs Report, 2014). This is particularly striking given the strong alignment between the role's demands and the contributions of female field officers, which makes a clear business case for their inclusion. This disjuncture underscores the need to

examine how male line managers, as gatekeepers of organizational boundaries, may engage in routine practices that intentionally or not, sustain gendered exclusions.

Our insights, drawn from the perspectives of male line managers, move beyond the predominant 'focus (only) on women' in gender diversity research (Joshi et al., 2015, p. 1470) and examine the understudied role of line managers in shaping organizational gender (in)equality (Williamson and Colley, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). We contribute to boundary work scholarship in three key ways.

First, we shift attention to the discursive nature of boundary work by showing how line managers invoke paternalistic narratives of care and safety as strategic tools to legitimize exclusion, obscure systemic gender inequalities, and reinforce hierarchical power structures, all under the guise of concern and symbolic inclusion. Second, we foreground the gendered enactment of boundary work as a micro-political process, wherein male managers align organizational practices with prevailing socio-cultural expectations to normalize and sustain gendered hierarchies. Third, we demonstrate how managerial agency interacts with organizational structures, revealing that line managers strategically interpret the passivity of senior leadership as tacit approval. This perceived inaction becomes a performative resource through which managers deflect accountability and reinforce exclusionary practices. Collectively, these insights offer a more relational and processual understanding of boundary work, highlighting how power is enacted, legitimized, and concealed through everyday managerial practices framed as pragmatism or inclusion.

In the following sections, we begin by reviewing the literature that examines the role of line managers in gender diversity. We then proceed to outline the literature on boundary work. Thereafter we explain the research context (including national and industry), given the need for careful context unpacking 'to answer the pertinent when, where, and how questions

in diversity research and practice... and to help practitioners manage diversity more effectively' (Post et al., 2021, p. 2006). We then explain method, findings, and present the discussion and conclusions.

GENDER DIVERSITY: THE ROLE OF LINE MANAGERS AS BOUNDARY MEDIATORS

Research shows that everyday organizational practices often prioritize men's experiences over women's, thereby perpetuating gender inequities in the workplace (Gill et al., 2017). These ingrained dynamics underscore the importance of not only having gender diversity initiatives in place, but also of how they are implemented. While such initiatives are central to advancing gender equality, their effectiveness hinges on the role of line managers, who act as intermediaries between strategic intent and operational reality (Williamson and Colley, 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). Line managers are pivotal actors in key HR functions such as recruitment, selection, and performance management, making them instrumental in shaping an organization's equality and diversity climate (Nachmias et al., 2022). Kirton and Greene (2015) note that their day-to-day actions, values, and interpretations of policy have the most direct impact on how diversity is experienced at work. When line managers hold positive attitudes toward gender diversity, they can model inclusive behavior and encourage alignment with organizational values (Nachmias et al., 2022). However, research also shows that many line managers do not take ownership of gender inequality issues, limiting the impact of diversity policies. For example, Elhoushy et al. (2023) demonstrate how personal biases can impede efforts to increase women's workforce participation, even when inclusive hiring policies are in place.

In addition to attitudinal barriers, structural constraints such as limited expertise, competing priorities, and workload pressures further reduce line managers' ability to

effectively implement diversity initiatives (Nishii et al., 2018; Bainbridge, 2015). These constraints contribute to forms of decoupling, where diversity policies exist in name but are poorly enacted (policy-practice decoupling), or where they fail to yield the intended outcomes (means-end decoupling) (Williamson et al., 2020).

Given their central role as gatekeepers of workplace equality, recent scholarship calls for greater attention to how line managers shape gender diversity outcomes in practice (Ng and Sears, 2020). While prior research has emphasized their lack of ownership, it often overlooks the everyday, routine interactions through which gender dynamics are maintained or contested. Informal practices such as decision-making, interpersonal communication, and task allocation, can subtly reproduce or challenge gender norms, often in invisible ways. Understanding these micro-level enactments is essential to uncover how line managers mediate organizational policies and construct gender relations on the ground. To this end, we adopt boundary work as our analytical lens to examine the everyday activities through which managers draw, maintain, or reconfigure boundaries that influence inclusion and exclusion dynamics (van Eck et al., 2024).

BOUNDARY WORK

Boundary work refers to the actions and strategies individuals and groups use to establish, maintain, and reinforce distinctions between categories, groups, or practices (Hernes, 2004; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Langley et al., 2019). It highlights how both individuals and collectives actively shape and preserve boundaries within social and organizational contexts. In doing so, boundary work plays a critical role in defining group membership, constructing identities, and sustaining social order. Central to boundary work are symbolic and social boundaries, which, while conceptually distinct, are deeply interconnected. Symbolic boundaries refer to the conceptual distinctions people use to classify individuals, objects, or

practices, such as what is deemed legitimate, ethical, or valuable (Langley et al., 2019). These symbolic distinctions often reflect societal hierarchies and norms. When widely accepted, they solidify into social boundaries, manifested in unequal access to resources, status, or opportunities, which reinforce systemic exclusion and marginalization (Lamont and Molnár, 2002).

The construction and maintenance of boundaries are crucial to how individuals and groups establish legitimacy, assert control, and navigate relationships in organizational settings (Bucher et al., 2016). Boundary work shapes collaboration, inclusion, and exclusion, and influences how work is organized and experienced. Although boundaries are often fluid, some become relatively stable and less permeable. Two important forms—defensive (Langley et al., 2019) and reinforcement boundary work (Faraj and Yan, 2009; Kislov, 2018), are particularly relevant to sustaining boundaries and limiting permeability.

Defensive boundary work is primarily focused on protecting a group's identity, power, or position from internal or external challenges. It often arises when a group perceives its position to be under threat or its boundaries encroached upon. For instance, Edlinger (2015) describes how employer brand managers engage in creating, controlling, promoting, and policing the ideal employer brand. These efforts aim to communicate the legitimacy of their representation, even as they struggle to gain acceptance among other internal groups. Defensive boundary work may also manifest as resistance to changes or challenges, such as opposing new policies, practices, or external actors that threaten established boundaries (Langley et al., 2019). In contrast, reinforcement boundary work focuses on internally establishing and reclaiming boundaries by increasing awareness and sharpening identity. It involves inward-facing efforts that emphasize factors internal to the individual or group, such as cultivating a clear self-concept and a cohesive sense of identity. Conceptually, boundary

reinforcement generates a sustained centripetal force that stabilizes the perimeter of personal or collective space, reinforcing legitimacy and cohesion (Faraj and Yan, 2009).

While the literature has extensively examined boundary work outcomes, there is limited attention to the micro-level processes through which boundaries are enacted, negotiated, and reproduced in daily work (Azambuja et al., 2023; Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta et al., 2022). Recent calls highlight the need to explore how boundaries are proactively shaped and fine-tuned in routine practices (Azambuja et al., 2023: 1824). Moreover, although gender is central to the construction and maintenance of boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002), its role in boundary work processes remains underexplored (Vuolanto and Kolehmainen, 2021). Gender is not merely a pre-existing social category; it is actively produced through boundary work that shapes how roles, spaces, and interactions are defined. Individuals engage in boundary work as gendered actors, drawing upon and reinforcing culturally embedded gender norms (Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta et al., 2022). These practices sustain assumptions such as men being more suitable for leadership or technical roles, which translate into subtle yet persistent forms of exclusion. Over time, such practices contribute to gendered career paths and work identities, legitimized through organizational narratives and structures.

Importantly, gendered boundary work does not simply sustain existing inequalities, but can also generate new patterns of inclusion and exclusion, depending on organizational context and power relations. Attending to the gendered dynamics of boundary work allows us to better understand how line managers construct and sustain boundaries that contribute to the reproduction of gender hierarchies within organizations.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Indian context for gender diversity

Over the years, the Indian government has undertaken several initiatives to increase women's participation in the workforce. These include substantial investments in girls' education and the introduction of quotas to ensure women's representation in programs such as 'Skill India' and 'Make in India'. Legislative efforts, such as the enactment of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act in 2013, aim to foster safer and more supportive work environments. Similarly, the 2017 amendment to the Maternity Benefit Act, which extended paid maternity leave from 12 to 26 weeks, marked a significant step in supporting women's continued workforce engagement.

Despite these efforts, women in India continue to face barriers in the workplace, particularly due to gender stereotyping that limits the range of professional roles deemed acceptable for them (Dutta and Mishra, 2021). Organizations often question women's commitment to their careers, limiting their access to high-stakes or leadership roles (Chakraborty and Chatterjee, 2020). Moreover, in the absence of legal safeguards prohibiting inquiries into family status during hiring, employers often discriminate, consciously or unconsciously, based on marital or parental status.

India continues to grapple with low female labor force participation, a concern well documented by scholars (e.g., Desai and Joshi, 2019). Between 2005 and 2021, female participation dropped from 32% to 19% (Chakrabarty, 2023), placing India at the lowest end among countries with comparable income levels (Nikore, 2019). These figures do not account for the large number of women engaged in unregulated domestic work in others' homes (Nair and Hofman, 2022). Cultural norms around women's primary caregiving roles

also contribute to high voluntary attrition rates (Kaushiva and Joshi, 2020), with nearly 48% of women exiting the workforce by age 30 (Pant and Venkateswaran, 2020). This early exit underscores the ongoing tension between professional aspirations and societal expectations to prioritize familial responsibilities.

MFIs in India

The MFIs examined in this study operate in rural India and focus on providing group-based microloans secured through mutual guarantees exclusively to women with low incomes, limited formal education, and restricted access to economic opportunities. These institutions are labour-intensive, particularly at the field level, with approximately 70 percent of employees serving as field officers, including trainees. Each branch typically employs five to seven field staff, along with a branch manager. While branch managers supervise field officers, the latter are responsible for recruiting clients, managing loan processing and disbursement, ensuring repayment, and maintaining client engagement across loan cycles (Report on HRM in MFIs, 2014). Both branch managers and field officers are expected to meet monthly targets for loan disbursement and collection.

A key challenge for these MFIs is the recruitment of field officers, who often possess limited education and come from socio-economically disadvantaged rural backgrounds, similar to the clients they serve. In rural areas, people typically engage in agriculture and are often reluctant to pursue non-agricultural employment due to long travel times and inflexible working hours. These factors make it difficult for MFIs to attract frontline staff. The challenge is even more acute for rural women, who face additional socio-cultural constraints that limit their autonomy and social mobility (Chatterjee et al., 2020). Moreover, the prevalent joint family structure in rural areas, often involving multi-generational co-residence, particularly with women's parents-in-law, imposes further restrictions. In such

households, women's mobility is constrained, and decision-making authority typically resides with the older generation. These cultural norms hinder women's participation in paid work, especially in roles requiring independent travel, regular interaction with strangers, or non-standard working hours. Even when women are recruited, retention remains difficult due to pressures related to marriage, relocation, childcare responsibilities, and concerns about safety and respectability.

Not surprisingly, despite MFIs' stated commitment to women's empowerment, research shows that these organizations struggle to hire female staff in field positions, and the proportion of women in such roles has been declining (Jha and Singh, 2015; Report on HRM in MFIs, 2014). Nevertheless, the presence of female field officers is widely recognized as critical to the success of MFIs (Mia et al., 2022). Prior research shows that women staff are better positioned to build trust and relational ties with women clients, thereby strengthening the social networks that support loan repayment and client retention (Bisht et al., 2023; Bisht, 2019). They are also more attuned to the consumption patterns and financial priorities of women clients, which can enhance service delivery, reduce transaction costs, and improve organizational performance (Mia et al., 2022; Zhao and Wry, 2016). However, realizing these benefits requires MFIs to act as catalysts for social change by proactively addressing the structural and normative barriers (Holck, 2018) that restrict women's participation in frontline roles in rural India.

DATA AND METHODS

Our study is based on one-to-one, semi-structured interviews conducted with thirty- seven male branch managers working in various locations within six MFIs operating in rural areas across the northern Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. All these organizations were committed to hiring women in their written policies. Two of these MFIs also had only women

zones and branches in a few locations. This meant that in these zones and branches only women employees worked. The branch managers under this study are male line managers who had considerable power to independently hire and manage the field officers. Our inclusion criteria for these branch managers were twofold. Firstly, we focused on branch managers leading branches without any female field officers, considering these branches as 'extreme cases' in line with Flyvbjerg (2006). While we acknowledge that boundary work by male managers may affect women's work experiences in various branch settings, we believed that examining such 'extreme cases' would reveal fundamental mechanisms that could be applied and explored in other contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 229). Secondly, our study required branch managers to possess a minimum of two years of experience in the MFI industry, to ensure that they could provide in-depth and comprehensive insights into the subject under investigation. Our sampling approach combined purposive and snowball methods. The first author leveraged her personal connections to initially approach nine branch managers who met our inclusion criteria. Subsequently, these participants were asked to introduce other branch managers who might be interested in participating in the study.

The interviews were conducted by the first author in English and Hindi, lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. They took place in the branch offices, agreed upon at mutually convenient times, usually in the afternoons when branch managers were relatively free from their routine duties and felt at ease to express themselves. Before commencing the interviews, participants received participant information sheets outlining the study's details, the topics we intended to explore, and our data storage and reporting methods designed to protect their anonymity. Participants understood that their involvement was voluntary, and they could choose not to answer any question or terminate the interview at any point. The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 32 years, and their experience in the MFI industry spanned from 2 to 7 years. Table 1 provides details of respondents across different companies.

Insert Table 1 about here

During the interviews, participants shared both personal experiences and observations of others within the MFI industry. They reflected on the presence or absence of female field officers, organizational culture, hiring practices concerning women, and the factors shaping their own agency in gender diversity management. Notably, although the role of senior managers was not a primary focus of the initial research design, their repeated mention in early interviews highlighted their influence on line managers' agency. In response, we revised the interview guide to include specific questions exploring the impact of senior managers on gender diversity decision-making. Interviews continued until we reached theoretical saturation, indicating that additional data collection was unlikely to produce new insights (Lee, 1999).

The first author's positionality and prior research experience with Indian MFIs significantly facilitated field access and data collection. Her earlier engagement with the sector enabled her to build on existing networks and navigate institutional structures more effectively, helping to secure participant involvement. As a North Indian, she shared a cultural and linguistic background with many participants, which fostered familiarity and trust, an important factor in rural field settings where social proximity shapes openness. Her position as a faculty member at a prestigious management institute further earned her respect from branch managers. Crucially, she was perceived as an independent academic rather than someone affiliated with the MFIs' internal management or audit systems. This outsider status encouraged participants to speak candidly about sensitive issues, including gender norms, recruitment practices, and organizational constraints, thereby enriching the empirical depth and authenticity of the data collected.

The interviews were digitally recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Hindi segments were translated into English by a research assistant proficient in both languages to ensure accuracy and minimize interpretive errors (Brislin, 1970). To protect anonymity, interviewees were assigned codes (e.g., A1 refers to the first branch manager from Company A, and B2 to the second branch manager from Company B). Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (King, 2004), which involved identifying key themes and sub-themes through an iterative process that engaged both the data and relevant literature. Initial coding was conducted by the first author, with subsequent review and validation by the other two authors to ensure coding reliability. Throughout the analysis, we remained attentive to our own positional and gender-based biases. To promote reflexivity and balance, the first and third authors, both women, actively engaged the second author, a man, in reviewing and refining the emergent themes and sub-themes.

Two prominent themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) Gendered boundary work as a mechanism of exclusion and (2) Reinforcing exclusion through passive managerial endorsement. Examples of second-order codes included propagating gender stereotypes, gendered hiring practices, and justified discrimination (see Table 2). These overarching themes served as the analytical framework for progressively coding the data using second- and third-order codes (Sinkovics and Alfoldi, 2012). In the following section, we present our findings structured around these themes and codes.

 Insert Table 2 about here

FINDINGS

The findings shed light on how line managers engage in boundary work to (re)produce and sustain gendered boundaries, and how they construe senior managers' passivity as tacit support for reinforcement boundary work. In what follows, we elaborate on these key themes and present illustrative quotes to support our analysis.

Gendered boundary work as a mechanism of exclusion

Propagate gender stereotypes

Analysis of the respondents' accounts led to the identification of boundary work through which branch managers propagated interrelated gender stereotypes. These stereotypes were not merely expressions of personal bias but functioned as tools for constructing and reinforcing symbolic and social boundaries that (re)produced and normalized gender hierarchies in the organization. Normalization, in this context, refers to behaviors that implicitly or explicitly, intentionally or unintentionally, communicate the acceptability of prevailing social inequalities and contribute to the risk of these inequalities evading detection, remaining unchallenged, and being left unattended (Bapuji et al., 2020). Respondents deployed these boundaries to position men and women as fundamentally different social categories, separating who was seen as capable, who was at risk, and who belonged.

Despite numerous MFIs in India hiring women for field-level positions and some even operating women-only branches, participants engaged in symbolic boundary work by drawing on stereotypes that portrayed women as unable to adapt to the demanding nature of field jobs. These symbolic boundaries were discursively constructed to exclude women not based on formal policy, but through everyday managerial talk and assumptions about gender roles. This narrative reinforced traditional gendered divisions of labor, positioning household and caregiving responsibilities as inherently female, and fieldwork as incompatible with women's *natural* roles. Managers cited early start times and long hours as barriers for

women, aligning exclusionary logics with cultural expectations of women's domestic responsibilities.

Women are primarily and, on many occasions, solely responsible to make food, take care of family including elders and children. This kind of field jobs are not meant for women. (B#1)

Work starts at 7 am and ends at 8 pm...women can't adapt to this kind of schedule. (F#6)

Social boundaries were also reinforced by invoking the moral risks and reputational threats women might face when traveling or working outside the home in rural areas. Managers framed exclusion not as discrimination, but as care, masking control as concern.

Our social culture is such that even now if women go out, society, especially in rural areas see that from a negative perspective. People hold conservative views perceiving women leaving the home as morally questionable, and often believe they should remain at home instead. (C2)

We work in rural areas. A woman coming home late is not seen in a good light; she is looked at with suspicion, as if to say, 'where is she coming from'? (D3)

By citing prevailing rural attitudes, managers externalized responsibility for exclusion while upholding gendered power asymmetries that kept women out of field roles. These statements reveal how boundary work operates at the intersection of organizational and societal norms, where invoking local culture serves as a justification for maintaining workplace inequalities. Participants highlighted that the nature of the job required women to travel by two-wheeler in rural areas, making them vulnerable to incidents of eve-teasing, a term referring to public sexual harassment of women by men. This gendered framing portrayed women as passive and fragile, legitimizing their containment as a form of 'protection'.

Eve teasing is very common as we work in remote locations. Sometimes when they [female field officers] are going on a scooter, people[strangers] give flying kisses and wink at them. People pass comments like, 'where you are going alone,' or say things like; 'take me along or come here to us'. It's better that they[women] stay at home. (A1)

Participants reinforced symbolic boundaries by portraying women as physically unsuited for field roles, citing perceived limitations in stamina, endurance, and travel capacity. Fieldwork was also framed as unsafe for women, invoking paternalistic discourses that positioned them as inherently unfit for such roles.

How can a woman travel 40 to 60 kms on a daily basis? It might be manageable for a day or two, but if it's routine, they [women field officers] can't do this. Women get tired and can't travel this much. (A3)

Typically, women tend to prefer jobs with less travel, and the role entails extensive travel, which is better suited for male field officers. (B4)

In sum, the boundary work performed by line managers was not merely expressive but constitutive, actively legitimizing a gendered division of labor. By invoking practicality, safety, and morality, they deployed gender stereotypes to control and exclude women. This form of benevolent discrimination (Romani et al., 2019) functioned as a paternalistic mechanism, concealing power and inequality behind the rhetoric of care and reinforcing women's structural marginalization.

Gendered hiring practices

As agential mediators (Azambuja and Islam, 2019), branch managers exercised their political capabilities to construct boundaries that were difficult for women to cross, even in the absence of formal policy restrictions. Although official structures such as written policies or job advertisements did not explicitly prohibit the hiring of women, respondents openly admitted to consciously avoiding their recruitment.

Hiring women was frequently framed as a source of 'tension,' 'burden,' or 'liability,' prompting managers to preemptively exclude them. We identify three interrelated boundary work strategies through which exclusion was enacted: (1) not reaching out to women

candidates, (2) filtering them out during the selection process, and (3) dissuading them from accepting offers. These practices manipulated the visibility and permeability of organizational boundaries, rendering access to field roles selectively inaccessible to women.

Despite formally opening job listings to both men and women, recruitment efforts remain largely passive, leading to a predominantly male applicant pool. Interviewees frequently invoked the 'pipeline problem' to explain the lack of female applicants, yet admitted to taking no proactive steps to reach women or diversify the applicant pool:

When the company advertises job openings, both online and in print, our listings are open to both male and female candidates, with clear job requirements outlined. However, we largely receive applications from male candidates and we are not putting efforts to ensure females in the pool. (E6)

Usually, we receive few applications from women for field officer positions, primarily because there is limited awareness of this job among potential female candidates. Also, we don't try to do anything to have women in the applicant pool. (F5)

As a distinct form of boundary work, this practice involved actively positioning women on the exclusionary side of organizational boundaries. Line managers enacted this by deliberately withholding interview opportunities from female applicants or using the interview process itself as a tool for exclusion. These actions were framed through narratives of unsuitability or lack of competence, which served to obscure the underlying gender bias driving these decisions. Through such boundary work, exclusion was legitimized under the guise of meritocratic evaluation, reinforcing gendered divisions while maintaining an appearance of procedural fairness.

Even when we receive a resume from a female applicant, we often do not extend an invitation for an interview. (D6)

At times, we receive CVs sent by the head office, obligating us to contact these candidates. However, we reject them for 'poor interview' performance. (C4)

To avoid hiring female staff, we conduct rigorous interviews with the deliberate intent of rejecting them. The decision ultimately rests within our control. (F3)

The next boundary work tactic involved proactive efforts by line managers to discourage women from entering the organization, thereby reinforcing gendered boundaries around field roles. This was enacted through the strategic use of discouraging language, for instance, emphasizing the absence of female colleagues or portraying fieldwork as too physically demanding for women. Additionally, assigning women to remote locations functioned as a calculated move, exploiting familial and social obligations to deter them from accepting the role. These deliberate practices worked to construct the field environment as incompatible with women's participation, thereby making organizational boundaries appear naturally aligned with gendered divisions while masking the exclusionary intent.

Once, a girl arrived for an interview. Her father expressed his concern about her working in an all-male branch. Upon learning that the branch in which she was offered job, consisted solely of male employees, he refused and took her home with him. (B5)

Typically, before making a selection, we assign certain applicants to field assignments. If we prefer not to hire a candidate[female], we send them to a challenging area. Often, they become apprehensive and realize that the job may not be suitable for them, leading them to decline the opportunity on their own accord. (E2)

Women do not have the independence to make their decision. They are required to seek permission from their parents or husbands before pursuing employment. Especially if there are no other women working in the same branch, women don't get permission... We use this to not hire women. (A2)

These accounts reveal how boundary work is enacted through subtle manipulation of structural and social constraints, where formal inclusion is retained, but practical exclusion is ensured. This form of boundary work reflects a liminal dynamic, where women are neither fully inside nor fully outside the organization. They are symbolically included—able to apply, be interviewed, or even offered roles—but materially excluded through the construction of inaccessible or unappealing opportunities. Overall, the described situations

reflect efforts to render boundary work opaque and difficult to navigate, thereby restricting women's ability to cross or contest these boundaries (Azambuja et al., 2023).

Justified discrimination

Participants engaged in various rationalizing actions to defend their positions, thereby legitimizing their viewpoints and reinforcing existing boundaries. Through this form of defensive boundary work, line managers actively constructed and justified symbolic distinctions between those deemed to belong and those considered outsiders.

By positioning themselves on one side of the boundary, managers discursively framed exclusionary decisions as rational or normative, even when these actions were inherently unfair. One prominent tactic involved aligning themselves with peer managers, fluidly shifting between personal views and an assumed collective stance. This boundary work tactic enabled them to normalize resistance to hiring women by presenting it not as individual bias but as an industry-wide norm, thus reinforcing a symbolic boundary between male insiders and female outsiders.

Additionally, branch managers employed benevolent discourses as boundary work strategies that obscured exclusionary intent. For instance, managers portrayed women as inherently vulnerable and workplaces as unsafe, especially for roles requiring mobility. This framing, though superficially caring, masked the gendered logic of exclusion. The boundary work here operates through discourses that render exclusion acceptable by reinterpreting it as protection. Thus, the boundary between men and women was not only maintained but morally justified, highlighting how discursive strategies work to obscure structural inequalities.

We don't hire women due to concerns about their safety. We want to prevent any potential mishaps or negative situations. We care for them and want to ensure their well-being. If we hire them, they might have to suffer in the future. (A3)

Boundary work was also evident in how participants strategically invoked institutional policies to justify exclusion. Rather than viewing women-friendly legislation as protective, managers recast laws such as the Maternity Benefit Act as burdensome, reinforcing boundaries around women's participation. This reinterpretation of policy serves as a boundary work tactic that frames structural support for women as operational risk, thereby justifying exclusion in ostensibly rational terms.

Our budget allocation for hiring employees in a branch is determined based on the number of customers. Employing women means providing them with six months of paid maternity leave, which is a significant financial commitment. (D3)

MFIs are small organizations. How can we afford to pay six months of paid leave to women? (F1)

Despite policy provisions for hiring temporary replacements during maternity leave, managers resisted utilizing them. They feared doing so might be perceived by male staff as offering special privileges to women. This underscores how boundary maintenance is not only about drawing lines but also about preserving perceived equity within the insider group by avoiding any actions that could be interpreted as favoring outsiders. Further, line managers described the Sexual Harassment Act as creating complications in male-female work interactions. Here, boundary work involved constructing women as risks to the organizational order, thereby reinforcing exclusion as a preventative measure. The threat of legal consequences became a discursive tool to justify the maintenance of gendered boundaries, portraying women's inclusion as a liability rather than an asset.

There are occasions when, in the event of lower collections, we [Branch managers] have a heightened level of frustration which comes out in our language. Even at the field level, they [male field officers] show a lot of aggressiveness, when targets are not met. This can create discomfort for women and they can file sexual harassment complaints. (B3)

Lending is not difficult, but the collection process is difficult. It's a target-based job. If we hire women, we cannot pressurize them to meet these targets, that makes it challenging to coordinate with female staff. We fear that they may file sexual harassment complaints, so it's fair on our part, to not have women. (E3)

As an inherently political process, this boundary work reveals how the interpretation and implementation of laws are open to contestation by actors (La Barbera and Lombardo, 2019; Tildesley et al., 2023), who may selectively mobilize or resist them, justifying discriminatory practices under a logic of risk avoidance.

Reinforcing exclusion through passive managerial endorsement

This theme highlights how line managers engaged in reinforcement boundary work by strategically interpreting the passivity of senior managers, ranging from immediate supervisors to area, regional, and zonal managers, as tacit approval. While prior research often characterizes senior leadership as instrumental in advancing gender equality, our findings reveal that their inaction functioned as a key enabling condition for exclusionary boundary work. Line managers viewed this silence not as indifference, but as implicit endorsement, which emboldened them to actively reproduce and fortify gendered boundaries within the organization.

Acknowledge support from senior managers

Participants constructed and manipulated the legitimacy of inclusion or exclusion by invoking perceived alignment with those higher in the hierarchy. By positioning senior managers as co-

signatories, albeit passive ones to their decisions, line managers reasserted and stabilized exclusionary boundaries, lending them an appearance of organizational legitimacy and routine.

If we express our desire to not hire the candidate [woman] they [senior managers] are understanding and do not inquire, 'why you don't want to hire,' or 'what's the reason for it'. The final choice is entirely at our discretion. (F7)

They understand why we don't want to hire women. That's why they [senior managers] just don't question us. (D4)

This perceived alignment with senior managers became a mechanism through which line managers reinforced and legitimized their own boundary-setting authority. Their boundary work not only excluded women from recruitment pipelines but also reframed this exclusion as rational and aligned with organizational culture and goals. The lack of questioning or challenge from above was converted into discursive capital, used to justify their hiring decisions and bolster their control over workforce composition.

Senior managers refrain from providing any recommendations or initiatives to boost the representation of women. They don't want to pressurize us to hire women if we are not comfortable working with women. (E1)

We had less women at field; now the numbers are very less. Still, they [senior managers] never offer any suggestions. I mean there is no conversation about this (C2)

Here, the boundary work is not simply about keeping women out of field roles; it is about constructing and maintaining boundaries as shared organizational positions, sustained through silence and institutional passivity. This reinforces Heracleous' (2004) notion that boundaries are not fixed, but emerge from "messy socio-political processes" that later come to appear stable or natural.

Collective justification through economic rationalization

Another dimension of this boundary work involved line managers aligning with senior management's shared emphasis on financial priorities, thereby reinforcing and legitimizing their own exclusionary practices. By referencing external shocks such as demonetization, a nationwide policy announced by the Indian government in November 2016 that abruptly invalidated certain Indian Rupee currency notes, severely impacting the cash-based microfinance industry and the COVID-19 pandemic, line managers constructed a narrative of financial strain and operational risk that rationalized the continued exclusion of women. These contextual references allowed them to frame exclusionary decisions as not just personal preferences, but as organizational imperatives aligned with senior leadership's business priorities.

Actually, demonetization and COVID-19 lockdown badly affected our books[finances], so we [branch managers and senior managers] have to cut down the cost. Senior managers are with us on this. (F8)

When women take maternity leave for 6-9 months, who will work on her behalf? They [senior managers] understand that. It turns out to be a costly affair, when we [branch managers and senior managers] are trying to cut down cost. (B2)

This illustrates a collective form of boundary work, in which line managers perform alignment with senior management to construct a shared boundary that prioritizes operational efficiency over gender diversity. What emerges is not just discriminatory hiring but the consolidation of boundaries that regulate gendered access to organizational roles, boundaries that are not arbitrary but strategically justified through economic pragmatism and collective endorsement.

They [senior managers] understand that field has become really tough and we struggle to meet targets. In the past, there was significant pressure to ensure that each pool included at least one woman. However, that pressure has now been lifted, and the push is no longer there (D1).

The repercussions of demonetization and the lockdown were severe for us. Now we [branch managers and senior managers] don't think about hiring women. What matters is business. (C2)

In sum, by aligning with senior managers' passivity, line managers help construct a stable, organization-wide logic that justifies exclusion. This boundary work shows that exclusion is not simply the absence of inclusion but the result of deliberate efforts to normalize gendered divisions under the guise of neutrality and strategic necessity. Our findings demonstrate how managerial agency, anchored in hierarchical alignment and economic rationality, generates shared norms and behaviors (Kislov, 2018) that legitimize and sustain exclusionary practices.

DISCUSSION

Our study investigated how line managers in MFIs contribute to the (re)production of gender inequalities through boundary work. Operating within a rural, patriarchal context, line managers engaged in boundary work at the intersection of social and symbolic boundaries, reinforcing gendered divisions that marginalized women field officers. This research underscores the pivotal role of line managers in advancing, or undermining, diversity goals and responds to recent calls to examine how line managers shape the implementation of diversity agendas (Elhousy et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2021). Drawing on our empirical findings, we offer three key contributions to the literature on boundary work.

First, we foreground the discursive nature of boundary work as a key mechanism for legitimizing and sustaining gendered exclusion. While prior research has primarily focused on the outcomes of boundary work (Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta et al., 2022), we shift attention to how actors engage in defensive boundary work (Langley et al., 2019), strategically drawing on paternalistic and morally coded narratives of care, safety, and necessity. These narratives obscure discriminatory intent and allow exclusion to persist under the guise of concern. We show how benevolent discrimination (Romani et al., 2019) operates not through overt

hostility but through socially and culturally resonant discourses that frame exclusion as morally justified.

Building on this, we demonstrate how women-friendly legislation, such as the Maternity Benefit Act and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, is discursively reframed by line managers as operational constraints. By portraying legal compliance as incompatible with business goals, managers reassert exclusionary boundaries while presenting noncompliance as pragmatically necessary. This offers a novel perspective on defensive boundary work, revealing how institutional mechanisms designed to promote inclusion can be appropriated to rationalize exclusion. In doing so, we extend understandings of boundary work as a politically contested process (Heracleous, 2004), where actors reinterpret external pressures to serve entrenched power interests. Further, we illuminate how boundary work unfolds in liminal spaces—where formal inclusion coexists with material exclusion—showing how women are symbolically included yet practically marginalized through spatial segregation, moral rationalization, and rhetorical discouragement. These dynamics expose how inequality is reproduced not just through overt discrimination, but through routinized practices masked by the language of care and inclusion.

Second, our study contributes to understanding the gendered enactment of boundary work (Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta et al., 2022; Vuolanto and Kolehmainen, 2021) as a micro-level, strategic process through which male managers reproduce and legitimize gender hierarchies by aligning organizational norms with dominant cultural expectations. Our findings reveal how line managers interpret their roles through a gendered lens, positioning women as outsiders to field operations and shaping their access to resources, roles, and opportunities accordingly. Drawing on stereotypes that depict women as physically weak, or dependent on

familial approval, managers justify the containment of women through routine acts of regulation and restriction.

This perspective highlights how managerial practices embed patriarchal logics into organizational life by aligning professional judgments with dominant cultural norms. The blurring of boundaries between organizational expectations and societal gender roles enables exclusionary practices to appear morally grounded and socially acceptable. In doing so, our analysis deepens the understanding of boundary work as a relational and cultural process, where inclusion and exclusion are constantly negotiated through the everyday actions of line managers who occupy interpretive and discretionary spaces within the organization.

Finally, we offer a dynamic understanding of how managerial agency interacts with organizational structures, specifically senior management, in the enactment of boundary work. Our findings show that line managers actively reinforce gendered boundaries by interpreting the passivity of senior leaders not as indifference, but as tacit approval of exclusionary practices. In the absence of explicit directives or accountability mechanisms, this managerial inaction is strategically reframed as organizational consensus, enabling line managers to present their decisions as aligned with broader institutional norms and expectations.

Through this discursive alignment, line managers draw on economic rationalities, such as cost control, operational efficiency, and crisis-induced constraints, to justify the exclusion of women as a practical and necessary decision. Citing shared financial pressures, including those brought on by events like demonetization and the COVID-19 pandemic, line managers repackage gendered exclusion as a business imperative rather than a biased choice. In this way, inaction becomes a performative resource, leveraged to construct a coherent narrative of exclusion that appears aligned with the organization's strategic goals.

This contribution complicates dominant portrayals of senior leaders as the primary agents of institutional change (Kelan, 2022) by revealing how their passivity enables line managers to assert discretionary control over diversity outcomes. Rather than disrupting gendered practices, senior leaders' passivity is mobilized to stabilize them. We show that boundary work in such contexts is not confined to individual interpretations, but is collectively reinforced through symbolic alignment with higher authority and embedded in shared discourses of economic rationality. This produces durable, institutionally endorsed forms of exclusion that are sustained over time, not through explicit resistance to diversity, but through its marginalization in the name of neutrality, efficiency, and organizational coherence.

Implications of practice

The findings of this study underscore that gender exclusion in MFIs is not merely the result of individual bias but is structurally embedded and institutionally sustained through the boundary work of line managers, often reinforced by the passivity of senior leadership. Addressing such deeply entrenched practices requires moving beyond conventional diversity training toward systemic, multi-level interventions that target the structural, procedural, and discursive foundations of exclusion. First, MFIs must establish formal accountability mechanisms within hiring processes, as unchecked managerial discretion enables discretionary exclusionary practices. This may involve independent reviews of recruitment decisions, documented justifications for candidate rejections, and the inclusion of neutral observers on interview panels. Second, gender inclusion should be positioned as a core organizational outcome rather than a peripheral HR concern. MFIs should embed gender diversity metrics into managerial performance evaluations, monitor gender-disaggregated hiring and attrition data, and link inclusive practices to performance-based incentives.

Third, there is an urgent need to reframe how protective legislation, such as the Maternity Benefit Act and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, is understood and implemented. MFIs should invest in policy literacy workshops to help managers interpret these frameworks as tools for building inclusive workplaces, rather than as liabilities. Without such efforts, there is a risk of misinterpreting or misapplying legal protections intended to support women's workforce participation (Reichel et al., 2023). Fourth, senior leadership passivity must be actively addressed. Senior managers should be directly involved in reviewing gender outcomes, intervening in patterns of systemic exclusion, and demonstrating sustained institutional commitment to inclusion. This may include establishing diversity councils and conducting regular audits of branches with notable gender disparities. Finally, MFIs must intervene at the level of discourse. Because exclusion is sustained through narratives of female vulnerability, moral risk, and domestic prioritization, organizations should actively promote counter-narratives that showcase the success of women in field roles, foster peer mentorship, and equip line managers to engage families and communities constructively. In sum, our findings call for a shift from one-off awareness efforts to systemic change that dismantles the conditions sustaining gendered exclusion through boundary work.

Limitations and future research

This study offers a critical yet partial perspective by centering on the boundary work practices of male line managers. While this underexamined focus sheds light on how dominant actors reproduce everyday exclusion (Joshi et al., 2015), it also limits our ability to capture how such exclusion is experienced, contested, or negotiated by marginalized actors. Future research should incorporate the voices of women field officers to explore how they perceive and navigate organizational boundaries, particularly in rural or patriarchal sectors—such as construction, manufacturing, or microfinance—where intersectional inequalities often

intensify marginalization. Second, our analysis draws exclusively from line managers' accounts, excluding the perspectives of senior leadership. Although we highlight how the passivity of senior managers is interpreted as tacit approval, we cannot ascertain whether this inaction stems from strategic ambiguity, bureaucratic inertia, or deliberate disengagement. Further inquiry should adopt multi-level approaches to examine how power and responsibility are distributed across organizational hierarchies, and how silence functions as an active mechanism of boundary maintenance.

Third, by focusing on male line managers as a group, we risk treating them as a uniform category. Future studies should interrogate how performances of masculinity, and the enactment of boundary work, vary across organizational levels, regions, and institutional cultures. Disaggregating these dynamics would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how power operates through intersecting dimensions of gender, role, and positionality, shaping who is empowered to police or permeate boundaries. Finally, we call for more contextualized and intersectional research on boundary work in non-Western settings (Langley et al., 2019). In countries like India, workplace boundaries are not only gendered but also entangled with broader social hierarchies based on caste, class, religion, and sexuality. Attending to these intersecting inequalities would allow researchers to reconceptualize boundary work as not merely an organizational practice but a socio-political process embedded in historically rooted systems of exclusion. Such scholarship would deepen critical boundary work literature by exposing how seemingly neutral organizational boundaries are complicit in reproducing structural marginalization.

Conclusion

We examine how line managers perform boundary work to reinforce workplace inequalities, foregrounding both the processual and gendered dimensions of this phenomenon. Our

findings demonstrate how managerial agency, shaped by the perceived passivity of senior male managers, sustains exclusionary practices and legitimizes structural inequality. By showing how line managers interpret inaction as tacit support, we reveal how managerial passivity amplifies their role in maintaining rigid boundaries. Bringing these insights together, we call for more context-sensitive research on boundary work in the Global South, where distinct legal frameworks, institutional gaps, and socio-cultural dynamics shape boundary formation in ways that differ markedly from Western contexts.

ENDNOTE

¹ The authors recognize that gender is non-binary. However, in this article, we draw upon the gender diversity literature, which predominantly focuses on categorizations of men and women. Additionally, for the organizations we studied, gender diversity centered on addressing the representation and inclusion of women.

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