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Gender differences in board members' perceptions of governance: a study of four European HE systems

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on gender differences in the boards of higher education institutions (HEIs), challenging the notion of inherent differences between men and women in board governance. The article provides a gendered analysis of the perceptions of men and women board members about board governance in Finland, Poland, Portugal and Sweden. Contrary to expectations of diverse perceptions, a survey across these countries' higher education systems revealed that men and women on boards generally shared similar perspectives on board governance. Factors such as professional background, age, and country context proved more significant than gender. The study indicated nuanced differences between men and women board members, such as women exhibiting a more managerialist mindset and emphasizing sustainability. This research contributes to discussions about gender diversity in board governance, extending the exploration to the unique context of European HEIs. The findings provide insights of (gender) diversity and homogeneity of board members and discusses the possible reasons for the homogeneity. For decision-makers and practitioners these insights provide a starting point to shape gender diversity policies for HEIs.

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Introduction

Achieving gender equality in decision-making bodies has long been a widely recognized political and institutional goal within higher education institutions (HEIs) (Klenk et al. 2022). The desire for gender balance is often supported by arguments emphasizing the positive impacts of gender diversity and the increased involvement of women in fostering organizational growth and development. Research has consistently highlighted the benefits of diversified and equitable decision-making, driven by the inclusion of women in leadership roles. For instance, the following impacts have been reported: improved financial performance, stronger organizational climates, stronger commitments to equity and diversity, increased organizational social responsibility and reputation, less corruption, and greater innovation capabilities due to the varied perspectives women and men bring to the table (Hafsi and Turgut 2013; Kakabadse et al. 2015; Madsen 2015; Mechkova, Dahlum, and Petrarca 2024; Ottervik and Su 2023).

The expected benefits are based on the assumption that women and men are inherently different and that women can diversify boards beyond pure gender in terms of skills, abilities, experiences, attitudes, values, behaviours, and networks (Hillman, Shropshire, and Cannella 2007; Kakabadse et al. 2015; Kirsch 2018). However, counterintuitively, studies in different contexts have shown that men and women in board positions may actually be rather similar to each other, holding similar perspectives on board governance (Carvalho and Diogo 2018; Mikkonen, Stenvall, and Lehtonen 2021; Wille et al. 2018), and that the inclusion of women and descriptive representation do not automatically lead to the expected improvement (Mechkova, Dahlum, and Petrarca 2024). The aim of this research is to explore this dilemma, compare the perspectives of women and men university board (council) members regarding board governance, and determine whether gender-based differences exist.

Most gender-related studies on university governance have predominantly focused on leadership or management roles (e.g. Morley 2013; O'Connor 2014; O'Connor et al. 2015; White and Özkanlı 2010; White, Carvalho, and Riordan 2011; Wroblewski 2019) rather than on collective decision-making bodies such as university boards (Rotondo et al. 2022; Sherer and Zakaria 2018). This research therefore provides relevant input for practitioners and decision-makers designing or running gender diversity promotion policies in higher education (HE) governance. Furthermore, this study extends the academic debate on gender diversity and board governance. Specifically, it contributes to the discussion on the assumed differences between men and women in board governance positions and the desired outcomes of gender diversity (Hillman, Shropshire, and Cannella 2007; Kakabadse et al. 2015; Madsen 2015; Mechkova, Dahlum, and Petrarca 2024; Ottervik and Su 2023; Wille et al. 2018). Lastly, we answer the call of Kirsch (2018) for more research on (assumed) gender-based differences in board members' values and traits.

Empirically, this study extends the current body of knowledge by exploring the phenomenon in the context of four European HE systems, which is an underdeveloped stream of research, especially in terms of cross-context research. The current body of knowledge tends to focus on the corporate sector (Kirsch 2018; Reddy and Jadhav 2019; Rotondo et al. 2022). The study is based on a survey of 783 HEI board members and chairs across four European countries' higher education (HE) systems: Finland, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden. These countries have different managerial cultures,

gender-related work practices and policy environment (Klenk et al. 2022; Mikkonen 2023a; Peterson et al. 2021; Siemenska and Domaradzka 2019). Data collection was carried out through an electronic survey questionnaire distributed to all members and chairpersons of higher education institution (HEI) boards. The survey, conducted in 2023, covered all public HEIs, including universities and universities of applied sciences (university colleges), within the specified countries. The collected data were analysed using distribution and regression analysis methods.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce the conceptual underpinnings of this study and present three hypotheses on gender differences based on the previous literature. Second, we briefly introduce our sample, methods, and the variables used in the study. Third, we analyse the data and detail our findings. Fourth, we discuss the findings, and finally, in the last section, we offer general conclusions and highlight their implications.

Board governance in HEIs

The broadening role of boards in higher education institutions (HEIs) is analysed within the frame of New Public Management (NPM)-inspired reforms, as many European countries have implemented governance changes in HEIs to transform them into more professionally managed organizations accountable to the wider society (Antonowicz, Rónay, and Jaworska 2023). These reforms have influenced all the higher education systems under study, shaping the role and composition of university boards (or councils). While this has resulted in notable similarities across the case countries, some differences have persisted (see Appendix 1). University boards serve as the highest decision-making bodies in university governance and typically approve financial plans, determine strategic directions, and oversee operational management.

At a more general level, the functions and internal dynamics of university boards have been explored through at least eight distinct perspectives. First, individual board members may hold varying perspectives on how a board contributes (or should contribute) to institutional decision making as well as about their own role and the contributions they bring on to the board. These contributions can range from providing expert knowledge to representing certain stakeholder groups or safeguarding academic freedom. Based on literature, nine central contributions can be identified. First, one of the most prominent contributions is to supply expert knowledge to the board, whether this involves subject-matter expertise or specialized perspectives, such as governance or fundraising (Kretek, Dragšić, and Kehm 2013). Second, representation different of different internal and/or external groups represents a contribution that is more democratic in nature, with board members seen as advocates for specific stakeholder groups.

Third contribution is strengthening the link between universities and society. To justify their position and public funding, universities must increasingly address societal needs and respond to global challenges like climate change and poverty. In this context, a board member may contribute by voicing the perspectives of the broader society, without compromising the board's independence (De Boer, Huisman, and Meister-Scheytt 2010). Fourth, the board may contribute by holding (university) management accountable for their actions (Kretek, Dragšić, and Kehm 2013). Fifth, the board may contribute by

offering an independent, external perspective on academic issues, thus providing symbolic legitimacy (Rowlands 2013).

Sixth, board and the board members may act as mediators to resolve disputes, thus contributing by conflict resolution. Universities are prone to structural and functional conflicts, given their nature as loosely coupled systems of autonomous units rather than rigid hierarchies. Thus, the board's role includes shielding the university from societal conflicts and resolving internal disputes when necessary for the common good (cf. Hartman 1977). Seventh contribution bases on the increased pressures for social responsibility (see Garde Sánchez et al. 2020). Lastly, NPM-inspired reforms across Europe have impacted institutional autonomy in universities, often reducing it. This has partly contributed to the last two contributions. Board members and the board may view themselves as guardians of academic institutional autonomy (cf. Hartman 1977). On the other hand, they may contribute to institutional decision-making by protecting individual academic freedom, ensuring that the principles of independent scholarly inquiry are upheld amidst evolving governance structures.

Gender, diversity, and board governance in HEIs

This study bases on a fundamental thought that gender is a social structure, organizing all social life (Lorber 1994; Risman 2004). It is rather stable in its given culture; however, constantly (re)shaped through discourses, cultural symbols, interactions and identities (Martin 2003; Risman 2004). Essentially gender refers to the cultural expectations and roles associated with women and men as social groups, while sex refers to the biological aspects and physical bodies of women and men (Muehlenhard and Peterson 2011). While acknowledging the socially constructed nature of gender, we recognize that these two dimensions are closely intertwined as social expectations for being a woman or a man are often influenced by biological factors and physical characteristics (Lips 2014; Yoder 2003), and thus often mixed in everyday language and summed together in policies.

The expectations and roles associated with women and men, femininities and masculinities are (at least) partly shaped by bodies and biological propensities (Muehlenhard and Peterson 2011; Yoder 2003), creating structural inequalities and stereotypes. For instance, the male body is often associated with power and good leadership skills, thus providing men with privileges, while for instance the ability of the female body to become pregnant creates social expectations and socially constructed barriers for women (see Lips 2014; Mikkonen 2023a; Muhr and Sullivan 2013). For transgender, the social expectations of a male/female body contradicting with their gender and gender representations (through femininities and masculinities) may cause prejudice and barriers, as they do not fit the prototype of an ideal leader.[1] We further argue that sex categories, such as male and female, are socially constructed and empirically connected to gender (Muehlenhard and Peterson 2011; West and Zimmermann 2020).

Several studies on general populations have provided evidence that, on average, gender differences exist between self-reported binary genders, women and men, in behaviours such as risk-taking, competitiveness, and confidence. These may partially explain differences in women's and men's experiences of working life and the scarcity of women in decision-making positions (Croson and Gneezy 2009; Kakabadse et al. 2015;

Kirsch 2018). Such findings regarding general populations are often used as the basis for arguments supporting board gender diversity to improve organizational outcomes (Hillman, Shropshire, and Cannella 2007).

In line with this argument regarding gender differences, information/decision-making researchers have claimed that diversity has a positive impact on board governance and organizational outcomes (Williams and O'Reilly 1998). Similarly, resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003) holds that diverse board members bring diverse resources to their organizations, thus benefitting those organizations (Hillman, Cannella, and Paetzold 2000; Rotondo et al. 2022). These approaches have led to the assumption that because gender-diverse groups bring people with different backgrounds and life experiences together, they possess different kinds of knowledge, networks, information, and expertise and approach problems differently. This heterogeneity may promote more diverse contextual understanding and decision-making (Reddy and Jadhav 2019) and foster social responsibility and sustainability awareness (Amorelli and García-Sánchez 2021; Nicolò et al. 2023), compliance with laws and regulations (Fernandes and Machado 2023), and improved financial performance (Aversano et al. 2023). If varied expertise and knowledge are considered and valued in organizational decision-making, a group's outcomes should improve, even if diversity negatively affects the group's functioning (Williams and O'Reilly 1998). This rationale has often been discussed when arguing for gender equality and diversity in decision-making bodies, such as organizational boards.

However, studies conducted with women and men in board positions have considered another perspective. Women and men in board or other top-level decision-making positions may be more similar to each other than general population studies suggest, and assumptions based on general populations may not hold for women in board positions (Carvalho and Diogo 2018; Mikkonen, Stenvall, and Lehtonen 2021; Wille et al. 2018). For instance, Sila, Gonzalez, and Hagendorff (2016) found that boards with high proportions of women are no more or less prone to risk-taking than male-dominated boards, and Wille et al. (2018) concluded that men and women in board positions reflect fundamentally similar populations in terms of personality traits. Furthermore, Aversano et al. (2023) showed that board gender diversity does not affect universities' performance (apart from financial performance), hinting that the perspectives of women and men may be similar even when the influence of critical mass (Kanter 1977) is considered. Socioeconomic background, age and professional experience may be more important factors than gender in influencing decision-making behaviour. Based on these counter-intuitive studies, the following hypothesis was formed:

> H1: Women and men have similar perceptions concerning most board governance contributions.

Even if women and men in leadership positions may be rather similar, previous studies have highlighted that there may also be some differences between them. In addition to professional background, age, and other socioeconomic characteristics (Adams and Funk 2012), contextual factors – such as a country's culture – may also play a role in shaping perceptions of men and women serving on boards (Pinheiro et al. 2015). The share of women on boards differs between the countries. However, women are a minority in different high-level decision-making positions compared to

men in HE across most of the countries analysed (Sweden an exception with 54.5% of women leaders and 49.5% of women in scientific and administrative boards, or advisory boards of a research organizations (see European Commission 2021])). There are also socio-cultural differences across the countries that may impact gender equality and the share of women on boards. Broadly speaking, Finland and Sweden represent the Nordic welfare model, characterized by egalitarian societies and weak male-breadwinner models (Klenk et al. 2022; Mikkonen 2023a), Portugal has a strong double-earner model and a high number of women professionals in academia (Peterson et al. 2021), while Poland has a stronger traditional division of paid and unpaid labour between men and women (Siemenska and Domaradzka 2019).

When considering progress in reducing the gender gap, the figures of Finland and Sweden are flattening (European Institute for Gender Equality 2023). Although their gender equality levels are generally higher than the EU average, their progress in recent years has slowed, narrowing the gap between these high performers and the EU average. Portugal's index is lower than the EU average, but the country is making rapid improvements, thus catching up with other EU countries. Poland has also improved its Gender Equality Index, but it remains significantly lower than the EU average, and its progress is slower, resulting in a widening gap between the EU average and Poland's score (European Institute for Gender Equality 2023).

These characteristics are reflected in the decision-making bodies of the countries' HE systems. Sweden has the highest number of women in different board positions (e.g. on scientific and administrative boards and on the advisory boards of research organizations), followed by Finland and Portugal. All three countries rank above the European Union (EU) women board participation average, while Poland ranks below the average (European Commission 2021). Similar trend can be found across sectors in different international reports, such as the Gender Gap Report (share of women's membership in boards Swe: 37.9; Fin: 35.2; Por: 31.0; Pol: 24.7; World Economic Forum 2023). These statistics support Hofstede's (2001) theorizations about the effects of country context on individuals. In masculine cultures, gender roles are generally stricter, which may lead to stronger differences between women's and men's behaviour than in countries with lower masculinity indices. Different country contexts may result in different perceptions of gender and leadership in universities (White and Özkanlı 2010), and different gender systems across different societies may explain the wide variation in women's behaviour in different societies (Alatas et al. 2009). Therefore, we expected that the country might be more important than gender in influencing decision-making behaviour (Adams 2016; Alatas et al. 2009; Hofstede 2001; Ottervik and Su 2023; White, Carvalho, and Riordan 2011). Based on the preceding literature, we formulated the following hypotheses (Hs):

> H2: Differences between women's and men's perceptions of board governance are mitigated by other relevant determinants, such as country, age, and professional background.

Another line of argument proposes that while there may be differences between men and women decision-makers, these differences do not necessarily reflect the traditional stereotypes of women as more feminine and men as more masculine (Adams and Ferreira 2009; Adams and Funk 2012). Some studies have suggested that women on corporate boards may actually display characteristics and behaviours that are traditionally

perceived to be masculine, such as strong self-direction, stimulation orientation, and risk-taking, but be less security- and tradition-oriented than men (e.g. Adams and Funk 2012). In particular, women and women-dominated boards tend to be more active in undertaking board work than men. Moreover, women board members tend to be more assiduous in monitoring operational leadership and holding CEOs accountable for poor performance (Adams and Ferreira 2009; Aversano et al. 2023; Dang, Bender, and Scotto 2014; Fernandes and Machado 2023; Zalata et al. 2019). Conversely, another line of research supporting women's high monitoring tendency regarding board governance has argued that women are more risk-averse and, hence, more altruistic, cautious, communal, fair, independent, objective, and responsible (Zalata et al. 2019). Nevertheless, both lines of argument converge regarding women board members' stronger monitoring attitude towards executive management. Third line of arguments, basing on agency theory, proposes that women on boards are more likely to closely monitor management compared to men, because they are more likely to be outsiders (not part of 'old boys clubs') and to be more diligent than men (see Dang, Bender, and Scotto 2014; Kirsch 2018). This is interesting in the strengthening context of managerialisms in HE (Kallio et al. 2016) that prioritizes quantitative performance indicators for control and accountability (Pollitt 1991), and advocate for standardized procedures and formalized control mechanisms (Hood 1991). Based on the preceding literature, we formulated the following:

> H3: Women board members tend to have stronger managerial attitudes than men board members.

Data and methods

We collected the data for this study from a 2023 survey across the university boards of four European countries: Finland, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden. These countries offered an interesting sample of European countries, both geographically and in terms of different levels of gender equality and numbers of women in decision-making positions in HE (see the previous section). The survey questionnaire was sent electronically to the board secretaries of the countries' public universities and equivalent HE institutions (universities of applied sciences and college universities). We asked the board secretaries to forward the survey to all the current board members, thus covering the full population of 2455 university board members. Table 1 reports response rates, and Table 2 shows the composition of the sample according to country, external membership (a board member not originally affiliated to the corresponding HEI), and age group. As shown in Table 2, the four countries displayed rather large variations in terms of gender

Table 1. HEI board member population and survey sample by country.

	Population	Effective sample	Response rate
Finland	342	110	32.2%
Sweden	463	138	29.8%
Poland	850	296	34.8%
Portugal	800*	239	29.9%
Total	2455	783	31.9%

*The Portuguese population is a close approximation.

Table 2. HEI board member survey sample composition.

			Age group					
	Female	External member	20–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	61–70	70+
Finland	36.4%	60.0%	9.1%	7.3%	20.0%	33.6%	20.0%	7.3%
Sweden	51.4%	60.1%	12.3%	5.1%	18.8%	24.6%	29.7%	8.7%
Poland	31.1%	43.9%	7.1%	5.1%	24.3%	29.1%	33.4%	0.0%
Portugal	44.4%	29.3%	10.5%	2.5%	20.1%	39.7%	20.5%	6.7%
Total sample	40.8%	48.3%	9.7%	5.0%	20.8%	31.8%	25.9%	5.7%

proportions. The proportions, however, roughly followed the general state of gender equality in the countries and their HE systems (European Commission 2021). Because quantitative approach necessitates operationalization, we have operationalized gender into four categories: female, male, other, and I prefer not to answer[2] (*Q1 Please choose your gender*). However, the number of respondents in the 'other' and 'I prefer not to answer' categories (6 out of 776) was so small that they were excluded from the analyses.

None of the countries has mandatory gender quotas for HEI boards. In Sweden, the even distribution between women and men on boards may be explained by HE administrators explicitly encouraging equal gender representation (SFS 1993, 100). Furthermore, the number of external members in our sample was higher in Finland and Sweden than in the other countries. We controlled for the membership profile (internal/external member) in the second stage of analysis. In terms of the method of appointment to the board, the countries differ slightly. In Poland, both external and internal members are elected by the Senate, and a student member heads the student body. In Sweden, external members and vice-chancellors are appointed by the government, whereas internal members are elected by staff, and students are appointed by students' unions. In Finland, the university collegium elects the board members by tripartite election; in foundation universities, the joint multi-member administrative bodies appoint members after consulting the universities' founding partners; and in universities of applied sciences, internal members are elected by staff, student members are appointed by student unions, and external members are appointed by the shareholder meeting. In Portugal, external members are appointed by university councils, while internal members are elected by their colleagues (teachers, researchers, and students).

In this study, we aimed to scrutinize the differences between the perceptions of women and men in HE institution boards regarding board governance. Based on the preceding literature, we formulated three hypotheses:

> H1: Women and men have similar perceptions concerning most board governance contributions.
>
> H2: Differences between women's and men's perceptions of board governance are mitigated by other relevant determinants, such as country, age, and professional background.
>
> H3: Women board members tend to have stronger managerial attitudes than men board members.

To test the hypotheses, we operationalized the dependent variables using two sets of ten five-point Likert-scale questions. For the first set, the respondents rated the boards' nine different contributions to university administration on a five-point strongly disagree–strongly agree scale. For the second set, the respondents rated the extent to which they

made each of the same nine different contributions on a scale ranging from 'not at all' to 'substantially'. The nine different contributions were inspired by the work of Kretek, Dragšić, and Kehm (2013) and Cornforth (2004), which were discussed by the author group representing all the countries involved in this research. The authors engaged in reflexive discussions to adapt the survey items and options and facilitate comparison across different country contexts (Kosmützky, Nokkala, and Diogo 2020). Based on the previous literature and contextual factors considered by the authors, the following nine contributions were deemed the most relevant for HEI board governance:

(1) Expert knowledge
(2) Representing various specific internal and external groups
(3) Reflecting the perspectives of the wider society
(4) Holding university managers accountable for their performance
(5) Symbolic legitimacy/managerial fashion (imitation of private sector structures)
(6) Conflict resolution
(7) University social responsibility
(8) Protecting the institutional autonomy of the university
(9) Protecting individual academic freedom

For the sake of clarity in the findings section, we address H1 and H3 first and H2 separately because we use the same method for testing H1 and H3.

Regarding H1 and H3, we report the percentages of rating scores for the 18 items. We statistically assessed differences in rating distributions according to the respondents' self-reported gender[3] by means of linear-by-linear associations. That is, we measured whether in-scale increases were significantly associated with different respondents' gender.[4] We used items concerning performance accountability and symbolic managerial legitimacy as proxies for managerial attitude. Regarding symbolic managerial legitimacy, the rationale was that members whose attitudes aligned with managerial logics would probably understand their contribution (and that of their boards) to helping raise HEIs' status according to business-like, or NPM-inspired ideals. Then, to test hypothesis H2, we screened for significant differences in the distributions using mixed-effects ordinal logistic regression models. We controlled for the respondents' age group and self-reported professional background in the models as either 'internal' (if they came from the university ranks, including students), or 'external,' which we broke down into different possible origins (business position, government, professional association, etc.). Assuming that responses were nested within countries, we used country as the second-level grouping variable (i.e. in the random-effects equations) in the mixed models to account for inter-country variation in other factors. This approach also helped minimize confounding and omitted variable bias while addressing sample skewness (Steiner et al. 2010).

Findings

Tables 3 and 4 relate to H1 (i.e. women and men have similar perceptions concerning most board governance contributions), and H3 (i.e. women board members tend to have stronger managerial attitudes than men board members).

Table 3. Board contributions to decision-making by gender (Likert-scale rating percentages and linear-by-linear association significance). *$p < 0.5$.

Board contribution to decision-making	Gender category	Rating: Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Linear association sig.
Expert knowledge	Female	0.8%	6.5%	13.4%	41.9%	37.4%	.807
	Male	1.0%	7.0%	10.1%	47.9%	33.9%	
Group representation	Female	2.0%	3.7%	5.3%	44.7%	44.3%	<.001*
	Male	3.4%	8.8%	12.2%	41.8%	33.8%	
Perspective of wider society	Female	1.2%	3.7%	9.3%	38.6%	47.2%	.293
	Male	2.1%	4.7%	9.6%	39.3%	44.3%	
Performance accountability *(proxy for managerial attitude)*	Female	1.2%	4.9%	11.8%	46.1%	35.9%	.042*
	Male	2.1%	4.9%	19.2%	43.1%	30.6%	
Symbolic managerial legitimacy *(proxy for managerial attitude)*	Female	10.2%	13.1%	17.1%	42.0%	17.6%	<.001*
	Male	17.9%	19.4%	20.7%	28.8%	13.2%	
Conflict resolution	Female	3.3%	14.7%	37.6%	33.1%	11.4%	.174
	Male	4.7%	19.7%	32.1%	34.5%	9.1%	
Social responsibility	Female	1.6%	5.7%	14.2%	49.6%	28.9%	.010*
	Male	1.3%	8.3%	20.2%	50.3%	19.9%	
Protecting institutional autonomy	Female	1.6%	9.4%	17.1%	47.8%	24.1%	.615
	Male	2.3%	9.1%	21.6%	41.0%	26.0%	
Protecting academic freedom	Female	3.3%	11.8%	29.3%	39.4%	16.3%	.903
	Male	3.9%	9.8%	31.6%	37.0%	17.6%	

Table 4. Assets brought by respondents by gender (Likert-scale rating percentages and linear-by-linear association significance).

Assets contributed by respondent	Gender category	Rating: Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Moderately	Substantially	Linear association sig.
Expert knowledge	Female	1.2%	8.5%	15.9%	40.7%	33.7%	.224
	Male	1.3%	5.2%	15.6%	41.6%	36.4%	
Group representation	Female	10.2%	9.0%	16.7%	32.7%	31.4%	.035*
	Male	11.5%	12.5%	22.1%	28.6%	25.3%	
Perspective of wider society	Female	3.7%	11.5%	24.3%	35.8%	24.7%	.351
	Male	5.7%	8.8%	19.7%	36.4%	29.4%	
Performance accountability *(proxy for managerial attitude)*	Female	5.3%	13.4%	27.6%	31.3%	22.4%	.046*
	Male	3.4%	8.8%	26.5%	37.4%	23.9%	
Symbolic managerial legitimacy *(proxy for managerial attitude)*	Female	30.5%	17.7%	22.2%	21.0%	8.6%	.022*
	Male	43.3%	14.7%	13.9%	21.1%	7.0%	
Conflict resolution	Female	11.0%	22.9%	36.7%	22.9%	6.5%	.990
	Male	10.9%	25.2%	31.4%	27.0%	5.5%	
Social responsibility	Female	2.9%	8.6%	27.3%	37.6%	23.7%	.691
	Male	1.3%	10.9%	25.8%	43.0%	19.0%	
Protecting institutional autonomy	Female	4.9%	6.6%	27.6%	33.3%	27.6%	.180
	Male	3.1%	7.8%	21.8%	37.0%	30.3%	
Protecting academic freedom	Female	6.5%	8.9%	22.8%	30.5%	31.3%	.274
	Male	3.1%	10.4%	20.8%	33.3%	32.3%	

The results provided supportive empirical evidence for H1, meaning that the women and men in boards tended to think similarly about the boards' role in university governance. In most cases, the respondents' frequencies were very similar.

Furthermore, in most measurements there were no statistically significant differences between the two gender categories. The women and men had some statistically significant differences regarding group representation (Tables 3 and 4). The women were more likely to think that the role of the board was to represent specific internal and/or external groups, and that their own role was to represent specific groups in the board. Furthermore, women tended to highlight the role of boards in safeguarding social responsibility (Table 3).

Regarding H3, the results were slightly contradictory. For three of the four questions, women tended to exhibit stronger managerial attitudes as board members. The women tended to agree or fully agree that the role of boards is to hold managers accountable for performance. Furthermore, they were considerably more likely to think that the role of boards is to provide managerial 'symbolic legitimacy' as a business-like or NPM-inspired ballast for HEIs. When asked to evaluate the assets they brought to the board, again, women were more likely to think that they provide managerial symbolic legitimacy. Although this possibly indicated their self-awareness of an exclusively ceremonial role (i.e. their contribution was *only* symbolic), it revealed the perception of a managerial self, or the adoption of a managerial role, given the question wording. However, counter-intuitively, regarding performance accountability, the men were more likely to consider that they contributed to the board by holding university managers accountable for their performance. Therefore, the results partially confirmed H3.

Table 5. Board contributions according to board members, mixed-effects ordinal regression models, controlled by age and gender (Model 1) and member profile (Model 2); odds ratios (standard errors in Italics).

	Group representation		Performance accountability		Symbolic legitimacy		Social responsibility	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Age	0.83***	0.86**	1.12*	1.09	0.92	0.88*	1.23***	1.16**
(10-y step)	*0.05*	*0.06*	*0.07*	*0.07*	*0.06*	*0.06*	*0.07*	*0.08*
Female	1.58***	1.53***	1.36**	1.38**	1.23	1.22	1.59***	1.61***
(ref. = male)	*0.25*	*0.24*	*0.21*	*0.22*	*0.19*	*0.19*	*0.25*	*0.26*
Profile (ref. = internal)								
Business position		0.61**		1.31		0.99		0.86
		0.15		*0.31*		*0.23*		*0.20*
Nonprofit organization		1.36		1.05		0.90		2.01**
		0.45		*0.34*		*0.29*		*0.64*
Local government official		0.85		1.36		2.30**		4.46***
		0.33		*0.53*		*0.92*		*1.82*
National government official		0.68		1.72		2.57**		1.83
		0.25		*0.67*		*0.94*		*0.67*
Professional association		0.50**		1.10		1.11		1.10
		0.14		*0.31*		*0.32*		*0.32*
Other:		1.06		1.05		1.14		1.38
		0.31		*0.31*		*0.33*		*0.41*
Country								
var(cons)[†]	0.14	0.09	0.06	0.03	1.42	1.31	0.04	0.02
	0.12	*0.08*	*0.06*	*0.05*	*1.03*	*0.95*	*0.05*	*0.04*
prob > chi^2	<.001	<.001	.034	.275	.138	.007	0.000	<.001
LR vs. logit, prob > $chibar^2$	<.001	.005	.002	.128	<.001	<.001	.060	.315

*$p < .1$.
**$p < .05$.
***$p < .01$.
[†]Random-effects variations in logit scale (rather than odds ratio).

Tables 5 and 6 report the results for the regression models constructed to test H2, addressing each of the significant relationships we mapped, as reported in Tables 3 and 4. Mixed-effects ordinal logistic regressions accounted for the data clustered by *country*, and are presented in two steps (equation models 1 and 2). The first model equation (Model 1) included *age* and *gender* as controls. The second model equation (Model 2) comprised an additional variable for member *profile*. We considered age in the models an ordinal, according to the survey question design (i.e. from the base category 20–30 years old, in 10-year increments, to older than 70 years).

Three general considerations are worth noting about the models (Tables 5 and 6). First, for most equations, the model fits were good (prob > chi^2 was less than .05), although there were risks of overfitting (prob > chi^2 was less than .001). However, the goal was to evaluate whether other factors reduce the significance (p-value) of gender influence and not to predict model-driven variations in board contributions/member assets. Second, with the exception of the full models for board contributions/performance accountability and social responsibility, intercountry variation played a significant role (likelihood ratio tests comparing the mixed effects and simple ordinal models showed significant differences $p < .1$). Third, in most cases, both age group and professional background significantly influenced the responses.

The results showed that country context, age, and professional background tended to often reduce the significance (p-value) of the gender differences in the respondents'

Table 6. Individual assets contributed by board members, mixed-effects ordinal regression models, controlled by age and gender (Model 1) and member profile (Model 2); odds ratios (standard errors in italics).

	Group representation		Performance accountability		Symbolic managerial legitimacy	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Age	0.68***	0.77***	1.15**	1.14**	0.99	0.95
(10-y step)	*0.04*	*0.05*	*0.07*	*0.07*	*0.06*	*0.07*
Female	1.18	1.15	0.75*	0.78*	0.98	0.98
(ref. = male)	*0.18*	*0.18*	*0.11*	*0.12*	*0.16*	*0.16*
Profile (ref. = internal)						
Business position		0.47***		1.35		1.21
		0.11		*0.31*		*0.31*
Nonprofit organization		0.33		0.90		1.60
		0.10		*0.28*		*0.53*
Local government official		0.46**		0.48**		1.12
		0.17		*0.18*		*0.41*
National government official		0.27***		1.18		1.51
		0.10		*0.42*		*0.52*
Professional association		0.66		2.19***		0.51
		0.17		*0.61*		*0.22*
Other:		0.33***		0.83		1.74*
		0.10		*0.23*		*0.53*
Country						
var(cons)†	.20	.21	.12	.16	1.65	1.42
	.16	*.17*	*.10*	*.13*	*1.19*	*1.03*
prob > chi^2	<.001	<.001	.004	.001	.981	.347
LR vs logit, prob > $chibar^2$	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001

*$p < .1$.
**$p < .05$.
***$p < .01$.
†Random-effect variations in logit scale (rather than odds ratio).

Table 7. Main hypotheses and results.

Hypothesis	Basic assumption	Confirmed/ rejected
H1: Women and men have similar perceptions concerning most board governance contributions.	The assumptions based on findings for general populations may not hold for women in board positions (Aversano et al. 2023; Mikkonen, Stenvall, and Lehtonen 2021; Sila, Gonzalez, and Hagendorff 2016; Wille et al. 2018)	Confirmed
H2: Differences between women's and men's perceptions of board governance are mitigated by other relevant determinants, such as country, age, and professional background.	Country context, age, and professional background socialize individuals regardless of their gender (Alatas et al. 2009; Hofstede 2001; Ottervik and Su 2023)	Partially confirmed
H3: Women board members tend to have stronger managerial attitudes than men board members.	On average, women tend to be more active on boards and have characteristics that contribute to their managerial attitudes, such as more intense monitoring of executives compared to their men colleagues (Adams and Ferreira 2009; Adams and Funk 2012; Aversano et al. 2023; Fernandes and Machado 2023; Zalata et al. 2019)	Partially confirmed

answers. However, even when those factors were accounted for, gender still influenced perspectives, especially regarding the contributions that boards made to HEI decision-making. The models showed that being a woman could increase the odds of a higher score according to the response scales for *group representation*, *performance accountability,* and *social responsibility* (Table 5). Regarding individual member assets, women had up to a 25% decrease in the odds of perceiving that they contributed more *performance accountability* to their boards (Table 6). However, this was the least significant finding (p = .098). In summary, the results safely attested that the women tended to perceive that the boards they participated in contributed to HEI decision-making by fostering group representation, performance accountability, and social responsibility. Table 7 summarizes the basic assumptions and results for H1, H2, and H3.

Discussion

Our results support the findings of previous studies showing that regardless of the differences between men and women reported for general populations, people in board governance positions tend to be quite alike on their opinions regardless of their gender (Aversano et al. 2023; Carvalho and Diogo 2018; Mikkonen, Stenvall, and Lehtonen 2021; Sila, Gonzalez, and Hagendorff 2016; Wille et al. 2018). This study showed that there are often no statistically significant differences between the perceptions of women and men in board positions regarding what they bring to the table in board work, nor regarding their perceptions of the contributions of their boards to organizational decision-making. Explaining the reasons for this similarity is beyond the scope and data of this study, but based on the previous literature, there are several different accounts for understanding the similarity.

First, it may be that only certain types of people orient themselves towards board governance positions and thus end up in these positions. The pool of candidates for board members may already be skewed, and stratification may occur before board selection. Second, it is possible that only certain types of people are selected and seen as competent for board positions. Therefore, even if there were more and different women candidates,

they would not necessarily be selected because they would not fit the 'profile' (Mikkonen 2023b; O'Connor et al. 2015; O'Connor and White 2021a). These two perspectives relate to the two broad lines of arguments explaining the scarcity of women in different powerful positions (such as on university boards; e.g. European Commission 2021; Mazzotta et al. 2020; Sherer and Zakaria 2018) and ways to tackle gender inequality – the individual and the structural and systemic perspectives (see Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005; O'Connor 2014; O'Connor et al. 2015).

The individual perspective suggests that the scarcity of women in power positions is due to factors within women themselves, such as them not being brave or bold enough, or not applying for the positions. In contrast, contemporary literature more frequently cites the structural perspective, which argues that systemic oppression and gendered barriers hinder women from attaining positions of power (and may also discourage women to envision themselves in leadership roles and seek into them in HE; see O'Connor 2014). One form of structural perspective is (idealistic) meritocracy (see Bird and Rhoton 2021; Mikkonen, Stenvall, and Lehtonen 2021; Peterson et al. 2021), which is the belief in a system that objectively and fairly rewards individuals based on their merits. These assumptions about fair and objective meritocracy, however, are often unconscious and gendered, continuing to profit those who are benefiting of the institutionalized inequities of the current system (Collins 2019; Friedmann and Efrat-Treister 2023; O'Connor 2014). This aspect also highlights the findings of the current study. If board member selection bases on an idea of objective and meritocratic system, minority groups in HEI governance, such as women, may continue to face unfair barriers.

Understanding gender as a social structure in a given context, occurring in a multilevel system, where gender roles and sexism at the macro level impact individual choices at the micro level and organizational practices at the meso level (Mikkonen 2023b; O'Connor et al. 2015), it is plausible that for instance country contexts and backgrounds may explain individual behaviour. This study strengthens this perspective by showing that when professional background, age, and country context are considered, these factors often reduce the significance (p-value) of gender differences. This means that professional background, age, and country context may better explain the different responses of board members than gender. Furthermore, these findings support the arguments suggesting that sociocultural country contexts and professional backgrounds may shape the individuals (both men and women) who end up in HEI board positions. In other words, women and men board members resemble each other because only certain types of people from certain backgrounds tend to be selected or to orient themselves towards these positions (Bird and Rhoton 2021; e.g. Carvalho and Diogo 2018; Mikkonen, Stenvall, and Lehtonen 2021; O'Connor 2014; O'Connor and White 2021b).

Despite the similarities discussed, the results of this study showed that gender could explain some significant differences between board members (see Adams and Funk 2012), especially in three different ways. On average, women tended to underscore different individual and board contributions to HEI decision-making than men – group representation, social responsibility, and managerial mindset. In terms of the first two, the findings were robust and significant. Women's tendency to highlight social responsibility aligns well with previous studies suggesting that women and gender-diverse boards tend to focus more on social responsibility and sustainability in

their decision-making (Amorelli and García-Sánchez 2021; Cook and Glass 2018; Nicolò et al. 2023). Furthermore, women were more prone to think that their boards represented diverse internal and external groups. In terms of managerial mindset, the results were slightly conflicting. Regardless, the findings showed that women highlighted a more managerialist mindset in their board work. This finding supports previous studies, such as those by Adams and Ferreira (2009), Fernandes and Machado (2023), and Zalata et al. (2019), claiming that women are more managerialist and more likely to monitor organizational management.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to scrutinize the perceptions of women and men board members in the context of European HE institutions and to explore whether their perspectives differed regarding the contributions of the board to institutional decision-making and the contributions they believed they brought to the table. Following a robust analysis of university board members in four European countries (Finland, Poland, Portugal, and Sweden), we conclude that, in general, the women and men in boards tended to think rather similarly about board governance and the assets they brought to board governance, thus supporting, for instance, Mikkonen, Stenvall, and Lehtonen (2021) and Wille et al. (2018). Rather than gender, professional background, age, and country context seemed to be more significant in explaining differences. However, the analysis highlighted some gender-based differences, suggesting that gender may have an impact to some specific aspects of board governance, including social responsibility, group representation, and managerial mindset. However, professional background, age, and country context seem to have more explanatory power than gender.

This study contributes to the literature on board governance and gender diversity both empirically and theoretically. First, our findings seem to align with the findings that men and women in different power positions (e.g. political positions, managerial top positions, and board positions) tend to share similar mindsets regarding many aspects of board governance (Aversano et al. 2023; Carvalho and Diogo 2018; Mikkonen, Stenvall, and Lehtonen 2021; Sila, Gonzalez, and Hagendorff 2016; Wille et al. 2018). Yet, we remark that women showed perception differences which held regardless of control variables – namely a significantly higher concern about the boards' social responsibility, the representation of different societal groups, besides slightly lesser concern about performance accountability.

Empirically, we extend the current body of knowledge to the context of European HE governance – a context that has remained largely unexplored, as recent studies on diversity and board governance have tended to focus on the corporate sector (Kirsch 2018; Reddy and Jadhav 2019). In terms of policy and practical implications, the study suggests that regarding diversity and the inclusion of diverse perspectives in decision-making bodies, attention should be paid to the accessibility of these positions and the criteria and processes by which board members are selected. This study supports previous studies concluding that only certain types of people are selected or orient themselves towards these power positions (Carvalho and Diogo 2018; Mikkonen, Stenvall, and Lehtonen 2021; O'Connor & White 2021b). More studies are thus needed to explore the

extent to which pools of candidates are skewed and the extent to which biased selection/election processes result in homogenized boards. In practice, it is vital to ensure that election/selection criteria and processes are not biased and to address the factors causing homogenization. This may be achieved for instance by broadening recruitment channels, developing clear and objective criteria for evaluating candidates based on the needs of the organization, training decision-makers in bias awareness, reaching out to underrepresented groups, and ensuring transparency and accountability in the selection and election processes.

The findings were representative of the four European countries we selected, thus providing an interesting cross-section of board governance in European HE institutions. However, more research in different contexts, especially beyond the Global North, may extend our understanding further and help identify boundary conditions for more general theories on gender differences in the perceptions of people in decision-making positions and in different HE systems. An intriguing avenue for further research would be to explore explanations for the similarity between women and men in board positions through comparative approaches to understand how sociocultural contexts affect women and men board members' perspectives, (see Mikkonen 2023a; Pinheiro et al. 2015). It is important to note that the evidence only partially supported H2. While the differences between men and women were not substantial, they were statistically significant. However, we understand that statistically significant differences have meaningful implications, especially when looking at large populations. Therefore, we call for more research to determine whether similar differences can be observed in other populations.

Since our findings also highlight the role of other demographic and contextual factors, further explorations incorporating an intersectional approach may provide nuanced insights into the interplay of gender and other identities (Crenshaw 1990; Lips 2014). Acknowledging that there may be differences within gender categories, further analysis accounting for intersecting identities such as gender, professional background, age, and race is needed.

The data collected for this study did not allow us to control for board composition in terms of the proportion of men and women. Studies based on the critical-mass and token concepts (Dahlerup 2006; Kanter 1977) have suggested that if a critical mass of women is reached in a decision-making group, the benefits of gender diversity may be more significant (Cook and Glass 2018; Yarram and Adapa 2021). This line of argument is also worth investigating in terms of board governance and HEI boards.

Finally, we address three important limitations of the questionnaire employed in this research, which are inherent to international survey data. First, the survey was conducted in the national languages of the four countries. Despite the research teams' diligence in ensuring proper semantic adaptation, specific concepts may have had slightly different meanings for different respondents. Second, cultural/institutional and conjunctural differences across countries could also have affected the respondents' interpretations of the statements used in the questionnaire. Lastly, regarding Q1 please choose your gender, the categories in the English version of the survey were male, female, other, I prefer not to answer. It must be noted that this may have confused some of the respondents responding in English. This manuscript sought to address gender differences. Therefore, we acknowledge that some nuances of gender may not be fully captured (for instance non-binary or transgender identities) even if we base our understanding on the interconnectedness of sex and gender (Muehlenhard and Peterson 2011; West

and Zimmerman 2002; Yoder 2003). The majority of the respondents answered with their national languages, in which the challenge of unorthodox gender categories does not apply. In Finnish, Polish and Swedish the same terms are used to refer to gender and sex (in the Portuguese version the categories referred to gender). As the result of the English categories of the survey and the three languages, in which same terms are often used to refer to sex and gender, we argue that the article is a gendered analysis of women and men on boards of HEIs (based on sex-based differences).

Notes

1. The focus of this article is on two gender categories: men and women because the number of respondents in the 'other' and 'I prefer not to answer' categories (6 out of 776) was too small for statistical analyses.
2. English translations; Majority of the respondents answered with their national languages in Finnish nainen/mies/muu; in Polish kobieta/mężczyzna/inna; in Swedish kvinna/man/annat; in Portuguese feminino/masculino/outro.
3. Answers that differed from 'male' or 'female' were excluded from the analysis, given their very low frequencies (6 out of 776).
4. Unlike Pearson's chi-squared distribution tests, the significance of linear-by-linear association tests is based on the ordinal nature of Likert scales (i.e. the test does not compare the distributions per se, but the odds that belonging to one or the other group can increase scores on the scale).

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