

Article

Toward a Universal Framework for Gender Equality Certification

Silvia Angeloni 

Department of Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods, Università degli Studi di Milano,
20122 Milan, Italy; silvia.angeloni@unimi.it

Abstract

This study presents a comparative analysis of five gender equality certification schemes alongside the ISO 53800 standard with the aim of distilling shared conceptual foundations and design principles that can inform progress toward Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality. The comparative analysis reveals marked heterogeneity in scope, design architecture, indicators, and transparency. Methodologically, the study draws on the relevant literature, documentary evidence, and semi-structured consultations with five experts in gender equality, diversity management, auditing, and ESG reporting. Building on the most effective and robust features across gender equality schemes, the study proposes a universal framework for gender equality certification. Under this framework, an ideal universal certification model should apply the same core requirements to both public and private organizations, while including simplified procedures tailored to small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Moreover, the model should rely on a limited set of key performance indicators (KPIs), focusing on the most material dimensions and prioritizing quantitative measures. It should also strengthen employee feedback mechanisms and enhance accountability in corporate governance. The framework should also pay attention to intersectional dimensions, extend responsibility across the value chain, and address the gender-related implications of artificial intelligence (AI). Importantly, an ideal universal gender equality certification should ensure a high level of transparency through the public disclosure of certified organizations, assessment criteria, KPIs, and levels or scores achieved. Furthermore, it should be supported by a free digital self-assessment tool and robust auditing arrangements, underpinned by a sufficiently large pool of accredited certification bodies and gender-balanced audit teams. Finally, it should undergo periodic review and align with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles and other related SDGs.

Keywords: auditing; gender equality certifications; environmental, social, and governance (ESG); sustainability; ISO 53800; key performance indicators (KPIs); SDG 5



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1. Introduction

Among the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, stands as both a distinct objective and a foundational pillar for the realization of global sustainability. Gender equality “refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys . . . Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men . . . Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development” [1].

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right and a driver of sustainable development [2–4] but is also increasingly recognized as an integral part of an organization's environmental, social, and governance (ESG) strategy. ESG reporting provides the framework that organizations use to structure their sustainability disclosures and to communicate progress to investors, regulators, employees, and other stakeholders. Sustainability disclosure is intended to increase transparency and legitimacy, enhance brand value and reputation, enable benchmarking against competitors, motivate employees, and strengthen internal information and control processes [5]. Evidence suggests that ESG disclosure positively affects firm performance [6].

In recent years, sustainability disclosure has attracted growing regulatory attention in several jurisdictions. The European Union is at the forefront of this shift, adopting legislation that regulates the disclosure of companies' sustainability aspects through the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and subsequent amendments. International standard-setting is also moving fast, with reporting standards from the International Sustainability Standards Board and the European Commission [7]. Sustainability reporting has become an effective practice for communicating corporate commitments to SDGs, including those related to gender equality. In this context, increasing gender-related disclosure can improve transparency, stakeholder trust, reputation, and alignment with sustainability goals [8,9]. Moreover, Directive (EU) 2023/970 strengthens the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between women and men through enhanced pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms. Notwithstanding this momentum, important gaps persist in gender-related guidance and practice [10].

Given these premises, it is crucial to explore how companies can and should advance gender equality. Despite numerous studies on women's roles and rights in the workplace, current research still lacks a comprehensive analysis of the diverse strategies that organizations can adopt to certify and communicate their efforts toward gender equality, leveraging well-established frameworks developed by trusted and reputable institutions. In recent years, there has been a surge in gender-focused Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) initiatives, some of which are associated with certification, understood by Castka et al. (2020, p. 2) as "formal recognition that an organization's applicable systems, processes, products, services, and/or performance conform to the requirements specified in the VSS" [11].

Certifications can play an important role in signaling organizational commitment, enhancing accountability, and driving continuous improvement in gender-related practices. Their value lies not only in driving internal improvements but also in strengthening trust and strategic alignment with ESG requirements. As highlighted by Qi et al. (2013, p. 1988), "firms whose stakeholders have a higher demand for sustainability management are more likely to obtain international sustainability standards certification" [12]. For example, evidence shows that firms with a certified environmental management system (EMS) are associated with significantly higher overall ESG scores than non-certified firms [13]. Voluntary environmental certifications operate as pragmatic instruments that both signal sustainability commitments and demonstrate the development of strategic resources aligned with stakeholders' expectations [14].

Although gender-related issues have increasingly attracted scholarly attention, particularly in the area of gender diversity in corporate governance [15,16], research on gender equality certification systems remains scarce. One of the few exceptions is the study by Velasco Balmaseda et al. (2024), who offered an exploratory mapping of international gender-related standards and examined their institutional design, scope, and drivers [17]. However, their study provides limited insights into a more granular and operational comparison, and it does not analyze how gender equality standards translate into measurable

outcomes. By contrast, the present study examines five gender equality certifications in greater depth, assesses their strengths and weaknesses, and uses the number of certifications issued by the end of 2024 as a proxy for their impact.

Moreover, this study compares leading national and international gender equality certification standards to develop an integrative framework for a unified gender equality certification. Despite increasing regulatory attention, existing models remain highly fragmented and differentiated, reducing comparability and limiting broad uptake across organizations. Such heterogeneity may result in uneven impacts on efforts to reduce gender gaps, as outcomes depend on how each standard structures its requirements, key performance indicators (KPIs), and audit mechanisms. Understanding and comparing these models are, therefore, essential steps for assessing their role in advancing gender equality. The study posits that certification standards may help reduce gender gaps and that a harmonized model could enhance the legitimacy, robustness, and appeal of such standards, thereby fostering wider adoption across organizations and countries. The proposed framework builds on the most effective features of existing systems and addresses the need for greater alignment with ESG and SDG-oriented gender reporting.

Essentially, the study contributes to the literature by distilling the conceptual foundations and design principles underlying existing gender equality certification schemes, highlighting the most robust design features, and proposing a unifying framework that improves cross-scheme comparability while accommodating contextual diversity. The analysis is guided by two research questions: (1) Which key features can be extracted from the current gender equality certification schemes, and what are their main strengths and weaknesses? (2) What essential characteristics should a universal or harmonized gender equality certification system possess to enhance international comparability and strengthen organizations' incentives to seek it?

The remainder of the research article is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the conceptual and theoretical foundations of gender equality certifications within sustainability frameworks. Section 3 describes the methodology adopted for the comparative analysis. Section 4 analyzes five national and international gender equality certification schemes alongside ISO 53800, detailing their institutional design, evaluation architecture, implementation features, and principal strengths and limitations. Section 5 discusses the implications of the comparative evidence and proposes a universal model for gender equality certification. Section 6 concludes by synthesizing the findings and acknowledging the study's limitations and future research agenda.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Voluntary Sustainability Standards and Certifications

In a world characterized by intense communication, and increasingly driven by benchmarking and metrics, certification practices and their public disclosure are rapidly expanding. There is a proliferation of rival and uncoordinated VSS, which often compete for market share and legitimacy even as they co-evolve and tend to reinforce one another [18,19].

There is no fixed definition of VSS, yet the United Nations Forum on Sustainability Standards (UNFSS, 2013, p. 4) defines them as “standards specifying requirements that producers, traders, manufacturers, retailers or service providers may be asked to meet, relating to a wide range of sustainability metrics, including respect for basic human rights, worker health and safety, environmental impacts, community relations, land-use planning and others” [20]. VSS are developed by international, regional, and national standard-setting bodies, or by organizations with narrower sectoral mandates, to support the achievement of sustainability objectives. VSS, sometimes referred to as “sustainability certifications” or “eco-labels” [21], are commonly used by businesses to establish, incentivize, and enforce

commitments to sustainable development. They also serve as tools for tracking, measuring, and reporting progress toward sustainability goals [22].

The rapid expansion of VSS over the past three decades has broadened their scope and influence. VSS increasingly require adherence to a wide range of sustainability metrics, including gender equality, human rights, workers' health and safety, fair income, and environmental protection [23]. Certifications may generate a wide range of internal and external benefits [24], including potential improvements in productivity and profitability [25]. However, adopting one or multiple certifications does not necessarily translate into improved firm performance, as empirical evidence on performance effects remains mixed and context-dependent [26,27].

Martins et al. (2022) examined the role of VSS in promoting sustainability through a systematic literature review, identifying several benefits, including improved wages, enhanced gender equality, and increased community well-being. At the same time, the review reports persistent challenges, such as the exclusion of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), governance gaps, and fragmented implementation, all of which limit the fair distribution of benefits and reduce the overall effectiveness of VSS in addressing global trade inequalities. The review further indicates that the rapid growth in the number of VSS schemes creates competition among certification programs seeking to expand their market share, which weakens interoperability. Furthermore, the continued lack of harmonized metrics remains a significant obstacle to achieving broader and more consistent impacts [28].

With around 300 schemes in circulation, VSS vary widely in standard setting, auditing, complaint systems, and transparency. Third-party audits face well-documented problems, including low information quality, conflicts of interest, and inconsistent outcomes. Although some schemes add accreditation and grievance mechanisms, advanced safeguards remain rare and uneven in effectiveness [29]. When an applicant meets a VSS's requirements, a certificate can be issued. Depending on the scheme, certificates usually remain valid for one to five years. At the end of this period, renewal may be granted if the applicant passes a recertification conformity assessment. During the validity period, additional conformity assessments, such as annual surveillance audits, are typically conducted to verify continued compliance with the standard [30].

Certification and auditing are central to ensuring compliance, promoting transparency, and addressing gender-related concerns [23]. According to the literature, multi-stakeholder third-party certification systems, which involve accredited independent certifiers and robust enforcement mechanisms such as monitoring tools and sanctioning systems, are regarded as effective governance tools. In contrast, first-party certification (self-regulation by individual companies) and second-party certification (regulation within an industry sector) are generally regarded as significantly less effective and, in some cases, merely symbolic [31].

As highlighted by Valero-Gil et al. (2024, p. 5984), different "types of organizations use certifications to reduce information asymmetry in an extensive range of business activities. In some cases, the widespread use of certifications can lead to multiple competing and overlapping standards. Some organizations also obtain similar certifications in a process defined as over-certification" [19].

Credibility is crucial for scaling up the uptake of certification schemes, as some instruments, particularly ISO certifications, may be preferred due to the International Organization for Standardization's role as a leading standards-setting body. Founded in 1947, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is an independent and non-governmental international organization that has issued over 25,000 International

Standards. ISO standards are globally recognized frameworks that support organizations in areas such as quality, safety, environmental responsibility, and governance.

ISO standards, which provide voluntary rules and guidance for activities and their results, can take multiple forms. Some ISO standards are designed to be auditable and support third-party certification, while others provide guidance without being intended for certification. In any case, ISO itself does not issue certifications, which are carried out by independent accredited bodies following audits against the relevant standard [32]. Many ISO standards, including “Quality management systems” (ISO 9001:2015), “Environmental management systems” (ISO 14001:2015), “Energy management systems” (ISO 50001:2018), and “Occupational health and safety management systems” (ISO 45001:2018), are management system standards used for third-party certification. Conversely, the recent ISO 53800, which provides guidance on implementing gender equality, is not associated with certification.

2.2. Theoretical Frameworks on Certifications

The literature has framed the drivers of organizational certifications within different theoretical frameworks. The main theoretical foundations of certifications can be traced to legitimacy theory, institutional theory, stakeholder theory, the resource-based view, and signaling theory.

According to legitimacy theory, as remarked by Dowling and Pfeffer (1975, p. 127), an “organization can adapt its output, goals, and methods of operation to conform to prevailing definitions of legitimacy” [33]. In this view, firms actively seek to obtain legitimacy, defined by Suchman (1995, p. 574), as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” [34]. Legitimacy theory suggests that organizations adopt certification schemes because they grant public recognition, enabling organizations to demonstrate conformity with socially valued standards and thereby maintain or enhance their legitimacy within society [35]. Conformance to standards can bolster legitimacy, image, and reputation, which in turn may enhance corporate financial performance [36–41].

Moreover, according to institutional theory, organizations tend to conform to institutional pressures [42]. Formal organizational structures emerge primarily to incorporate the practices and procedures shaped by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society. As theorized by Meyer and Rowan (1977, p. 340), organizations “that do so increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures” [43]. The cultural–cognitive, normative, and regulative facets of institutions shape competition and markets [44], and can play a key role in influencing firms’ decisions to adopt international management standards and certifications [45,46]. For instance, when institutional frameworks support ESG initiatives, certifications that enhance corporate responsibility act as important institutional drivers, encouraging enterprises to actively engage in sustainable practices, although not all stakeholder pressures matter the same way [47]. As highlighted by Sun and Qiu (2025, p. 6), “certification enables firms to better respond to external institutional pressures and thereby advance their sustainability objectives” [48]. In line with institutional theory, firms operating in contexts where certifications are widespread tend to adopt them in order to conform to prevailing norms and gain legitimacy [49].

Additionally, according to stakeholder theory, an organization’s success depends on how well it manages its relationships with its multiple stakeholders, where a stakeholder is defined by Freeman (2010, p. 46) as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” [50]. As noted by Phillips et al. (2003, p. 480), stakeholder theory “is a theory of organizational management

and ethics” [51], and it suggests that firms should create value for all stakeholders, including financiers, employees, customers, suppliers, and local communities, rather than focusing only on shareholders. From a stakeholder theory perspective, third-party certifications can be adopted as a response to stakeholder expectations [19]. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant because stakeholders can also act as key drivers in the implementation of more sustainable practices, such as management systems [13].

Furthermore, the resource-based view (RBV) takes an inside-out perspective, arguing that firm performance depends on internal resources and capabilities rather than industry structure; competitive advantage arises when resources are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable (the VRIN criteria), and when resources are heterogeneous and imperfectly mobile across firms [52,53]. Viewed through the RBV, voluntary certifications function as pragmatic instruments that embed sustainability-oriented commitments into firms’ strategic resources and organizational routines. Under the RBV, firms that align their business processes with certification requirements can achieve better financial performance [14]. For instance, from the RBV perspective, ISO certifications are adopted to augment the firm’s resource base by enhancing organizational attention to the identification and development of valuable assets, capabilities, and competencies [39]. Similarly, the RBV has been used to investigate how EMS certification shapes corporate technological innovation and improves business performance [54–56].

Finally, the literature on information asymmetries [57–59] offers an additional framework that provides a theoretical rationale for the use of certifications. Building on signaling theory, firms can communicate positive information to external stakeholders through observable actions in markets characterized by information asymmetry, thereby strengthening trust and improving access to resources [48]. Under conditions of uncertainty, certification can publicly signal commitment in areas where organizational practices are difficult to observe externally, reducing information asymmetries, conveying positive information to external stakeholders, and lowering transaction costs [19]. As clarified by Pelzer and Hogan (2023, p. 1110), certifications “involve verification by a third party, which increases the credibility of the communication by the firm and, as a result, reduces information asymmetry” [60]. Certifications can serve as signals of innovative business practices and a firm’s commitment to quality [61] or values-based practices [62], improving access to external financing [63] and communication with exchange partners [64]. After the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change, third-party ESG certifications became more valuable, while uncertified and self-reported ESG signals lost their positive effect [65].

2.3. Gender Equality Certifications and Corporate Governance

Numerous Certification and Award Schemes (CAS) addressing gender equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) have emerged across higher education, research, and other spheres. Nason and Sangiuliano (2020) identified 113 CAS broadly related to EDI across Europe and beyond, spanning higher education and research institutions, businesses, and other public and private organizations [66]. Several effective CAS have been implemented in the UK and Germany to advance gender equality in higher education and research [67–69].

To date, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the corporate context has been predominantly examined through the lens of stakeholder theory [70], while gender equality policies have also been analyzed through the framework of institutional theory [71,72]. Moreover, emphasizing signaling mechanisms, Velasco-Balmaseda et al. (2024) mapped 36 international gender equality initiatives and then conducted a content analysis of 20 standards with an external audit process. They highlighted substantial heterogeneity in missions, results, measurement, and definitions, with intersectionality largely absent [17].

Furthermore, although SDG 5 is intended to be treated as a crosscutting issue in the implementation of the SDGs, existing gender inequality indices remain narrow in scope, emphasizing workplace-related gender equality rather than broader dimensions of women's and girls' empowerment [73–75]. A recent bibliometric review in the management literature documents the rapid growth in SDG 5 scholarship since 2016, with a clear concentration around three recurring themes: board diversity and firm performance, women on boards and CSR strategies, and the demographic diversity of corporate boards [76].

Against this backdrop, there is fairly consistent evidence that gender, understood as both the presence of women and their relative proportion on boards of directors, is positively associated with firm performance, although the results are not uniform. The literature largely supports the view that the presence of female board members enhances not only a firm's reputation [77] and financial performance [78–83], but also its non-financial performance [84]. For instance, Zhang et al. (2013) found empirical evidence that a greater presence of women directors was associated with improved CSR performance [85]. Similarly, Arayssi et al. (2020) showed that greater gender diversity on boards can significantly improve ESG transparency and foster sustainable business practices [86].

Overall, evidence on the diversity–performance relationship is mixed and appears to depend on contextual factors and on the specific performance criteria examined [87]. As also remarked by Zhang et al. (2020), the relationship between gender diversity and firm performance varies significantly across countries and industries due to differences in institutional context. Where gender diversity enjoys stronger normative legitimacy, gender-diverse firms tend to exhibit higher market valuation and better performance, whereas in contexts characterized by low institutional legitimacy, the association may weaken or turn negative [88].

2.4. Gender Disclosure and Reporting

Gender equality certifications can be useful for improving the quality of sustainability reporting disclosures. At the international level, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards are the most widely used sustainability reporting standards [7]. As noted by García-Sánchez et al. (2022, p. 386), one “of the most common reporting frameworks internationally for producing gender disclosure applies the GRI standards” [8]. Within the European Union, the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) have become the mandatory reporting framework and are now being implemented [89]. Both reporting frameworks require specific gender-related information to be disclosed.

The GRI standards provide companies with a comprehensive international framework for preparing non-financial reports and publicly disclosing a wide range of economic, environmental, and social impacts. Regarding gender issues, key references are distributed across several GRI standards. GRI 2 (*General Disclosures 2021*) requires reporting the total number of employees, disaggregated by contract type and by gender and region. It also requires disclosure of the gender composition of the highest governance body and its committees, the organization's policy commitment to respecting human rights, with particular attention to at-risk or vulnerable groups, including women, and its approach to stakeholder engagement. Additionally, GRI 202 (*Market Presence 2016*) applies when a significant share of employees is covered by minimum-wage provisions. In such cases, the organization must disclose, for significant operating locations, the ratio of the standard entry-level wage to the local minimum wage, broken down by gender. Moreover, under GRI 401 (*Employment 2016*), organizations must report on new employee hires and turnover rates by age group, gender, and region, and provide parental leave, return-to-work, and retention data disaggregated by gender. In addition, GRI 404 (*Training and Education 2016*) requires reporting the average hours of training per employee by gender and employee

category, together with the percentage of employees receiving regular performance and career development reviews by gender and employee category. Furthermore, GRI 405 (*Diversity and Equal Opportunity 2016*) calls for the disclosure of the percentage of individuals in governance bodies and across employee categories, disaggregated by gender, and the ratio of women's to men's basic salary and remuneration in each employee category. Finally, GRI 406 (*Non-Discrimination 2016*) requires organizations to report the total number of discrimination incidents and the corrective actions taken, including incidents on grounds of race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction, or social origin.

Instead, companies subject to the CSRD, introduced by Directive (EU) 2022/2464 and replacing Directive 2014/95/EU (the so-called "Non-Financial Reporting Directive", NFRD), are required to report in accordance with the ESRS, which mandate detailed and specific disclosures on gender-related issues. The CSRD provides that sustainability information be included in the management report and introduces a phased implementation timeline for different categories of undertakings, according to a schedule recently updated by Directive (EU) 2025/794. In the context of the CSRD, gender equality is addressed across multiple ESRS, which are analyzed here in their current version.

First, ESRS 2 (*General Disclosures*) requires companies to disclose information on the gender composition and diversity of their administrative, management, and supervisory bodies, including a percentage-based gender breakdown. Moreover, ESRS S1 (*Own Workforce*) sets out disclosure requirements for key workforce-related policies and metrics, including gender equality and measures against violence and harassment, together with actions and targets addressing material impacts. Required disclosures include workforce characteristics by gender and contract type. They also cover diversity metrics, such as the gender distribution in top management. Further disclosures relate to work-life balance, including indicators on family-related leave and uptake disaggregated by gender. Organizations are also expected to report training hours and participation in performance and career development reviews, again disaggregated by gender. Remuneration metrics are also required, including the gender pay gap and the ratio between the highest-paid individual and the median employee, while gender disaggregation is optional for information on employees with disabilities. Additional gender-relevant disclosures are also covered under ESRS S2 (*Workers in the Value Chain*), ESRS S3 (*Affected Communities*), and ESRS S4 (*Consumers and End-Users*). Where applicable, the undertaking must disclose the steps taken to gain insight into the perspectives of value chain workers, affected communities, consumers, and end-users who may be particularly vulnerable or marginalized, such as women workers and women and girls.

Despite the existence of mandatory or voluntary disclosure requirements, a growing body of scholarship suggests that corporate engagement with gender mainstreaming is frequently limited to superficial metrics such as board composition or the proportion of female employees, thereby overlooking the multidimensional nature of gender equality, which necessitates a holistic and cross-cutting organizational approach.

In this regard, Miotto and Vilajoana-Alejandre (2019) examined how three leading fast fashion brands (Zara, H&M, and Mango) framed gender equality in their sustainability reports as part of their corporate legitimization efforts within the industry. Their analysis shows that disclosures focused primarily on women's working conditions and professional development, and also addressed issues such as women's representation on boards. However, reporting practices were uneven and fragmented across companies, and several potential areas for action and disclosure appeared underdeveloped. Gender equality was often communicated as a means to support legitimacy, rather than being consistently presented as a fully embedded strategic priority [90].

Similarly, Cosentino and Venuti (2023) argued that companies tend to adopt a symbolic rather than substantive approach when disclosing information related to gender issues [91]. Omitting gender-related disclosures can obscure material information, making corporate annual reports of interest as much for what they do not report as for what they include [92]. For instance, the workforce breakdown by gender offers little or no insight into progress toward gender equality within individual firms if not accompanied by disclosures on actual performance in terms of equal pay, opportunities, qualifications, training, and promotions. Thus, the disclosure of a high share of women in the workforce does not necessarily indicate an equitable workplace. Ultimately, the use of isolated measures is misleading and should be abandoned in favor of a comprehensive set of indicators covering women's pay, career progression, recruitment, retention, promotions, and access to training and development [93].

In this regard, Ojeda et al. (2025) provide broader evidence through a systematic review of 27 empirical peer-reviewed studies published between 1998 and 2022, showing that gender-equality reporting remains limited in scope and often superficial in corporate sustainability reporting. The analysis found that most studies focused primarily on women's representation in governance, especially corporate boards, while other crucial aspects such as pay equity and work–life balance were rarely addressed. Despite growing pressure to provide gender-related information, disclosures were often dispersed and poorly integrated across reports [94].

The risk of superficial or symbolic disclosure is closely related to the notion of “gender washing”, referring to the practice whereby corporations use CSR initiatives to project an image of gender inclusivity and empowerment without implementing substantive change. This phenomenon is examined by Walters (2022), who, drawing parallels with greenwashing, outlines seven manifestations of gender washing, including selective disclosure, empty gender claims and policies, dubious certifications and labels, coopted NGO endorsements and partnerships, ineffective public voluntary programs, misleading narratives and discourse, and misleading branding [95]. The risk of the symbolic use of certifications rather than genuine internalization should not be underestimated; it is heightened when criteria are predominantly procedural rather than outcome-based.

3. Methodology

With the sole exception of the ISO 53800 guidelines, the present study focuses on gender equality certifications. This clarification matters because the auditing process is central to strengthening a company's credibility and reliability in meeting high standards on gender issues, thereby reinforcing stakeholder trust. This focus is not meant to downplay the value of other gender-related frameworks, which may be rigorous but do not provide organizations with the possibility of obtaining a public certification. Accordingly, while such tools can be useful, they are not examined in this study, which concentrates primarily on systems that result in a gender equality certification.

The main assumption is that companies are likely to be interested in adopting widely recognized certifications that signal commitment to high standards and enhance their legitimacy. Such certifications and standards strengthen their public image, demonstrate a commitment to quality and ethical practices, and build trust with customers, partners, and other stakeholders. By showcasing adherence to high standards, companies can differentiate themselves from competitors, attract socially conscious consumers and workers, and strengthen their overall brand reputation.

Gender equality certifications can be understood through five complementary theoretical perspectives: legitimacy theory, institutional theory, stakeholder theory, the RBV, and signaling theory. Under legitimacy theory, gender equality certifications operate as public

recognition mechanisms that align organizations with socially valued norms, strengthening their reputation and social acceptance. From an institutional perspective, gender equality certifications are adopted in response to normative, regulative, and cultural-cognitive pressures that shape organizational choices. From a stakeholder perspective, gender equality certifications respond to the expectations of diverse groups such as employees, investors, customers, and communities, encouraging the adoption of more responsible practices. Within the RBV, gender equality certifications embed routines and capabilities that enhance the firm's internal resource base and competitive position. Seen through signaling theory, gender equality certifications function as credible signals that reduce information asymmetry, lower transaction costs, and build stakeholder trust.

To develop a robust understanding of the most relevant gender equality certifications, this study focuses on a selected set of schemes spanning both national and international frameworks and combining established and newly introduced models, thereby enabling a balanced comparison of approaches and implementation practices. Although limited, the sample is sufficient to reveal the substantial heterogeneity that characterizes gender equality certification models. More specifically, the analysis covers two national gender equality certifications, implemented in France and Italy, and three international frameworks, namely the Equity, Diversity, and Gender Equality (EDGE) Certification, the UNDP Gender Equality Seal (GES), and the Gender Equality European and International Standard (GEEIS). To enhance the accuracy of the comparative evaluation, direct communication was established with the organizations responsible for each certification, allowing for the clarification of technical aspects and the validation of key information.

Moreover, although not a certification in itself, ISO 53800 was also reviewed due to its comprehensive framework for promoting and implementing gender equality, offering a potential universal reference point for future developments. The rationale for also analyzing ISO 53800 lies in the fact that it was developed by an international multi-stakeholder group comprising experts from more than 60 countries and six international organizations, making it a key reference point for any discussion of a single and universal gender equality certification. Furthermore, nothing precludes ISO 53800 from serving, in the coming years, as the basis for a fully certifiable ISO gender equality standard with auditable requirements, given that, as noted by Papafloratos and Fragidis (2025, p. 3), companies “tend to overwhelmingly choose ISO management standards to manage ESG-related topics” [18].

In addition to the documentary and comparative analysis, the study incorporated semi-structured consultations with five experts in gender equality, diversity management, auditing, and ESG reporting. Although not formal focus groups in the traditional sense, these consultations served as focused expert discussions aimed at validating the comparative assessment and clarifying the strengths and limitations of each certification model. Notes from these sessions were analyzed through thematic coding, enabling the identification of recurring concepts across expert contributions. This feedback was integrated into the comparative evaluation and informed the development of a conceptual framework for a universal gender equality certification. The main features of the five gender equality certifications, together with the ISO 53800 standard, are outlined below and are subsequently drawn upon in the discussion section.

4. Analysis of Five Gender Equality Certifications and ISO 53800

The national and international gender equality certifications analyzed in this study, alongside ISO 53800, differ substantially in terms of scope, design, and evaluation logic, as summarized below and further highlighted in Table 1.

In 2004, France introduced a national certification specifically focused on gender equality, known as the “Professional Equality Label” (*Label Égalité Professionnelle entre*

les Femmes et les Hommes). Owned by the French state and administered by the national standards body AFNOR (*Association Française de Normalisation*), the Label is intended to help organizations identify and address gender-based inequalities in the workplace and to strengthen their policies and practices on professional equality between women and men. Revised in 2022, the French Label is regularly updated to reflect regulatory changes and emerging societal challenges, including digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI) in human resource (HR) practices.

The French certification is available through three models: for private organizations with 50 or more employees; for private organizations with fewer than 50 employees; and for public employers. A prerequisite for the Professional Equality Label is achieving a score of at least 75 points out of 100 on France's Professional Equality Index, which covers gender pay gaps, pay increases (and promotions in larger firms), maternity-leave return adjustments, and representation among top earners [96].

The Professional Equality Label process is structured around seven domains: (1) *state of play and risk analysis*; (2) *definition and implementation of the Professional Equality policy*; (3) *listening and reporting system*; (4) *internal communication, awareness, and training*; (5) *integration of gender equality policy into HR management and governance*; (6) *external communication, territorial anchoring, relations with suppliers and users*; and (7) *evaluation and continuous improvement*. Public employers and larger private organizations are assessed through a comprehensive auditing system, which requires organizations to provide evidence of implementation for a range of elements. There are roughly 200 control points, each verified by at least one and often several auditors. Smaller entities are subject to proportionate requirements. The decision to award the label is taken by the "Label Égalité" commission, whose specific role is to hear the representative of the organization applying for certification and to examine the report produced by AFNOR Certification auditors.

The Professional Equality Label is praised for its simplified scheme for SMEs, regular updates, extended gender-equality coverage, and ethical consideration of AI, but its numerous control points may limit uptake among resource-constrained organizations and increase administrative burden. Moreover, its national scope can reduce its attractiveness to multinational organizations.

Another national scheme is the Italian Gender Equality Certification, introduced in Italy in 2022 through UNI/PdR 125:2022, which is a reference practice rather than a national standard [97]. This reference practice was published by UNI, the national standardization body, and developed through a working table coordinated by the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Italian Government. The Italian certification is based on a single architecture, implemented for both public and private organizations, and requires the establishment of gender equality policies, a strategic plan, and a management system with specific KPIs. The framework comprises six thematic areas: (1) *culture and strategy*; (2) *governance*; (3) *HR processes*; (4) *opportunities for growth and inclusion of women in the organization*; (5) *gender income equality*; and (6) *protection of parenthood and work-life balance*.

The number of KPIs required to obtain the Italian Gender Equality Certification varies according to the size of the organization. Large organizations (i.e., those with a number of employees of 250 or more) and medium organizations (i.e., those with a number of employees between 50 and 249) are assessed for all 31 KPIs, and a minimum overall score of 60% (i.e., 60) must be achieved to obtain the certification. Simplified requirements apply only to small and micro organizations. Small organizations (i.e., those with a number of employees between 10 and 49) must address only 13 KPIs, reflecting the proportionality principle embedded in the UNI/PdR framework. Micro organizations (i.e., those with a number of employees between 1 and 9) must address only eight KPIs. For both small and

micro organizations, certification is granted upon reaching at least 60% of the maximum score obtainable under the applicable simplified scheme.

The framework of UNI/PdR stands out for its modular approach, which tailors requirements to organizational size, thereby ensuring accessibility for both large enterprises and smaller entities. Another positive aspect is the high number of accredited Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs) authorized to perform audits. At the end of 2024, the number of CABs reached 55. Public support mechanisms, particularly for SMEs, further enhance the appeal of the Italian Gender Equality Certification, while the transparency of the indicators contributes to its practical effectiveness. However, the system is characterized by a high proportion of qualitative KPIs, which may complicate objective measurement and benchmarking. Moreover, its national scope can restrict its broader applicability. Furthermore, the lack of public disclosure of the final scores of certified organizations limits transparency regarding their degree of gender equality maturity.

Turning to international gender equality certifications, a first model is represented by the Equity, Diversity, and Gender Equality (EDGE) scheme. Launched at the World Economic Forum in 2011, EDGE Certification is a global framework applicable across all sectors and organizational types. EDGE has three certification levels: “EDGE Assess” as the entry level, “EDGE Move” as the intermediate level, and “EDGE Lead” as the advanced level, reflecting increasing organizational maturity in embedding gender equity. Additionally, “EDGEplus” is an optional extension that adopts an intersectional lens beyond a binary gender scope, considering gender alongside other diversity dimensions such as gender identity, race and ethnicity, LGBTQ+ status, disability, nationality, and age.

The EDGE framework tracks and scores 18 indicators across four pillars: (1) *gender representation at all organizational levels*; (2) *pay equity*; (3) *effectiveness of policies and practices*; and (4) *inclusiveness of the organizational culture*. The first pillar measures the percentage of women and men in various managerial positions (junior, middle, upper, and top levels) and includes a “proportionate retention” KPI, defined as the percentage of women in top management divided by the percentage of women in junior management. Because women’s representation typically declines along the career pipeline, the EDGE framework uses this indicator to ensure the drop from junior to top levels stays within a defined range. As a benchmark, the EDGE scheme sets a minimum of 30% representation for both genders across all management levels (junior, middle, upper, and top) and requires that at least 60% of the percentage of women in junior management be retained at the top management level. This threshold supports gender balance progression across organizational levels.

The second pillar focuses on pay equity, applying a $\pm 5\%$ tolerance for unexplained gender pay gaps. This specific threshold, now reflected in international regulations, acknowledges the statistical complexities of compensation analysis while maintaining a commitment to fairness. The third pillar assesses the effectiveness of organizational policies and practices related to gender and intersectional equity, covering areas such as fair recruitment and promotion, career progression, leadership development, training and mentoring, and flexible working arrangements. The fourth pillar incorporates employee perceptions, requiring that at least half of respondents from each gender must affirm equal opportunities in recruitment, promotion, remuneration, and working conditions. This ensures that inclusiveness is validated through employee feedback.

Moreover, the EDGE Certified Foundation provides its clients with a digital platform that includes assessment methodology, data tables, policies and practices questionnaires, and an employee survey. This integrated solution supports organizations in preparing for both certification and recertification. Beyond the provision of a dedicated digital platform, EDGE Certification’s strengths include international recognition, attention to intersectional

dimensions, strong employee engagement, and transparent public disclosure of certified organizations and certification levels.

Another international gender equality certification is the Gender Equality Seal (GES), developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as a tool for mainstreaming gender across organizations and countries, spanning areas from internal policies and capacities to external partnerships and performance. Its aims extend beyond parity in the labor market. Specifically, the GES is a tool designed for development agencies, public institutions, and private enterprises to collaborate toward achieving the SDGs, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Numerous national certification programs have been implemented in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, and the Arab States [98].

There are three types of GES: the GES for Development (applicable to UNDP Country Offices and multilateral development agencies), the GES for Public Institutions, and the GES for the Private Sector. The GES for Development was launched in 2011, followed by the Private Sector scheme in 2015 and the Public Institutions scheme in 2021. For all three certification types, the GES program offers three levels of certification: Gold, Silver, and Bronze. Gold certification is awarded when the organization meets at least 80% of the requirements in key performance areas, Silver certification when at least 70% are met, and Bronze certification when at least 60% are fulfilled.

The GES for Development focuses on seven dimensions, the GES for Public Institutions includes five dimensions and 40 benchmarks (see Table 1), while the GES for the Private Sector consists of over 50 KPIs. For the private sector, UNDP provides an online platform, featuring nine modules and a system of gender equality indicators for companies aiming to demonstrate their progress in achieving workplace gender equality and identifying gender gaps. The nine modules include: (1) *organization profile and productivity*; (2) *personnel profile*; (3) *recruitment, selection, and hiring*; (4) *professional development and performance*; (5) *remuneration*; (6) *prevention of harassment in the workplace*; (7) *work-life balance with shared social responsibility*; (8) *communication*; and (9) *supply chain*.

Strengths of the GES certification include its international recognition, alignment with the SDGs, and attention to gender issues across the value chain. Additional strengths include the presence of a digital scoring platform and the transparent public disclosure of certified organizations and certification levels. However, the certification lacks transparency regarding the KPIs used for assessment.

The Gender Equality European and International Standard (GEEIS) is another international certification that recognizes organizations committed to promoting gender equality in the workplace. Established in 2010 by the Arborus Endowment Fund, the GEEIS provides a framework for companies to assess and enhance their gender-related policies. In 2020, Arborus launched the International Charter for Inclusive AI along with the GEEIS-AI label, which aims to ensure that algorithmic decisions in artificial intelligence are inclusive, ethical, and free from gender and minority biases in both data structures and code design.

The GEEIS label is structured around ten criteria: (1) *general policy*; (2) *implementation at the local level*; (3) *assessment of gender-related needs and risks*; (4) *HR management*; (5) *professional gender diversity and governance*; (6) *gender pay gap*; (7) *organization of work*; (8) *shared organizational culture*; (9) *social dialogue*; and (10) *impact on the wider ecosystem*. Within a continuous improvement process, each criterion is supported by evidence and rated across six maturity levels, each corresponding to a specific stage of development. Achieving level 2 is the minimum requirement for obtaining the GEEIS label. At level 6, which represents full policy implementation, organizations can explicitly link their performance to one or more SDGs, extending beyond SDG 5.

Strengths of the GEEIS framework include its international recognition and field-based approach, with a strong emphasis on cultural inclusiveness and incentivized alignment with other SDGs beyond SDG 5. Moreover, GEEIS is updated biennially and proactively addresses emerging challenges such as AI and algorithmic bias, further enhancing its relevance. However, a key weakness is the lack of disclosure of certification levels and KPIs. Moreover, the limited number of accredited auditors and partial disclosure of certified organizations can reduce the visibility of the certification.

Although it is not a certification, a final gender-focused scheme that deserves attention is ISO 53800, published in 2024 and titled “Guidelines for the promotion and implementation of gender equality and women’s empowerment” [99]. The document was developed through contributions from experts across diverse disciplines and countries, aiming to provide broad perspectives and global applicability. The initiative behind ISO 53800 was led by the French standards body AFNOR, which submitted a proposal in 2021 and called for the establishment of an ISO project committee to further develop the document. Within Project Committee PC 337, 38 countries served as participating members, while an additional 24 countries served as observers.

In practical terms, ISO 53800 cannot be directly certified because it lacks audit-ready criteria. Instead, it provides guidelines on how to promote and implement gender equality and women’s empowerment, and is applicable to all types of organizations (public or private), regardless of their size, location, or field of activity. The document is intended to support organizations in making sustainable progress both internally and externally by providing guidelines, definitions, procedures, and helpful tools, including good practices and practical examples. ISO 53800 also defines key terms used throughout the guidelines, including gender equality, gender-based discrimination, gender-inclusive language, women’s empowerment, gender parity index, and gender balance. Gender-inclusive language is defined as spoken and written language that does not perpetuate stereotypes and that makes women and men, in all their diversity, visible, for example by using feminine and masculine forms where they differ and by using gender-neutral terms.

The standard is organized into clauses that outline key issues and specify “related actions and expectations” to guide organizational assessment and improvement. Illustrative actions include implementing career plans that account for parental, maternity, paternity, and other care leave, and engaging suppliers on gender equality policies. Recommended actions are intended to be prioritized based on organizational maturity, size, and objectives, and the document also includes guiding questions to support reflection.

ISO 53800 addresses four key areas: (a) *internal dimension of the organization*; (b) *activity and investments of the organization*; (c) *external relations of the organization*; and (d) *internal and external communication*. Moreover, the standard proposes a six-step methodology: (1) understanding the document and its terminology; (2) analyzing the current situation in regard to gender equality; (3) identifying the stakeholders; (4) identifying and prioritizing issues on gender equality, including assessing impacts and using tools such as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis; (5) involving stakeholders with issues; and (6) implementing a continuous improvement approach based on the universal Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle.

Key strengths of ISO 53800 include references to AI and the value chain, along with recommendations on inclusive and gender-neutral language in internal and external communications. A further strength is the provision of more than 40 gender-disaggregated indicators, listed in Annex B. These gender-disaggregated indicators cover, among other areas, positions within the organization, promotion, remuneration, training, working conditions, leave, and procedures for preventing and responding to sexual harassment and gender-based violence. The main limitation of ISO 53800 is that it is not designed as a

certifiable standard and therefore cannot serve as a basis for third-party audits, certification, or public disclosure, as it functions solely as a guidance framework.

Other relevant features of the six gender equality schemes analyzed here are provided in Table 1. To ensure comparability across heterogeneous schemes, Table 1 adopts a standardized coding frame capturing 15 characteristics, grouped into four categories: *institutional attributes* (1. Establishing body, 2. Year of first issuance, and 3. Scope); *scheme architecture* (4. Distinction between public and private organizations, 5. Number of models, 6. Number of levels, and 7. Number and list of domains); *evaluation features* (8. Number of KPIs, 9. Consideration of AI issues, 10. Eligibility requirements or attainment thresholds, 11. Transparency of the KPIs, and 12. Availability of a free digital tool or platform for running simulations); and *implementation indicators* (13. Disclosure of certified organizations and achieved levels/scores, 14. Period of certification validity, and 15. Number of organizations certified at the end of 2024).

Table 1. Comparative overview of five gender equality certification frameworks and ISO 53800.

NAME	French Professional Equality Label (Label Égalité Professionnelle entre les Femmes et les Hommes)
1. Establishing body	Owned by the French state and administered by the national standards body AFNOR
2. Year of first issuance	2004
3. Scope	France
4. Distinction between public and private organizations	Yes
5. Number of models	3 models: - for private organizations with 50 or more employees - for private organizations with fewer than 50 employees - for public employers
6. Number of levels	A single level
7. Number and list of domains (or equivalent)	7 domains: (1) <i>state of play and risk analysis</i> (2) <i>definition and implementation of the Professional Equality policy</i> (3) <i>listening and reporting system</i> (4) <i>internal communication, awareness, and training</i> (5) <i>integration of gender equality policy into HR management and governance</i> (6) <i>external communication, territorial anchoring, relations with suppliers and users</i> (7) <i>evaluation and continuous improvement</i>
8. Number of KPIs (or equivalent)	Roughly 200 points of control for organizations with 50 or more employees
9. Consideration of AI issues	Yes
10. Eligibility requirements or attainment thresholds	Beyond the prerequisite of achieving at least 75/100 on the Professional Equality Index, the decision to award the label is taken by the “Label Égalité” commission, based on the report produced by AFNOR Certification auditors
11. Transparency of the KPIs	No
12. Availability of a free digital tool or platform for running simulations	No
13. Disclosure of certified organizations and achieved levels/scores	Yes
14. Validity period of certification	4 years with a mid-term audit after 2 years
15. Number of certified companies at the end of 2024	595
NAME	Italian Gender Equality Certification (UNI/PdR 125:2022)
1. Establishing body	UNI, Italy’s national standardization body
2. Year of first issuance	2022
3. Scope	Italy
4. Distinction between public and private organizations	No

Table 1. Cont.

5. Number of models	3 models: - for medium and large organizations with 50 or more employees - for small organizations with 10–49 employees - for micro organizations with 1–9 employees
6. Number of levels	A single level
7. Number and list of domains (or equivalent)	6 areas: (1) <i>culture and strategy</i> (2) <i>governance</i> (3) <i>HR processes</i> (4) <i>opportunities for growth and inclusion of women in the organization</i> (5) <i>gender income equality</i> (6) <i>protection of parenthood and work–life balance</i>
8. Number of KPIs (or equivalent)	31 KPIs for medium and large organizations; 13 KPIs for small organizations; 8 KPIs for micro organizations
9. Consideration of AI issues	No
10. Eligibility requirements or attainment thresholds	Achievement of a minimum overall score of 60%
11. Transparency of the KPIs	Yes
12. Availability of a free digital tool or platform for running simulations	No
13. Disclosure of certified organizations and achieved levels/scores	Disclosure of certified organizations but the scores achieved by certified organizations are not publicly disclosed
14. Validity period of certification	3 years; surveillance audits at 12 and 24 months
15. Number of certified companies at the end of 2024	About 5000

NAME	Equity, Diversity, and Gender Equality (EDGE)
1. Establishing body	EDGE Certified Foundation (ECF)
2. Year of first issuance	2011
3. Scope	International
4. Distinction between public and private organizations	No
5. Number of models	A single model with size/sector adaptations
6. Number of levels	3 levels: EDGE Assess, EDGE Move, EDGE Lead 1 intersectional extension: EDGEplus
7. Number and list of domains (or equivalent)	4 pillars: (1) <i>gender representation at all organizational levels</i> (2) <i>pay equity</i> (3) <i>effectiveness of policies and practices</i> (4) <i>inclusiveness of the organizational culture</i>
8. Number of KPIs (or equivalent)	18 indicators tracked and scored
9. Consideration of AI issues	No
10. Eligibility requirements or attainment thresholds	Achievement of specific thresholds across the four pillars and for each level
11. Transparency of the KPIs	Yes
12. Availability of a free digital tool or platform for running simulations	Yes
13. Disclosure of certified organizations and achieved levels/scores	Yes
14. Validity period of certification	2 years
15. Number of certified companies at the end of 2024	More than 800 EDGE Certifications have been awarded to large organizations operating in 63 countries, covering 41 industry sectors and spanning all three levels

NAME	UNDP Gender Equality Seal (GES)
1. Establishing body	United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
2. Year of first issuance	2011
3. Scope	International
4. Distinction between public and private organizations	Yes

Table 1. Cont.

5. Number of models	3 models: - GES for Development, launched in 2011 - GES for the Private Sector, launched in 2015 - GES for Public Institutions, launched in 2021
6. Number of levels	3 levels: Bronze, Silver, Gold
7. Number and list of domains (or equivalent)	The GES for Development focuses on 7 dimensions: (1) <i>management systems for gender equality</i> (2) <i>gender equality capacities</i> (3) <i>enabling environment</i> (4) <i>gender responsive knowledge management and communications</i> (5) <i>programs and projects</i> (6) <i>partnerships</i> (7) <i>results and impact</i> The GES for the Private Sector is based on 9 modules: (1) <i>organization profile and productivity</i> (2) <i>personnel profile</i> (3) <i>recruitment, selection, and hiring</i> (4) <i>professional development and performance</i> (5) <i>remuneration</i> (6) <i>prevention of harassment in the workplace</i> (7) <i>work–life balance with shared social responsibility</i> (8) <i>communication</i> (9) <i>supply chain</i> The GES for Public Institutions includes 5 dimensions: (1) <i>planning and management for gender equality</i> (2) <i>gender equality architecture and capacities</i> (3) <i>work environments to enable gender equality</i> (4) <i>participation, partnerships and accountability</i> (5) <i>results and impact of public policies</i>
8. Number of KPIs (or equivalent)	More than 50 KPIs for the GES for the Private Sector and 40 benchmarks for the GES for Public Institutions
9. Consideration of AI issues	No
10. Eligibility requirements or attainment thresholds	Achievement of at least 60% of the requirements for the Bronze level Achievement of at least 70% of the requirements for the Silver level Achievement of at least 80% of the requirements for the Gold level
11. Transparency of the KPIs	No
12. Availability of a free digital tool or platform for running simulations	Yes, as there is an online platform for organizations seeking certification
13. Disclosure of certified organizations and achieved levels/scores	Yes
14. Validity period of certification	3 years
15. Number of certified companies at the end of 2024	445 companies have achieved the GES for the Private Sector; the GES for Public Institutions has been rolled out in 26 countries where UNDP works with 98 public institutions
NAME	Gender Equality European and International Standard (GEEIS)
1. Establishing body	Arborus Endowment Fund
2. Year of first issuance	2010
3. Scope	International
4. Distinction between public and private organizations	No
5. Number of models	A single model
6. Number of levels	6 levels: level 2 is the minimum threshold for certification; level 6 represents full policy implementation and may be linked to one or more SDGs beyond SDG 5

Table 1. Cont.

7. Number and list of domains (or equivalent)	10 areas: (1) <i>general policy</i> (2) <i>implementation at the local level</i> (3) <i>assessment of gender-related needs and risks</i> (4) <i>HR management</i> (5) <i>professional gender diversity and governance</i> (6) <i>gender pay gap</i> (7) <i>organization of work</i> (8) <i>shared organizational culture</i> (9) <i>social dialogue</i> (10) <i>impact on the wider ecosystem</i>
8. Number of KPIs (or equivalent)	More than 20 KPIs
9. Consideration of AI issues	Yes
10. Eligibility requirements or attainment thresholds	Achievement of level-specific thresholds, with level 2 as the minimum certification level
11. Transparency of the KPIs	No
12. Availability of a free digital tool or platform for running simulations	No
13. Disclosure of certified organizations and achieved levels/scores	Most certified organizations are disclosed, while the certification levels are not disclosed
14. Validity period of certification	4 years with a mid-term audit after 2 years
15. Number of certified companies at the end of 2024	More than 200 companies that are active in 54 countries
NAME	ISO 53800
1. Establishing body	International Organization for Standardization
2. Year of first issuance	2024
3. Scope	International
4. Distinction between public and private organizations	No
5. Number of models	A single model
6. Number of levels	A single level
7. Number and list of domains (or equivalent)	4 areas: (a) <i>internal dimension of the organization</i> (b) <i>activity and investments of the organization</i> (c) <i>external relations of the organization</i> (d) <i>internal and external communication</i>
8. Number of KPIs (or equivalent)	More than 40 indicators
9. Consideration of AI issues	Yes
10. Eligibility requirements or attainment thresholds	Not applicable, as ISO 53800 does not allow certification
11. Transparency of the KPIs	Access to indicators is conditional upon the purchase of the standard
12. Availability of a free digital tool or platform for running simulations	No
13. Disclosure of certified organizations and achieved levels/scores	Not applicable, as ISO 53800 does not allow certification
14. Validity period of certification	Not applicable, as ISO 53800 does not allow certification
15. Number of certified companies at the end of 2024	Not applicable, as ISO 53800 does not allow certification

Author's elaboration.

5. Discussion

The previous considerations, together with the additional technical details reported in Table 1, highlight the marked differentiation and limited interoperability among gender equality certification frameworks. Harmonizing measures of gender equality serves not only to enhance organizational legitimacy and the comparability of gender-related disclosures, but also to establish a shared language and a common benchmark that facilitates continuous improvement. When indicators and assessment criteria differ across multiple schemes, organizations may become skeptical because the resulting lack of consistency can reduce perceived legitimacy and discourage them from pursuing gender equality certification and related substantive improvements. Conversely, a harmonized set of metrics improves perceived legitimacy and establishes a common reference point that strengthens comparability and accountability across firms and sectors, supporting

internal decision-making and learning. It also makes progress on gender equality easier to track, communicate, and connect to broader societal outcomes, including community engagement and alignment with the SDGs.

Based on the literature, gender equality certifications provide a broad range of internal and external benefits. Internally, certified organizations often experience more transparent and equitable HR processes, fairer promotion and recruitment criteria, reductions in pay gaps, and improvements in employee motivation, engagement, and overall workplace climate. Gender equality certifications also tend to strengthen managerial accountability, bolster the quality and consistency of gender-related data, and support the integration of equality objectives into organizational planning and decision-making. Externally, gender equality certifications can enhance an organization's public image and legitimacy, increase trust among customers, investors, and other stakeholders, and improve its ability to attract and retain talent, particularly in competitive labor markets. They may also reinforce credibility in ESG reporting, facilitate compliance with emerging gender-related regulations, strengthen relationships across the supply chain, and, in some contexts, provide advantages in procurement processes or access to incentives.

However, gender equality certifications also present several important limitations. These schemes often require substantial administrative effort and extensive documentation, and the costs of implementation and certification can be significant, particularly for SMEs. Maintaining the system over time can be challenging, especially where internal engagement is limited. In many cases, heavy reliance on external consultants may reduce internal learning, weaken ownership of gender equality processes, and hinder the long-term institutionalization of more equitable practices. Because of stakeholders' heterogeneity in terms of logics and expectations regarding certification, firms may either internalize requirements and achieve substantive change or comply superficially [100].

According to Valero-Gil et al. (2024), organizations seeking the internal benefits of certification should focus resources on a well-chosen single certification to avoid resource inefficiency and organizational tensions; conversely, over-certification patterns may alert stakeholders to the risk of symbolic use rather than genuine internalization [19]. Marx et al. (2012) argue that the proliferation and limited harmonization of private standards can result in overlapping and sometimes conflicting requirements, increasing compliance costs [101]. Although gender equality is increasingly recognized globally as a priority, inadequacies in gender equality practices and disclosure persist.

Over the last two decades, national and international gender equality certifications have emerged to promote workplace equality by formalizing best practices and encouraging measurable progress in closing gender gaps. While the gender equality certifications examined in this study share common goals and guiding principles, they differ significantly in scope, methodology, and transparency. All certifications aim to reduce gender disparities in the workplace by addressing issues such as pay equity, representation, and inclusive policies. These certifications use both qualitative and quantitative indicators to assess organizational practices, incorporating key metrics such as gender pay gaps, leadership representation, and work-life balance initiatives. They also require organizations to develop action plans, implement policies, and establish mechanisms to monitor progress toward gender equality.

However, substantial differences exist in the domains covered and scored, including the number and typology of the KPIs applied, which are not always transparently disclosed. Additionally, some international frameworks provide multiple certification levels – such as Bronze, Silver, and Gold under the UNDP Gender Equality Seal scheme or Assess, Move, and Lead under the EDGE Certification framework – reflecting an organization's maturity in implementing gender equality measures. By contrast, the Italian framework, where

certification levels are not contemplated, publicly lists only certified organizations but does not disclose the scores achieved. Moreover, interim independent assessments are sometimes conducted to strengthen credibility and ensure compliance with high standards, yet the validity period of gender equality certifications varies considerably across schemes. Additional differences are summarized in Table 1.

This differentiation does not benefit organizations, as it generates confusion and disperses information. Harmonization helps align evaluation processes, simplify administrative tasks for companies, and increase the appeal of certification. Although distinctive territorial factors exist, women's rights are universal. Respect for these rights and gender equality within an organization must remain consistent regardless of whether it is public or private, its country of operation, or the certifying entity. While recognizing contextual differences, the framework proposed in Figure 1 is conceived as a common baseline rather than a one-size-fits-all instrument. A universal and transparent certification model should discourage organizations from pursuing certification primarily for external visibility or reputational gains, thereby reducing the risk of superficial adoption and increasing the likelihood of meaningful cultural and structural change.

The argument presented here is that pursuing a single gender equality certification model with international and universal applicability is essential to ensure comparability among organizations aiming to demonstrate their commitment to best practices in gender equality. This need for a common reference was also emphasized by the five experts consulted for this study. They agreed on the importance of harmonizing existing frameworks to enhance comparability, reduce duplication of efforts, and improve the overall attractiveness and effectiveness of gender equality certification systems. Consequently, uniqueness and universality emerge as the key characteristics a gender equality certification should possess, ensuring clear added value alongside broad applicability across diverse organizational contexts.

The underlying premise is that, given equal organizational characteristics, organizations should prefer international gender equality certifications over national ones, as the former offer greater recognition and visibility. This raises a crucial question: what characteristics should a universal gender equality certification embody? These characteristics were identified through semi-structured consultations with the five experts in gender equality and diversity management. Drawing on the experts' experience in sustainability reporting and auditing practices, this analysis provides a practice-oriented and robust basis for the key features proposed below.

Building on the in-depth comparative analysis of five major gender equality certifications alongside ISO 53800, a coherent and integrated conceptual framework for a universal gender equality certification has been developed. Leveraging the most effective elements of the French Label, Italian Gender Equality Certification, EDGE Certification, UNDP GES, GEEIS label, and ISO 53800, Figure 1 identifies two overarching applicability principles and 14 design criteria.

As regards applicability principles, the experts shared the view that an ideal international gender equality certification should apply consistently to both public and private organizations, while maintaining common core requirements and offering a simplified model for SMEs. Although governance structures differ, both public and private organizations operate within the same labor markets, face similar challenges in recruitment, pay equity, and career progression, and shape social norms through their employment practices. Instead, a simplified track for SMEs is justified by their more limited resources and data capacity, reducing administrative burdens while preserving the core requirements of the scheme.

As regards the design criteria (here discussed in the same order as in Figure 1), all five experts agreed that the number of KPIs should be kept manageable and focused on the most relevant ones, in order to avoid discouraging adoption through excessive administrative burden. Wherever feasible, priority should be given to quantitative indicators, as reliance on qualitative measures may increase auditors' discretionary power and reduce the objectivity of evaluations. For example, in the Italian certification system for medium and large organizations, 20 of the 31 indicators are qualitative. However, certain aspects, such as training activities for female and male employees, would be more appropriately assessed using quantitative metrics, as required by GRI 404 and ESRS S1. Qualitative indicators remain essential for capturing cultural and behavioral dimensions that cannot be fully quantified.

Moreover, the expert panel concurred that an ideal gender equality certification should enhance worker involvement in the assessment process, recognizing that employees are best positioned to evaluate the authentic presence of a gender-neutral workplace climate. While most certifications incorporate phases of employee participation, employee feedback should play a central role, as ensured by the EDGE and GEEIS schemes.

Furthermore, the experts revealed that a critical KPI often missing from many certifications is the linkage of managers' compensation to the achievement of gender-related objectives. Incorporating this parameter is essential, as it creates a direct incentive for leadership to prioritize and actively advance gender equality within their organizations. When compensation is tied to measurable progress on gender goals, it signals that diversity and inclusion are not merely aspirational values but fundamental performance targets. This alignment motivates managers to implement effective strategies, monitor progress, and systematically address disparities. Additionally, it fosters accountability at the leadership level, ensuring that efforts to achieve gender equality are sustained over time and embedded within the core business strategy rather than treated as optional initiatives. By embedding this KPI in gender equality certifications, organizations can drive cultural change, promote equality more effectively, and demonstrate a tangible commitment to creating an inclusive environment.

Likewise, the five experts emphasized that the representation of women in CEO and chairperson roles should be included among the key indicators monitored in the assessment of advanced gender equality certifications. While most current certification procedures require reporting the number of women in managerial roles, they often fail to track women's representation in top leadership positions, such as CEO and chairperson roles, an issue that remains critical in many economic systems.

The experts also highlighted that, in line with EDGEplus and ISO 53800, a coherent gender equality certification should include a dedicated focus on intersectionality. Furthermore, consistent with the UNDP GES and ISO 53800, certain KPIs should address gender-related issues across the value chain to align with the reporting obligations outlined in the ESRS. Likewise, the integration of AI-related considerations has increasingly been regarded as an important assessment dimension within gender equality schemes, following the approach already adopted in the French model and the GEEIS.

Additionally, drawing on the example of the Italian certification, the experts agreed that guidelines and related qualitative and quantitative KPIs should be freely accessible. Such transparency enables companies to identify their weaknesses proactively and understand the parameters on which they will be evaluated. This openness appears to be a key factor behind the rapid uptake of the Italian scheme, which, despite being introduced only in 2022, had surpassed the other certifications in terms of the number of participating companies by the end of 2024, as shown in Table 1.

Moreover, from a transparency-oriented perspective, the experts agreed that the list of certified organizations and their certification levels should be publicly disclosed and, where certification levels are not contemplated, the exact score achieved should be disclosed. For current and potential stakeholders, including investors, financiers, employees, consumers, and suppliers, understanding the maturity level a company has reached in implementing gender policies is essential for making informed decisions. Additionally, publishing a low or intermediate score encourages companies to improve their compliance with gender principles, fostering continuous enhancement of their policies and practices.

Applicability Principles	
I. Unique model for public and private organizations Apply a single certification framework across public and private organizations	II. Simplified procedures for SMEs Introduce proportionate and simplified schemes for small and medium-sized enterprises
Criteria	
1. Number of KPIs Limit KPIs to the most relevant ones to support uptake and participation	8. Inclusion of AI considerations Consider fairness issues related to the organization's use of AI
2. Typology of KPIs Use a combination of quantitative and qualitative KPIs, prioritizing measurable data to ensure objectivity	9. Transparency Ensure public disclosure of criteria, KPIs, certified organizations, certification scores/levels and costs
3. Employee engagement Incorporate employee feedback to assess workplace culture and inclusiveness	10. Free digital self-assessment tool Provide a free digital tool that enables organizations to conduct a preliminary self-assessment
4. Leadership accountability Link gender equality objectives to managerial performance evaluation and compensation	11. Auditing process Ensure a sufficient number of accredited audit bodies and gender-balanced audit teams
5. Top-tier representation Track women's representation in top executive and governance roles	12. Regular updating Periodically revise criteria and KPIs to reflect evolving regulatory, technological, and social contexts
6. Intersectionality Address overlapping identities and multiple forms of discrimination	13. Integration with sustainability reporting Align the certification framework with GRI and ESRS standards to support ESG reporting
7. Value chain accountability Extend gender equality assessment to suppliers and business partners	14. Connect SDG 5 to related SDGs Strengthen the gender equality certification by connecting SDG 5 to other SDGs

Figure 1. Applicability principles and criteria for a universal gender equality certification.

Furthermore, the experts emphasized that transparency in certification costs should be a defining feature of an ideal universal gender equality certification, as the lack of cost transparency and the often substantial financial burden associated with existing schemes constitute a significant barrier, particularly for SMEs. Given that certification fees typically scale with organizational complexity, it is advisable to establish comprehensive guidelines detailing the methodologies used to estimate these costs. Such guidelines should clearly articulate the principal parameters influencing cost calculations, including, but not limited to, the number of employees.

Additionally, as exemplified by the EDGE and UNDP GES schemes, a freely accessible digital tool should be developed to facilitate a preliminary self-assessment of companies' gender equality maturity. While various consulting agencies in Italy have created such tools, they are typically fee-based services, which may discourage SMEs, especially those with limited financial resources, from conducting an initial self-assessment.

The experts converged on the need for a sufficiently large pool of accredited certification bodies to avoid bottlenecks and delays, while also stressing the importance of ensuring that audit teams include women auditors.

The experts also emphasized the importance of continuously updating the certification framework. In particular, regularly revising the criteria and KPIs used in gender equality certification processes has emerged as essential to ensuring their continued relevance and effectiveness. This approach is consistent with that adopted for the French Professional Equality Label and GEEIS, which are subject to regular revisions reflecting evolving legal frameworks, societal expectations, and emerging challenges such as the gender-related impacts of digital technologies and AI.

Finally, the experts agreed that the model proposed here should align with existing sustainability reporting frameworks, such as GRI and the ESRS, while reinforcing commitments under SDG 5 and its links to other SDGs. In line with the UNDP GES, a universal gender equality certification should make explicit the links between SDG 5 and related SDGs, reflecting the cross-cutting nature of gender equality. Such a coherent framework could also strengthen ESG reporting by providing consistent and measurable benchmarks for gender-related performance. This is particularly relevant, as reporting standards such as GRI and ESRS require gender-disaggregated disclosures across core employment and governance topics, including workforce composition, pay gaps, recruitment and promotion, training and development, work–life balance, and discrimination. Achieving a shared and internationally recognized gender equality certification can, therefore, improve the comparability of gender-related reporting practices and support alignment with ESG criteria, particularly for companies that, due to their size or other factors, are exempt from mandatory sustainability disclosure requirements [102]. Moreover, as Christensen et al. (2021) suggest, enhanced comparability would benefit not only firms with limited sustainability disclosures but also those already demonstrating best practices [103].

In this regard, the current moment offers an important opportunity to strengthen accountability and transparency. Progress toward a universal approach to gender equality may bolster reporting systems and, in turn, enable meaningful and comprehensive comparisons of corporate performance. While a unique, universal, and comprehensive KPI system cannot, in isolation, eradicate gender discrimination, the quantity, quality, transparency, and comparability of KPIs remain essential for fostering awareness and cultivating a shared understanding of the issue.

6. Conclusions

Although gender equality and corporate diversity have garnered increasing scholarly attention, gender equality certifications remain relatively underexplored, particularly within the contexts of ESG frameworks and the SDGs. This study contributes to filling this gap by providing a comparative analysis of leading gender equality certification models and by proposing a unified framework aligned with international sustainability standards.

Based on a comparative analysis of five gender equality certifications and the ISO 53800 standard, this study proposes a harmonized certification model grounded in two applicability principles and 14 core criteria. The ideal universal certification model should apply to both public and private organizations and include simplified procedures tailored to SMEs. Moreover, it should be underpinned by an appropriate number of KPIs to avoid

discouraging companies from pursuing certification, and by a dual system of quantitative and qualitative indicators, with greater emphasis on quantitative metrics to reduce subjectivity and enhance comparability. In addition, an attractive and effective gender equality certification scheme should ensure strong employee engagement, incorporate an intersectional perspective, strengthen leadership accountability, track women's representation in top roles, extend responsibility across the value chain, consider AI-related issues, and ensure transparency. It should also be supported by robust auditing arrangements, drawing on a sufficiently large pool of accredited certification bodies and gender-balanced audit teams. Further key features include the regular updating of criteria and KPIs to reflect evolving contexts, and alignment with international sustainability reporting standards, such as GRI and ESRS, and with other SDGs beyond SDG 5. Overall, these elements support a globally applicable, adaptable, and robust framework for advancing workplace gender equality.

Notwithstanding these findings, the study has several limitations. First, it exclusively focuses on gender equality certifications derived from VSS that incorporate rigorous audit processes, thereby excluding other frameworks and diagnostic tools that, while uncertified, may nevertheless make meaningful contributions to gender equality. This narrowed scope may result in the omission of relevant initiatives and characteristics.

Moreover, the impact of gender equality certification cannot be accurately appraised solely on the basis of the number of certifications conferred at a given point in time, although increasing adoption rates may reflect heightened corporate engagement and perceived legitimacy. A rigorous impact analysis requires examining substantive organizational transformations and tangible outcomes following certification, rather than limiting assessment to formal adoption. Accordingly, future research should take a longitudinal approach to evaluate the effects of different certification schemes on organizational performance, workplace culture, employee satisfaction, and social equity.

Furthermore, this study does not seek to rank existing certifications or to develop an exhaustive list of essential indicators for a universal gender equality certification. Future research could address this gap by identifying and consolidating the most relevant KPIs across existing models, thereby improving comparability and strengthening the effectiveness of universal frameworks. Equally worthy of further research is the identification of a core set of KPIs tailored to SMEs. Future studies could also clarify the specific barriers SMEs face in pursuing gender equality certification and assess the potential effectiveness of government incentives in supporting their engagement.

Additionally, empirical research could examine whether organizations that provide comprehensive gender-related sustainability disclosures are more likely to hold national or international gender equality certifications. Identifying such correlations would strengthen the evidence for the strategic value of these certifications and highlight the need for transnational collaboration to develop a harmonized reference framework.

A further limitation is the assumption about the feasibility and utility of a universal gender equality certification scheme across diverse cultural, regulatory, and organizational contexts. This simplified assumption can be examined more fully in future studies, but the proposal of a universal gender scheme remains a challenge and, at the same time, a valuable way to catalyze a collective dialogue aimed at delineating global baselines.

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