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Benevolent Leadership: Unveiling the Impact of Supervisor Gender on HR Practices and Employee Commitment

Lena Göbel * and Steffen Burkert

Institute for Human Capital Management, LMU Munich School of Management, 80539 Munich, Germany; burkert@lmu.de

* Correspondence: lk.goebel@gmail.com

Abstract: In this study, we examine the relationship between supervisor gender, the adoption of HR practices, and employee commitment. Based on leadership theories arguing that female supervisors are more focused on employee needs than male supervisors, we suggest that female supervisors are more likely to adopt HR practices that address employee needs. Using social exchange arguments, we predict that this in turn leads to higher affective commitment among employees. We test our theoretical predictions using three waves of the German Linked Personnel Panel (LPP). Our results indicate that female supervisors promote personnel development practices (DP) more than male supervisors, which has a positive impact on employees' affective commitment to the organization. We find no statistically significant effect of a female supervisor on the provision of family-friendly work practices (FFWP). We discuss the implications of these findings and suggest avenues for future research.

Keywords: gender; supervisor; leadership; HR practices; commitment

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1. Introduction

Ongoing organizational changes, for instance, technological advances and the globalization, have increased the complexity of human resource management tasks, emphasizing the strategic role of HR professionals [1]. As a result, some activities that were originally associated with HR, such as tracking the realization of development plans, are more often transferred to supervisors [2] and their employees. Additionally, supervisors are expected to build up relationships with various stakeholder groups, especially with their subordinates [3]. They are requested to develop [4] and to lead their subordinates in people-oriented ways [5]. Further, the importance of work–life balance is rising, specifically when individuals decide on career and job opportunities [6]. We consider these evolving trends and examine whether female supervisors differ from male supervisors in the provision of HR practices that reflect employees' demands, namely family-friendly work practices (FFWP) and development practices (DP).

Despite the growing literature on the implications of female leadership, we lack an understanding of whether and in which regard female supervisors affect HR practices, especially those that address employees' needs [7]. Prior work has either focused on women at the top management level [8,9] or the share of female managers [10,11] and mostly analyzed a singular and very specific HR practice [4,12,13]. In this study, we expand our perspective and delve into the question of whether female supervisors are more likely to implement benevolent HR practices, and ultimately, how the existence of benevolent HR practices influence the supervisor–subordinate relationship, reflected in employees' attitudes toward the organization.

In particular, we draw on leadership theories and the underlying gender differences in values and attitudes [14] and expect that female leaders (compared to male leaders) behave more attentively to the individual needs of their subordinates as they more often adopt a transformational leadership style [11,15,16]. Hence, we suggest that female supervisors

provide more FFWP and DP than males. This in turn may affect employees' attitudes toward the supervisor–subordinate relationship since they are more likely to perceive these benevolent HR practices as a relevant concession from their supervisor. The latter is important for subordinates' everyday working lives as supervisors interact regularly with their employees [17–19]. Thus, we suggest that a positive supervisor–subordinate relationship spills over to attitudes toward the overall organization. On this basis, we expect that employees are willing to reciprocate with their employer through affective commitment.

By using three waves of matched employer–employee longitudinal data from German establishments between 2014 and 2018, we find that female versus male supervisors provide more DP, but there are no significant differences for FFWP. We also show that DP mediate the relationship between female supervisors and employees' affective commitment. Supplemental analyses reveal that female supervisors provide more FFWP to female (versus male) employees, and that female employees in turn appreciate these practices more than males. These findings support the argument that female supervisors are more likely to respond to target groups with higher needs for specific HR practices.

By focusing on the direct supervisors' gender and the supervisor–subordinate relationship, our study contributes to the literature on the impact of female leaders on strategic actions in general and the existence of HR practices in particular. Strategic decisions at the top management level are usually broken down to supervisors' goals; however, the process for the achievement of these goals is often not specified. Hence, supervisors have strategic leeway concerning the concrete implementation of these goals, which is reflected in the (non-) provision of organizational practices [20,21]. Prior work has mainly addressed the effect of female managers on organizational outcomes [10,22]. We extend this relationship: Based on the importance of the relationship between the supervisor and her subordinates for employees' identification with the organization [23,24], we argue and show that the link between female supervisors and affective commitment is partially mediated by the provision of benevolent HR practices. In doing so, we contribute to greater micro-level theorizing, which is important to capture more immediate employee-level effects.

Second, FFWP and DP represent practices that are increasingly expected from employees [4,6]. Hence, they are valuable resources for attracting and retaining the latter. We add important evidence to the role of supervisors' gender for people-oriented and state-of-the art leadership reflected in the provision of FFWP and DP [5]. For instance, FFWP are specifically important for women, because they still cover the majority of family-related activities ("gender care gap" [25]). FFWP are thus critical for women with children, strengthening their opportunities to realize their leadership aspirations more easily [6]. Given that organizations also place a greater emphasis on internal labor market strategies [26,27], DP are essential for preparing employees for higher-level positions. To summarize, in light of the current trends and societal developments, answering the question whether and in which regard the gender of the supervisor results in different responses to stakeholders' needs is a relevant contribution.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

In response to the increasing attention on the equal representation of women and men in leadership positions, research has started to investigate the potential effects of female representation in leadership positions, both for women in supervisory roles and top management positions. The predominant literature stream has examined the effect of female top managers on performance indicators [8,28], risk taking [9], or wage equality [12,29,30]. These studies show, for instance, that the presence of female CEOs is positively associated with organizational performance [8], better governance [31,32], and less risk-taking [9]. However, there is also recent evidence that goes in the other direction and that extends the previous findings by showing that employees tend to work less under female leaders [33].

A smaller part of the literature on the implications of female leadership studied the effect of female managers on organizational practices, such as FFWP and DP. One prominent study is the work by Bloom et al. [10]. They show that the share of female managers is

positively related to the presence of FFWP, such as childcare flexibility/subsidies, telework, and job switching/sharing. Gagliarducci and Paserman [34] and Devicienti et al. [11] ask similar research questions. Gagliarducci and Paserman [34], for example, use a matched employer–employee dataset from Germany between 1993 and 2012. Their evidence suggests that establishments with a higher share of women in management are more likely to provide childcare support and mentor female junior staff. Devicienti et al. [11] analyze how the share of female managers influences part-time work arrangements. By using a dataset of Italian establishments over three waves, they find that a higher share of female managers is associated with more restrictions concerning involuntary part-time work and with an increase in voluntary part-time arrangements and full-time employment.

Studies focusing on the influence of female managers or supervisors on development practices are very rare. One study that examines a related effect is that by Maume [35]. This paper shows that subordinates' perceived support from supervisors and career prospects are more optimistic when they report to a female supervisor. Melero [13] provides similar evidence, finding that management teams with a higher proportion of women monitor employee feedback and development more intensively. These teams allocate more time in meetings to providing feedback to employees, and they are more likely to use performance appraisals to improve employees' performance and to discuss their career prospects [13].

Hence, to the best of our knowledge, our study is one of the first attempts to examine (1) the impact of female supervisors on FFWP and DP at the supervisor–subordinate level and (2) the subsequent implication for affective commitment. While prior work has already pointed to the positive influence of (the share of) female managers on FFWP and DP, little is known about the influence of the direct supervisor.

3. Female Supervisors and FFWP and DP

The common rationale behind potential gender differences in management styles builds upon the consistent evidence that female values and attitudes deviate from those of their male counterparts [16,36]. Multiple studies show that, on average, personality traits differ between men and women [36–39], and this difference is reflected in leadership styles [16]. In particular, the discussion of whether female leadership differs from male leadership mostly revolves around three types of leadership: transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-fair leadership [40]. Leadership research has primarily found that women are more likely to act as transformational leaders [40,41], characterized by having trustful relationships with their employees, being oriented toward goals and developing plans for achieving them, and being innovative and mentoring and empowering followers by considering their individual needs [42].

Furthermore, female leaders score higher than male leaders on the contingent reward subscale of transactional leadership, indicating that females are more likely to reward the performance of their subordinates than males [16]. As both leadership characteristics, transformational leadership and contingent reward behavior, are predictors of leaders' effectiveness, the evidence hints at a female leadership effect advantage [43,44].

Male leadership tends to exhibit characteristics associated with management by exception (both active and passive) as well as laissez-faire behavior [16]. As a result, male leaders may be more inclined to focus on the failures of their subordinates compared to female leaders. In addition, male leaders are more likely to exhibit a degree of passivity by not intervening despite the critical nature of an issue, which can give subordinates the impression of their absence [16]. Eagly and Carli [40] even describe the laissez-faire leadership style as "an overall failure to take responsibility for managing" [40] (p. 815). In line with this quote, passive management by exception and laissez-faire behaviors are both negatively correlated with leaders' effectiveness [43,44].

Based on these differences in leadership styles between females and males, we predict that the presence of a female supervisor is positively related to the provision of FFWP and DP. These practices reflect the consideration of individual needs and the development of employees' skills. FFWP contribute to employees' well-being by balancing their private

and working life [11,45]. For instance, teleworking, a component of FFWP, offers employees physical and temporal flexibility so that they can quickly switch between work and family roles when needed [45]. Similarly, DP signal the intention of supervisors to support employees in their career advancement by communicating and providing feedback. For instance, DP include mentoring activities, e.g., development dialogues, and interpersonal contact between supervisors and employees. DP thus aim at empowering and mentoring employees so that they are able to achieve their goals.

As both FFWP and DP represent practices that are consistent with transformational leadership, we expect that more FFWP and DP are provided if the supervisor is female than male. This argumentation is in line with the findings from Matsa and Miller [46,47] and Devicienti et al. [11] that the relatively more other-oriented leadership style of women translates into real actions that address employees' needs. Summing up, we predict

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): *The presence of a female supervisor (versus a male supervisor) is positively related to FFWP.*

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): *The presence of a female supervisor (versus a male supervisor) is positively related to DP.*

4. FFWP, DP and Affective Commitment

Social exchange theory argues that individuals try to reciprocate when they feel that the organization invests in their well-being [48–51]. Benevolent HR practices that reflect transformational leadership attitudes—such as employees' long-term development and career opportunities or efforts to improve their work–life balance [52]—represent such an investment. Hence, HR practices can affect employees' exchange relations with the organization in positive ways. Evidence shows that HR practices positively influence retention, effort, commitment, and motivation [53,54]. Thus, employees may feel attached to the organization's goals and develop an emotional bond to the overall organization [55,56].

Bonds to the organization are usually bundled under the term organizational commitment. Based on Allen and Meyer [57] and subsequent work, the literature agrees on an organizational commitment model containing three aspects: affective, normative, and continuance commitment [58]. As affective commitment is the element that is most likely positively influenced by HR practices [58], we focus on affective commitment toward the organization. Affective commitment describes employees' emotional attachment to the organization, for instance, when an employee feels pride in being a member of the organization or aims at contributing to organizations' success [55,58]. They strongly identify with the goals and values of the organization and invest significant efforts in contributing to them and remaining a member. Nevertheless, organizational commitment goes beyond identification with the organization as it also focuses the exchange of resources between the organization and the employee [59]. Moreover, affective commitment is strongly linked with important organizational outcomes, e.g., attendance, performance, and organizational citizenship behavior, and employee level outcomes, e.g., stress and work–life balance [58]. On this basis, we consider HR practices, i.e., FFWP and DP, to be beneficial resources to employees that consequently increase employees' affective commitment. Hence, we predict:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): *FFWP is positively associated with employees' affective commitment.*

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): *DP is positively associated with employees' affective commitment.*

We argue that (a) the presence of a female supervisor is positively related to FFWP and DP, as female leadership is characterized by the consideration of individual needs and that (b) FFWP and DP positively relate to affective commitment, as both practices and affective commitment can be considered as an exchange of resources between the employee and the employer. Combining both arguments, we now conclude our theory development

and expect that FFWP and DP mediate the relationship between a female supervisor and affective commitment. Thus, we expect the following:

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): *The presence of a female supervisor is indirectly associated with affective commitment through FFWP.*

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): *The presence of a female supervisor is indirectly associated with affective commitment through DP.*

5. Methods

5.1. Sample

To investigate the impact of female leadership on commitment through HR practice provision, we used three waves of the Linked Personnel Panel (LPP), which were collected in 2014, 2016, and 2018. The LPP is a representative sample of employer–employee data that covers German establishments (for detailed information on the LPP see: https://fdz.iab.de/en/our-data-products/integrated-establishment-and-individual-data/lpp/ (accessed on 8 June 2023)). Moreover, the "only exceptions are that marginally employed employees (fewer than 10 h a week), employees without German nationality, and employees without vocational training or with unknown educational degrees are slightly underrepresented" [12] (p. 196). It was explicitly designed for quantitative empirical HR research [60] and offers a number of useful features. First, the LPP data can be matched with further individual- and establishment-level data from the Institute for Labor Market Research (German: IAB). Hence, the data can be combined with a number of additional types of information on the organizational and administrative level, such as the share of female top managers. Second, the data cover a broad range of establishments and employees from different industries, with different sizes and different backgrounds. At the employee level, the LPP offers a variety of established scales to measure job characteristics and job perceptions, personal characteristics, employee attitudes toward the organization, and employee behavior. Our final sample includes 10,867 employees from 1107 German establishments. Table 1 shows the distribution of the frequency of observations for establishments and employees.

Table 1. Sample description.

Number of Appearances	Establishments	Employees-Year Observations
1	550	6671
2	313	2768
3	244	1428
Total	1107	10,867

Notes: Table 1 shows the number and frequency of occurrences of employees and establishments in our sample.

5.2. Main Variables

Survey questions are listed in the online appendix: https://osf.io/m7fpe/?view_only=04d0ba01f5c84292b324633030c0dae2 (accessed on 8 June 2023).

5.2.1. Family-Friendly Work Practices (FFPW)

In line with Bloom et al. [10], we define FFWP as practices that "enhance the ability of employees to combine working and personal life" (p. 344). Note that the measures for FFWP and DP are based on responses from employees, i.e., this measure captures the perceived provision of practices. In line with Bloom et al. [10], we created an index for FFWP that includes the following dimensions: telework, which is a binary variable that is equal to 1 if either the employees have the opportunity for telework or if they have no telework option but they also do not wish to work from home, and 0 otherwise. Second, over time hours captures the percentage of hours an employee works more than specified in the working contract. The last item captures the extent of work-related requests during leisure. Note that we multiplied the items over time hours and work-related requests

during leisure by minus one such that higher values indicate more family-friendly work practices. These dimensions capture important aspects for balancing work with family needs [61–64]. In line with previous studies, we constructed a double z-scoring index variable, FFWP, as follows:

First, we eliminated the problem of different distributions of specific FFWP components by subtracting the sample mean of the FFWP component, X_i, and dividing it by the standard deviation. Thus, the components become comparable and can be combined.

$$z_i = \frac{X_i - \overline{X}_i}{\sigma_{X_i}}$$

We further constructed a double-z score by summing up all individual z-scores and using the same procedure on the index variable, which is:

$$zz_i = \frac{\sum zi - \overline{\sum zi}}{\sigma \sum zi}$$

5.2.2. Development Practices (DP)

DP consist of practices that have the goal of developing and training employee skills. They refer to the following dimensions (all binary variables): a development dialogue between the supervisor and the employee, the existence of a written goal agreement, the opportunity for training, and employer takes over training costs, i.e., the supervisor agrees on training days that are paid by the employer (with regard to paid absence or monetary costs). (As nearly 100% of employees confirm to have their training paid by the employer, the variable has no explanatory power. We rerun our regression models without the variable and our results stay robust as assumed). As before, we constructed a double z-scoring index variable, DP.

We checked the psychometric properties of both measures and used exploratory factor analyses. The components are correlated only weakly (alpha = 0.29 (FFWP) and alpha = 0.54 (DP)). Hence, they reflect different logics and cannot be used interchangeably. Formative index building is thus more appropriate.

5.2.3. Affective Commitment (AC)

We measured affective commitment toward the establishment using the six-item short-form scale introduced by Meyer et al. [62]. This construct represents a reduced scale of the original version introduced by Allen and Meyer [57]. Responses contain five-point Likert scales. We constructed an index based on the average of the six items. The internal consistency of the affective commitment index is alpha = 0.84. This value is similar to the value reported in the sample used by Meyer et al. [62] and Allen and Meyer [57] (alpha = 0.82).

5.2.4. Female Supervisor

Our independent variable female supervisor (0/1) is an indicator variable that is equal to one if an employee states that her supervisor is female and zero otherwise.

5.3. Controls

The LPP and IAB data allow us to include controls for employee and establishment characteristics [12]. In particular, to reduce the likelihood that confounders distort the relationship between our variables of interest, we control for a set of variables at the employee level and establishment level. These variables include the gender of the employee (female respondent (0/1)), their age (in years), employees' education, employees' occupation type (0 = blue collar worker; 1 = white collar worker), gross monthly wage, contractual hours per week (hours), dummies for employees' department, and whether an employee has leadership responsibilities (leader (0/1)). At the establishment level, we control for the size of the establishment (logarithm of the number of employees, size) and industry dummies.

We also control for the share of female executives (in %) because it may influence the likelihood of female supervisors and may affect the provision of specific practices such as FFWP and DP.

6. Methodology

Due to the two-level structure of the data, we test our hypotheses using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM). The main reason for this choice is that we observe multiple employees in the same establishment. Hence, the independence assumption in standard OLS estimations is violated. In other words, HLM considers that the error term is structured according to the known hierarchy, thus mitigating the issue of downwardly biased standard errors. HLM regressions are usually estimated with random effects. Fixed effect estimations, in contrast, can better account for unobserved heterogeneity [65]. Hence, we repeat the main analyses with fixed effects at the establishment level as a robustness check. This ensures that unobserved differences at the higher level (establishment) do not bias the estimates.

We examine our mediation hypotheses by following a stepwise process. We estimated the direct effects "path a", i.e., the effect of the independent variable on the mediator, and "path b", i.e., the effect of the mediator on the dependent variable. The indirect effect results from multiplying the direct effects [66]. As the indirect effect, ab, is not normally distributed [67], we use the Monte Carlo (MC) method.

7. Results

7.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 summarizes the means and standard deviations for all items used for measuring FFWP and DP. Table 3 reports the means and standard deviations for all variables used in the empirical analyses. On average, the employees are 47 years old, 27% of employees are female, and the average gross monthly wage is EUR 4249. Thirteen percent of employees indicate that they have a female supervisor.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation for index items.

Variable	Mean	SD
FFWP		
Telework	0.76	0.43
Over time hours	0.09	0.11
Work-related requests during leisure	3.92	1.14
DP		
Development dialogue	0.55	0.50
Written goal agreement	0.50	0.50
Opportunity of training	0.42	0.49
Employer takes over training costs	0.99	0.11

Notes: Variable names and operationalizations can be found in the text. N = 10,867. The table reports mean values before standardization/transformation and before we multiplied *over time hours* and *work-related requests during leisure* by (−1).

Table 3. Mean and standard deviations for main variables.

Variable	Mean	SD
Size (employees)	6168.56	17,138.60
Share of female executives (in %)	8.95	20.47
Age (in years)	47.34	10.30
Education		
Apprenticeship	0.440	0.497
Vocational training	0.087	0.281
Professional school (German "Fachschule")	0.208	0.406
College (German "Fachhochschule")	0.108	0.310

Table 3. *Cont.*

Variable	Mean	SD
University degree	0.121	0.327
Other degree	0.02	0.065
No degree	0.019	0.136
Female respondent	0.27	0.44
Wage (€, monthly)	4249.12	6980.37
Department		
Production	0.41	0.50
Marketing	0.11	0.31
Administration	0.16	0.37
Service	0.32	0.46
Leader	0.29	0.45
Hours	35.77	7.94
Occupation type	0.64	0.48
Female supervisor	0.129	0.335
FFWP	0	1
DP	0	1
AC	3.59	0.897

Notes: Variable names and operationalizations can be found in the text. N = 10,867. FFWP and DP are z-standardized. *Size* is not yet logarithmized.

7.2. Hypothesis Tests

We test our hypotheses with HLM. In addition, we repeat the analyses and use ordinary least squares models (OLS) with establishment fixed effects (FE) to account for potentially unobserved factors at the establishment level. Table 4 presents the results from the HLM analyses (Columns (1) and (2)) and the OLS with establishment fixed effects (Columns (3) and (4)) of the impact of a female supervisor on FFWP and DP. Column (1) shows a positive but non-significant estimate of the effect of a female supervisor on FFWP (b = 0.023, $p > 0.1$). Column (2) reports the estimates for the relationship between a female supervisor and DP. The estimate for the effect a female supervisor is significant and positive (b = 0.132, $p < 0.001$). Hence, employees with a female supervisor score 0.132 standard deviations higher with regard to DP than employees with a male supervisor. Columns (3) and (4) show the results of the OLS with FE. While we find very similar results for the effect of a female supervisor on DP (b = 0.129, $p < 0.001$), the coefficient for FFWP is larger in magnitude but still statistically insignificant (b = 0.043, $p > 0.1$). Hence, we can confirm H1b but not H1a. In addition, to establish the robustness of our results, we display findings for each component of the index (see online appendix: https://osf.io/m7fpe/?view_only=04d0ba01f5c84292b324633030c0dae2 (accessed on 8 June 2023)). The estimates show that the results are broadly consistent across the different components of both indices.

Table 4. Main results.

Model	HLM		OLS		HLM		OLS	
	FFWP	DP	FFWP	DP	FFWP → AC	DP → AC	FFWP → AC	DP → AC
Size	0.009	0.136 ***	0.116	−0.034	0.016	−0.007	0.013	0.019
	(0.012)	(0.016)	(0.133)	(0.30)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.144)	(0.137)
Share female executives	−0.001	0.001	−0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Age	0.011 ***	−0.004 ***	0.011 ***	−0.003 *	0.014 ***	0.015 ***	0.014 ***	0.015 ***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female respondent	0.047	−0.030	0.050	−0.029	−0.003	−0.001	0.001	0.004
	(0.029)	(0.025)	(0.034)	(0.028)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.030)	(0.030)
Wage	−0.094 ***	0.062 ***	−0.098 ***	0.055 ***	0.069 ***	0.057 ***	0.068 ***	0.058 ***
	(0.010)	(0.008)	(0.012)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.008)
Leader	−0.369 ***	0.138 ***	−0.361 ***	0.144 ***	0.219 ***	0.194 ***	0.212 ***	0.185 ***
	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.032)	(0.029)	(0.023)	(0.022)	(0.026)	(0.024)

Table 4. *Cont.*

Model	HLM		OLS		HLM		OLS	
	FFWP	**DP**	**FFWP**	**DP**	**FFWP → AC**	**DP → AC**	**FFWP → AC**	**DP → AC**
Hours	−0.000	0.002 +	−0.002	0.002 +	−0.001	−0.002	−0.001	−0.002
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Occupation type	−0.201 ***	0.216 ***	−0.190 ***	0.215 ***	0.060 *	0.020	0.069 *	0.030
	(0.028)	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.035)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Female supervisor	0.023	0.132 ***	0.043	0.129 ***				
	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.035)	(0.034)				
FFWP					0.009		0.005	
					(0.009)		(0.011)	
DP						0.170 ***		0.173 ***
						(0.011)		(0.013)
N	10,867	10,867	10,867	10,867	10,867	10,867	10,867	10,867
Establishment FE			YES	YES			YES	YES
Log-Lik.	−14,429	−13,515			−13,509	−13,346		
Adj. R-Squared			0.204	0.358			0.172	0.200

Notes: Variable names and operationalizations can be found in the text. All models include dummies for employees' education level and their department. HLM models include dummies for industries. Standard errors clustered at the establishment level are reported in parentheses. We do not report the constant term. + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

To test H2a and H2b, we continue with the second mediation path (since the first path is tested in H1a and H1b), i.e., we regress commitment on both HR practices. In Table 4, Column (5), the FFWP effect on commitment is close to zero and not significant (b = 0.009, $p > 0.1$), thus H2a and H3a are rejected. In contrast, the estimates for the relationship between DP and commitment are positive and significant (Table 4, Column (6); b = 0.170, $p < 0.001$). Specifically, a one standard deviation improvement in the development score is associated with an improvement in affective commitment of 0.170 points. Columns (7) and (8) show the results of the OLS with FE. FFWP and DP effects are very similar to the HLM specification.

In the next step, we examined the entire mediation model by calculating the indirect effect with the Monte Carlo (MC) method (using 50,000 replications) (H3a and H3b). Table 5 shows that the indirect effect of the female supervisor on affective commitment via DP is statistically significant as well (b = 0.022, 95%, CI of [0.014/0.032]). Results for the OLS models with establishment FE are similar to the HLM models. Hence, we find support for H2b and H3b.

Table 5. Mediation analyses based on HLM model.

Path	Female Supervisor → FFWP → AC	CI	Female Supervisor → DP → AC	CI
Coefficients	0.000 (0.001)	[−0.000, 0.001]	0.022 (0.005)	[0.014, 0.032]

Notes: Variable names and operationalizations can be found in the text. Monte Carlo simulation with 50,000 replications.

7.3. Supplemental Analyses

Female supervisors, employee needs, and managerial support. Our theoretical argument suggests that female supervisors are more engaged in providing HR practices that respond to the needs of employees. In our main estimates, however, we focused primarily on the average effect of female supervisors, i.e., we did not consider the specific needs of employees. To test for the role of potential differences in the need for FFWP and DP, we first examined whether the effect of female supervisors on FFWP is different for employees with (1) a partner at home, (2) children, (3) and female employees, and if the effect of female supervisors on DP is different for employees with (4) less education and (5) in non-leader positions. We also conditioned the female supervisor effect on (6) the share of female top managers. The rationale is that female supervisors may behave differently depending on

the support they receive from top management, e.g., because female supervisors receive more support the higher the female share at the top.

We find that the effect of a female supervisor on FFWP is positive for female employees and negative for male employees. Even if the single effects are not significant, the difference test reveals that there is a marginal significant difference between female versus male employees (Δfemale-male: b = 0.11, $p < 0.1$). This indicates that female supervisors provide more FFWP to female versus male employees. Additionally, findings show that an increase in FFWP leads to more affective commitment among female versus male employees (Δfemale-male: b = 0.07, $p < 0.001$). For DP, the split sample analyses suggest that there are no significant differences between the considered subgroups. The corresponding tables are in the online appendix.

8. Discussion

Based on three waves of a representative survey of employees and establishments in Germany, our results provide evidence that the gender of employees' supervisors is important for the provision of DP, with subsequent influence on employees' affective commitment. The findings also suggest that there is no relation between the gender of employees' supervisors and the provision of FFWP.

However, additional analyses reveal that the effect of a female supervisor on FFWP (and of FFWP on affective commitment) depends on the gender of the employee. This finding indicates that female (versus male) subordinates are more likely to request, receive, and appreciate FFWP from their supervisor. Following our previous assumption that female supervisors tend to care more about the needs of their subordinates, female supervisors consider FFWP as a simple way to improve work–life balance—in this case for a large share of female employees [10]. The main explanation is that women still fulfill the majority of family and caring duties. On average, women in Germany (which is our study's context) spend 52.4 percent more time per day on unpaid care work than men ("gender care gap", [25]).

8.1. Theoretical Contributions and Implications

Our findings are particularly relevant for two reasons. First, we contribute to a clearer understanding of the female leadership effect by considering HR practices as mechanisms that strengthen positive attitudes toward the organization. Previous research has predominantly examined the effect of female managers on organizational outcomes [8,10,28]. We extend this stream of literature and show the relevance of supervisory actions at lower levels. Further, affective commitment represents a target variable that relates to employees' well-being much more explicitly than organizational outcomes [68] and, additionally, expresses an ethical corporate culture, which is becoming important for various stakeholders [69,70].

Second, our study adds to research on the supervisor–subordinate relationship. While many studies in this field focus on the share of female managers as an independent variable, we move to the employee level. We consider this an essential contribution, as perceptions of employees are a good predictor of their attitudes and behaviors [56]. Ultimately, supervisors who maintain intense relationships with their subordinates are much more likely to determine how specific HR practices actually unfold and how, in the end, the latter is perceived by employees.

Overall, our findings support the argument that female supervisors meet their employees' needs more than their male counterparts. This finding is in line with previous studies showing that the relatively more other-oriented and compassionate patterns of women are reflected in their actions [11,46].

8.2. Practical Implications

Our finding carries important practical implications. It suggests that hiring and promoting women to leadership positions can have positive effects on organizations, adding further evidence to the potential benefits of increasing the female presence in leadership

positions. In today's landscape, where employees' expectations regarding flexible work arrangements and diversity perspectives are on the rise, our findings underscore the potential benefits of female leadership, as it could help organizations navigate these demands and foster an environment that aligns with employees' evolving needs and expectations [71,72]. Moreover, as female supervisors are more likely to implement benevolent HR practices, they contribute to employees' commitment. This finding is especially important for organizations with pronounced internal labor markets because the consideration of individual needs plays an important role in their functioning. Moreover, since management positions are filled by the promotion of lower-level employees [26], DP are essential as they prepare employees for higher-level positions.

Furthermore, companies are increasingly expected to ensure greater gender equality within their own organizations, e.g., to ensure an equal distribution of females and males in the top positions. The political and societal pressure to do so is becoming stronger [73]. One measure to meet this demand is to build up female employees internally. Our results show that FFWP increase female (versus male) employees' commitment. This finding may induce the suggestion that FFWP contribute to females' performance and facilitate their internal promotion. Hence, FFWP may complement internal promotion practices to the extent that they give female employees the opportunity to climb the hierarchy ladder while at the same time meeting family demands.

8.3. Limitations and Future Research

Our study has some limitations. First, we argued that female supervisors affect the actual provision of specific HR practices, but our operationalization captures the perceived provision of HR practices. Importantly, evidence suggests that employees' attitudinal and behavioral outcomes are significantly better explained by their perceptions of HR practices than the actual HR practices reported by management [56,74]. For example, Khilji and Wang [75] show that HR supervisors described the process of performance assessments as an open, participative discussion; contrary, employees perceived the same process as unclear and not supportive. However, the underlying theoretical explanation could be quite different if our estimates significantly deviated from estimates based on objective measures of HR practices. In this case, our findings could result from role congruity perspectives, i.e., employees expect specific behavioral or motivational differences due to stereotypes related to each gender. Nishii et al. [74], for example, show that employees reflect on the underlying motives behind HR practice provisions. Based on gender stereotypes, employees may attribute specific motives, leadership styles, and actions to women relatively independent from their actual behavior.

In addition, our findings do not fully rule out other alternative explanations. For instance, one counterargument could be that female supervisors may apply gender-based in-versus out-group categorizations that result from a preference for their gender in-group, i.e., females. This would imply that female supervisors privilege their female subordinates by granting them more FFWP [10,76–78]. Our empirical setting does not allow us to isolate this alternative explanation from the leadership argument used in this article. We encourage future studies to explore these aspects in more detail.

Third, similar to most studies, our work focuses on the simple female–male leadership differences and thus ignores that there might be much more complexity, especially in terms of the environment. These complexities became visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when established leadership practices started to be questioned. A future direction could thus be the investigation of contingencies (such as the role of artificial intelligence) to identify what type of leadership works best, also for the promotion of the well-being of workers.

Fourth, we lack a clear exogenous variation of the female supervisor variable. We try to mitigate endogeneity concerns using OLS models with fixed effects so that we at least control for unobserved constant heterogeneity at the establishment level, e.g., organizational culture. Furthermore, we conduct robustness checks by using PSM approaches.

We find similar and, thus, robust results across each of these specifications. However, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that the estimates are biased due to unobserved heterogeneity or self-selection issues. Therefore, we encourage future research to examine the causal effect of female leadership and its associated actions.

Fifth, we assumed that female supervisors consider individual needs and that they act accordingly. However, we cannot differentiate between employees who request FFWP or DP practices voluntarily and those who receive these practices involuntarily. Nevertheless, we believe that our additional subsample analyses approximate the match between employees' needs, i.e., female employees and the provision of FFWP. However, future research may consider this differentiation in more detailed ways, elaborating on the assumption that female supervisors pay more attention to individual needs.

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