

# Gender Diversity at the Workplace: Fostering Employee Engagement through Psychological Safety

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## **Abstract**

**Objective** – The aim of this study is to explore and evaluate how gender diversity affects employee engagement levels. Furthermore, the principal objective of this research is to examine the potential mediating influence of psychological safety

**Design/methodology** – The present study employed various statistical analyses, including ANOVA, correlation, regression, and mediation analysis, to evaluate a sample of 281 participants.

**Findings** – The results indicate that the existence of gender diversity significantly impacts employee engagement, but it does not seem to have a discernible effect on psychological safety

**Practical implications** – The study indicates that human resource practitioners and researchers would benefit from adopting a more adaptable approach in order to enhance the development and engagement of individuals. This approach takes into account the gender disparities among employees and showcases adaptability in addressing the unique needs and preferences of different employee cohorts.

**Originality/value** – The results of this research make a valuable contribution to the body of existing literature on the association between gender diversity and employee engagement. This study emphasizes the significance of the intervening role of psychological safety in augmenting the association between gender diversity and employee engagement.

**Keywords** – Employee engagement, gender diversity, psychological safety, mediation, correlation.

## 1. Introduction

Enterprises in the current business environment have been required to promptly adapt to a range of changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, changes in global markets, increased global competitiveness, developments in technology, alterations in government rules, and quickly changing employee expectations and demands have been identified as significant factors (Collins et al., 2020; Malhotra, 2021).

In contemporary organizational settings, there is a growing recognition of the enduring presence of change. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that change initiatives experience a failure rate spanning from 30% to 70% (Stouten et al., 2018; Schwarz et al., 2021; Hughes, 2022). The success of organizational transformation is significantly contingent on the execution process. Senior leaders bear the responsibility of conceptualizing, strategizing, implementing, and communicating change initiatives. According to Oreg et al. (2011), the achievement of successful transformation relies on several critical factors. As noted by Choi (2011), there is an observable trend where employees are adopting new cognitive and behavioral approaches. Hence, it is imperative to apply relevant theories and research in this context.

Prior studies have demonstrated that highly engaged employees tend to manifest a variety of positive outcomes, including a reduced intention to leave their organization, improved customer service delivery, enhanced financial performance, lowered job stress, and increased psychological well-being (Harter et al., 2020; Memon et al., 2020). The significance of employee engagement is underscored by the relatively low global engagement rate, which stands at 15% (Harter and Rubenstein, 2020).

Researchers are also delving into the correlation between employee engagement and psychological safety. The concept of psychological safety has garnered substantial attention in the field of organizational behavior, stemming from research conducted on organizational change. Schein and Bennis have emphasized the importance of organizations addressing the psychological safety needs of their members within the context of organizational change. As organizations grapple with the dynamic nature of their internal and external environments, resource reallocation, and adaptation, they must proactively respond to both opportunities and challenges to ensure their long-term sustainability and growth. This necessitates the implementation of various forms of organizational change, such as adjustments to their structure, workforce restructuring, and the promotion of strategic innovation.

However, implementing organizational change has the potential to evoke anxieties, fears, and feelings of insecurity among organizational members. These emotional responses can lead to increased turnover rates, decreased productivity, and a decline in job performance, among other potential consequences. Thus, it is imperative to address the psychological well-being of individuals within the organization during periods of organizational change. This can be achieved

by prioritizing their psychological safety, enhancing their sense of organizational identification, and fostering trust (Edmondson, 1999).

Psychological safety encompasses the well-being of individuals within an organization during times of organizational transition and is intricately linked to the effort and contributions exhibited by organizational members. Stimulating individual enthusiasm for their work and subsequently enhancing work performance can boost the core competitiveness of the organization.

### *1.1. Gender Diversity*

The theme of diversity has received substantial attention in recent academic research. According to Rafnsdóttir (2011), diversity has become a widely discussed topic in contemporary society, particularly among those involved in political decision-making and academia. In the context of the workplace, diversity pertains to the presence of differences among individuals. As noted by Ike and Eze (2013), this concept encompasses the recognition and appreciation of both the unique attributes and shared qualities among individuals.

According to Daft and Marcic (2008), employees within organizations exhibit diversity in various aspects, including socioeconomic status, age demographics, educational backgrounds, personality traits, skills, religious beliefs, ethnic affiliations, and racial identities. Additional factors contributing to individual diversity encompass gender, personal experiences, skin and eye color, physical abilities, ethnicity, national origin, disabilities, sexual orientation, values, cultural backgrounds, language, lifestyles, beliefs, physical appearances, and economic standings. However, the primary focus of this study revolves around gender diversity and its relationship with employee engagement.

Gender pertains to the social and biological characteristics associated with individuals identifying as male or female. Gender diversity is widely recognized as a significant demographic concern within the field of management practice, as emphasized by Kanter (1997). In the workplace, gender diversity relates to how individuals of different genders, specifically women and men, are perceived and treated within the professional context. It raises questions about the gender balance in the workplace when equal opportunities are provided and whether there are instances of overt or subtle gender discrimination.

An organization characterized by a balanced representation of genders is commonly referred to as a gender-diverse organization, while an organization with a predominant gender is often perceived as lacking gender diversity or sensitivity.

### *1.2. Psychological Safety*

The concept of psychological safety was first introduced to the field of organizational sciences by Schein and Bennis in 1965. However, it is only in more recent years that there has been a significant increase in empirical research on this topic. Psychological safety is a distinct cognitive state that differs from several other states explored in the field of organizational sciences. Psychological

safety refers to a psychological condition wherein individuals have a sense of safety, security, and comfort (Edmondson,1999). The perception of employees regarding their confidence in freely expressing themselves inside a specific workplace, without any apprehension of negative consequences on their career advancement and self-perception, has been discussed in previous research (Aramovich, 2013). The establishment of a psychologically secure environment in the workplace is of utmost importance, as it has been found that employees who feel psychologically safe are more likely to exhibit higher levels of engagement, engage in proactive behaviors, take initiative, and express their ideas (Edmondson,2004). Likewise, the establishment of psychological safety within the workplace has been found to foster employee pro-activity (Bakker et. al., 2019) hence enhancing their overall job performance (Edmondson, 2014).

### *1.3.Employee Engagement*

The concept of employee engagement is a well-explored topic in the fields of human resource management and employee psychology. This phenomenon is currently experiencing a rapid increase in awareness, utilization, and importance within professional settings, impacting various aspects of organizational functioning in a multifaceted manner. Human resources professionals are of the view that employee engagement is intricately connected to an individual's perception of their work experience and the way they are treated within the organizational framework. What sets engagement apart from merely having a job is its focus on how an individual conducts themselves while fulfilling their professional responsibilities

### *1.4.Review of Literature*

#### *1.4.1. Gender diversity*

Gender diversity refers to the presence and active participation of individuals from various genders within organizational settings. Numerous studies on diversity have demonstrated notable variations in responses between different genders. The level of gender diversity within a workforce has a significant impact on the extent to which diversity management initiatives are embraced (Soni, 2020). A research conducted in Australia revealed that women exhibit a higher level of receptiveness towards diversity initiatives inside organizations compared to men (Solan, 2008). In a similar vein, women exhibit a more favorable disposition towards workforce diversity and related activities compared to men, placing greater emphasis on the significance of fostering diversity within the workforce (Patrick, 2012). A separate research conducted in India revealed a notable disparity in the gender perspectives towards diversity initiatives within the organizational context (Rao, 2014).

#### 1.4.2. Psychological Safety

Psychological safety has gained widespread recognition as a mediator in the field of organizational literature, with studies like those conducted by Lyu (2016) and Zhou and Chen (2021) making noteworthy contributions. Furthermore, research on employee silence and voice, as exemplified by Elsaied (2019), has significantly integrated psychological safety as a mediating factor.

Psychological safety, as defined by Clark (2019), denotes a condition where individuals feel a sense of inclusion, the freedom to acquire knowledge, the ability to make meaningful contributions, and the liberty to question established norms without the fear of embarrassment, marginalization, or punitive measures. The impact of psychological safety on workplace effectiveness and employee engagement has been extensively scrutinized through empirical studies conducted in various locations and countries (Edmondson and Lei, 2014).

Baer and Frese (2003) contend that when discussing psychological safety, it's essential to consider two distinct concepts: individual psychological safety and team psychological safety. It's crucial to differentiate between merely deviating from certain standards and establishing a psychologically secure workplace (Edmondson, 2012). Two pivotal factors worthy of examination are psychological security and performance responsibility. According to Dunne and Greenwald (2014), the presence of psychological safety plays a pivotal role in fostering an environment in which employees are motivated to take measured risks, employ creative thinking in their professional tasks, and actively engage in their work responsibilities. This, in turn, contributes to the enhancement of work engagement.

Furthermore, as observed by Hall et al. (2010), a positive psychological environment positively impacts the level of employee engagement. When employees believe they are not exposed to any form of threat in their environment, they are encouraged to exert greater effort in their work. The concepts of psychological security and performance responsibility represent important areas of study in the field of psychology, encompassing factors such as trust and support.

#### 1.4.3. Employee Engagement

As per Kahn's (1990) perspective, employee engagement can be defined as the process by which individuals within an organization wholeheartedly invest themselves in their job tasks, displaying physical, cognitive, and emotional involvement during their work performances. Employee engagement is commonly categorized into three distinct dimensions: emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and social engagement (Soane et al., 2012).

Emotional engagement, according to their research, pertains to assessing an individual's level of attachment to their role and the display of a positive attitude towards their work. Cognitive engagement relates to the degree of involvement and absorption demonstrated by individuals in carrying out their job responsibilities. Social engagement refers to the extent to which an individual

aligns their values with those of others. Although employee engagement can be classified in various ways, emotional engagement holds particular significance in influencing employee performance.

Noah and Steve (2012) present evidence supporting the idea that employees who experience emotional attachment to their work are more likely to maintain a strong commitment to their organization

### 1.5.Objectives of the study

- To analyze the demographic profile (gender Profile) of the respondents.
- To examine the impact of gender on employee engagement.
- To investigate the mediating effect of psychological safety between gender and employee engagement.

## 2. Material & Methods

### 2.1. Research Design

The research employed a cross-sectional design, wherein data were gathered at a single time point. The utilization of a cross-sectional survey research methodology was considered suitable for this study due to its ability to efficiently and consistently gather data from a large number of participants simultaneously. According to Wakahiu et al. (2016), the utilisation of a cross-sectional survey design improves the reliability and uniformity of the gathered data. Therefore, this methodology was utilized to gather data from a representative subset of the population in order to estimate the correlation between the variables under investigation in this research.

### 2.2 Instrument

Questionnaires were employed as a means of gathering data. The employee engagement questionnaires utilized in this study were derived from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) developed by Goodman and Svyantek (1999) and Psychological safety dimensions questionnaires used in this study were derived from the scale developed by Dr. Edmondson(1999), while the gender diversity questions were adapted from the research conducted by Onwuchekwa et al. (2019).

### 2.3 Data collection

The study's population consisted of 55,665 people working in IT firms based in Mumbai. The sample size for the study was 350 employees from IT firms. Out of the total workforce of 350 individuals, a substantial number of 281 participants diligently completed and submitted the questionnaires. The obtained response rate of 80.2% was deemed sufficient to proceed with the research investigation. The respondents were chosen through the utilization of a probability

sampling strategy, as this particular method enables the researcher to make statistical generalizations based on the research findings (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010).

## 2.4 Data Analysis

The current study employed MS Office Suite Excel and IBM SPSS version 25.0 for statistical computations and the creation of graphical representations of data. The data analysis process involved the utilization of many tools, including reliability testing, validity testing, correlation analysis, regression analysis, ANOVA, and mediation analysis.

## 2.5 Hypotheses

H1 – Gender does not significantly impact the employee engagement.

H2 – Gender and Psychological safety are not significantly correlated.

H3 - Psychological safety and Employee engagement are not significantly correlated.

H4 - Psychological safety does not significantly mediate between the Gender and Employee engagement.

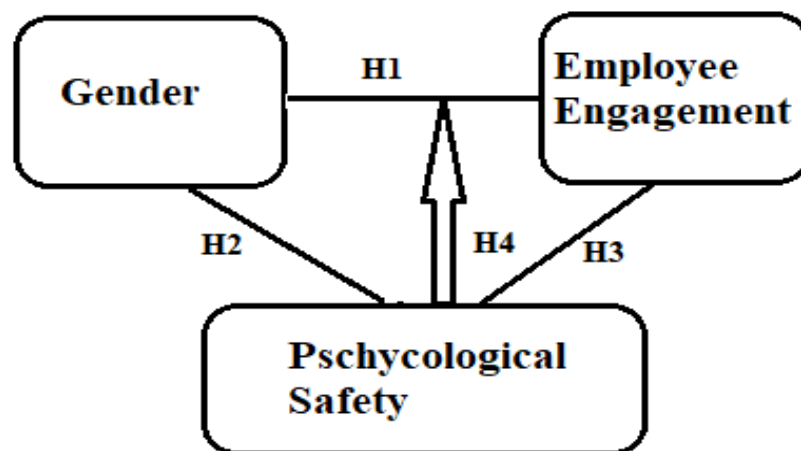


Fig. 1. Mediation Model

### 3. Results and Interpretations

#### 3.1 Demographic analysis - Gender

Statistics		
Gender		
N	Valid	281
	Missing	0
Mean		1.4662
Std. Deviation		0.49975
Variance		0.250

Gender					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	150	53.4	53.4	53.4
	Female	131	46.6	46.6	100.0
	Total	281	100.0	100.0	

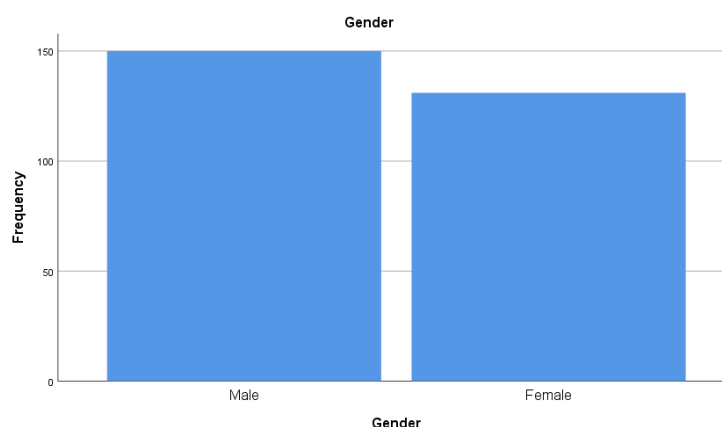


Fig. Graphical representation of Gender

#### 3.2 Reliability test

##### 3.2.1 Psychological Safety

The standardized scale that has been adopted for the purpose of measuring Psychological Safety. Attention has been the focus of research conducted by Dr. Edmondson(1999). The scale was comprised of 11 items and reported 0.82 as the reliability and the study reported a good Cronbach's alpha of 0.812.

##### 3.2.2 Employee Engagement

The study utilized a standardized scale to assess employee engagement, which was originally established by Goodman and Svyantek (1999). The scale consists of 17 items measured on a Likert scale. The scale was comprised of three assertions. The Cronbach's alpha values recorded for the original scale ranged from .80 to .90, while the Cronbach's alpha obtained for the present study was .802. The level of satisfaction is deemed acceptable.



H1 – Gender does not significantly impact the employee engagement.

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.478 <sup>a</sup>	0.229	0.226	8.40148
a. Predictors: (Constant), Gender				

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	71.818	1.556		46.156	0.000
	Gender	-9.138	1.005	-0.478	-9.095	0.000
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Engagement						

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5839.289	1	5839.289	82.727	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	19693.159	279	70.585		
	Total	25532.448	280			
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Engagement						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Gender						

The findings from the regression analysis present compelling evidence to reject the null hypothesis, which posits that there is no significant impact of gender on employee engagement. Hypothesis1 (H1) posits a significant association between gender and employee engagement. Therefore, the null hypothesis H1 is rejected @5% LoS.

H2 – Gender and Psychological safety are not significantly correlated.

Correlations			
		Gender	Psychological Safety
Gender	Pearson Correlation	1	-.372**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	281	281
Psychological Safety	Pearson Correlation	-.372**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	281	281
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

The table presented above indicates that the p-value, as reported under the Sig. (2-tailed) column, is .000, which is below the significance level of 0.05. A negative correlation was observed between the variables of gender and psychological safety ( $r = -.372$ ,  $N = 281$ ,  $p < .000$ ).

H3 - Psychological safety and Employee engagement are not significantly correlated.

Correlations			
		Psychological Safety	Employee Engagement
Psychological Safety	Pearson Correlation	1	.571**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	281	281
Employee Engagement	Pearson Correlation	.571**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	281	281
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

The table provided above indicates that the p-value, as denoted under the Sig. (2-tailed) column, is .000, which is below the threshold of 0.05.

The study revealed a substantial positive correlation ( $r = .571$ ,  $N = 281$ ,  $p < .000$ ) between the variables of Psychological Safety and Employee Engagement.

H4 - Psychological safety does not significantly mediate between the Gender and Employee engagement.

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>					
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t
1	(Constant)	71.818	1.556		46.156
	Gender	-9.138	1.005	-0.478	9.095
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Engagement					

The presented table demonstrates that the independent variable Gender exhibits a statistically significant predictive relationship with the dependent variable of employee engagement ( $t = 9.905$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	52.093	1.041		50.065	0.000
	Gender	-4.493	0.672	-0.372	-6.688	0.000
a. Dependent Variable: Psychological Safety						

The aforementioned table indicates that there is a substantial correlation between the independent variable gender and the mediating variable of psychological safety ( $t = 50.065$ ,  $p < .000$ ).

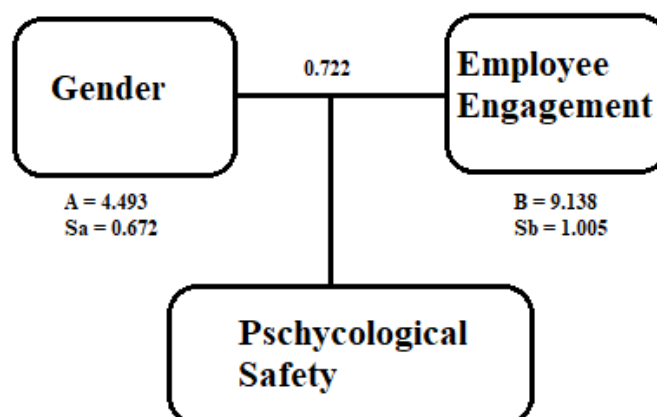
Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	34.201	4.313		7.930	0.000
	Gender	-5.894	0.949	-0.308	-6.208	0.000
	Psychological Safety	0.722	0.079	0.457	9.194	0.000
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Engagement						

Table reveals that while controlling the independent variable gender, the mediating variable psychological safety is a significant predictor of the dependent variable employee engagement ( $t = 7.930$ ,  $p < .05$ ). That is, there is statistical significance for "b" (unstandardized coefficient = 0.722).

Inputs		Test Name	Test Statistics	P Value	
A	4.493	Sobel's Test	5.38650102	One-tailed probability:	0.00004
B	9.138			One-tailed probability:	0.00004
S <sub>a</sub>	0.672	Aroian Test	6.486501	One-tailed probability:	0.00006
S <sub>b</sub>	1.005			One-tailed probability:	0.00006

The Sobel test was employed to investigate if psychological safety acted as a mediator in the association between gender and employee engagement. The findings from the simple linear regression analysis indicate that there is a statistically significant association between Gender and the dependent variable of employee engagement ( $t = 9.905$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Additionally, the Sobel test was employed to evaluate the aforementioned association. The results of the study provided

confirmation that the presence of psychological safety acts as a mediator in the connection between gender and employee engagement.



### 3.3 Findings of the study

The statistics exhibited gender diversity with proportions of 53.3% and 46.6% for each respective category. The investigation on the influence of gender on employee engagement yielded noteworthy findings, indicating that gender has a discernible effect on employee engagement, resulting in a variance of 2.29%. Upon doing a more extensive examination into the relationship between gender and psychological safety, as well as psychological safety and employee engagement, it was discovered that there exists a negative association between gender and psychological safety. Conversely, a positive correlation was observed between psychological safety and employee engagement. Finally, the mediation study revealed a statistically significant mediating role of psychological safety. This finding indicates that psychological safety effectively acts as a mediator between gender and employee engagement.

## 4. Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to explore the relationship and impact of gender diversity on employee engagement while examining the potential mediating role of psychological safety in this association. The study uncovered a statistically significant inverse correlation between gender and employee engagement (EE). However, a positive correlation was identified between psychological safety (PS) and employee engagement. These findings align with prior research conducted across various global regions.

In psychologically secure environments, employees have the assurance that the team will not subject them to embarrassment, rejection, or punishment for expressing their thoughts or opinions. Psychological safety fosters positive interpersonal interactions among employees by creating an environment characterized by support, openness, trust, flexibility, and the absence of threat (Rabiul et al., 2021; Lyu, 2016). In such contexts, employees have the opportunity to express their

perspectives to higher-ranking authorities, establishing confidence and trust with senior-level executives. This, in turn, can cultivate active involvement and commitment within the workplace (Harter et al., 2020; Kirk-Brown and Van Dijk, 2015; Robinson et al., 2004).

A study by Basit (2017) analyzing Malaysian hospital staff revealed a significant positive association between psychological safety and employee engagement. The presence of safety measures and the availability of resources have a beneficial impact on both job engagement and organizational engagement. Multiple studies provide evidence supporting the idea that employees' perception of a psychologically safe work environment, the presence of meaningful work, and access to personal resources contribute to positive employee behaviors, including increased levels of organizational and work engagement, irrespective of their gender diversity (Chen et al., 2011; Fletcher, 2016; Fletcher and Schofield, 2019; Memon et al., 2020).

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

The study's results reveal that gender diversity significantly contributes to employee engagement, but it does not have an observable impact on psychological safety. The findings indicate that there is no noticeable difference in participation levels between males and females. By including all three variables in a mediating model, it is evident that when acting as a mediator, psychological safety plays a crucial role in influencing the connection between gender diversity and employee engagement.

The research suggests that human resource professionals and researchers should adopt a more adaptable approach to effectively develop and engage their workforce. This approach should consider the gender variations among employees and exhibit flexibility in meeting the diverse needs and interests of different employee groups. Additionally, understanding the relationship between gender diversity and psychological safety is essential, as males and females may hold distinct perspectives regarding psychological safety.

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