

'Leading' by example? Gendered language in Human Resource job adverts

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Abstract

While there has been an increase of women in the workplace, why do they remain underrepresented at the senior level, even in women-dominated occupations such as Human Resources (HRs)? This article examines gendered wording in UK HR job adverts and the extent to which job adverts are a gendered practice contributing to women's underrepresentation in senior roles—even within a women-dominated profession. We analysed 158 HR job adverts to identify the use of gendered language, traits and behaviours, equality, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI), and flexible working practices. Findings show that as the salary or title seniority increases, the proportion of masculine words in the job adverts increases, the prevalence of EDI statements, and flexible working practices decreases. We theorise how job adverts are a hidden gendered barrier to women's progress in HR, contributing to the (re)production of patriarchy, the masculine discourse of leadership and a negative cycle sustaining hierarchical segregation where men dominate in senior roles. HR is not leading by example in reducing systemic inequality practices and is complicit in reinforcing gender stereotypes.

KEYWORDS

gender, Human Resources, job adverts, language, recruitment

Abbreviations: CIPD, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; EDI, equality, diversity, and inclusivity; FTSE, Financial Times Stock Exchange; HRM, Human Resource Management; HRs, Human Resources; IT, Information Technology; NHS, National Health Service; UK, United Kingdom.

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Practitioner notes

What is currently known?

- Despite increasing workforce participation, women are underrepresented at senior level.
- Human Resource (HR) has long been a women-dominated occupation, yet men hold a disproportionate number of senior roles.
- The subtle wording in job adverts plays a crucial role in affecting women's inclination to apply.

What does this study add?

- Examines the impact of job-wording at different seniority levels within a women-dominated occupation.
- Highlights that the wording in senior-level HR adverts may deter women applicants.
- Argues that HR is not leading by example in the drive to increase women's representation in senior roles.
- Demonstrates the increasing prevalence of masculine wording in senior roles.

Implications?

- Urgent attention needs to be paid to craft job adverts to reduce instances of gender bias carefully.
- Statements of equal opportunities and flexible working should be embedded in job adverts rather than mentioned cursorily.
- Salaries should be stated explicitly to avoid deterring women applicants.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite progress over the past 50 years, workplace gender inequality is a prevalent global issue (Flores et al., 2021), with women's workforce participation condensed within lower-paid economic roles (Mordaunt, 2019). This article examines how UK Human Resources (HRs) practices, such as gendered wording in job adverts, constrain women's progress, even within a women-dominated profession. Job adverts are often the first interaction individuals have with an organisation and form lasting perceptions; thus, gender inclusivity at this stage is crucial.

Although board-level diversity increases profitability, women are still underrepresented in executive positions (Vinnicombe & Tessaro, 2022), even in women-dominated occupations (e.g., secondary education) (Campero & Fernandez, 2019). This underrepresentation led the UK government to introduce the FTSE Women Leaders Review to increase women's participation in senior leadership roles (UK Government, 2021). External factors, such as the Equality Act 2010, should protect women's employment and guide formalised and transparent HR practices, such as gender-neutral recruitment criteria, but disparities remain. Diversity is increasingly a feature of organisational strategy (Ng & Sears, 2020). However, organisations remain patriarchal, with men in power and gendered, with inequalities reproduced through organisational systems, practices (Acker, 1990; Ugarte & Rubery, 2020) and embedded gendered stereotypes (Ellemers, 2018). Recently, calls have been made to explore how gendered HR practices are hidden within organisational norms (e.g., Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022).

Uncovering gendered HR practices that hinder women's progress, even within women-dominated professions, is critical to challenging patriarchy and enabling women's progress into leadership in men-dominated occupations, such as science, engineering, and technology. HR is an example of a women-dominated profession (Reichel et al., 2020), in which a disproportionate number of men occupy the senior ranks (Cohen, 2015), indicative of a glass ceiling (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990) or labyrinth of barriers to women's progress (Eagly & Carli, 2018). Further, it

is argued that more women in leadership roles positively affects the language used in organisational documents (Lawson et al., 2022). As an example of HR practice, job adverts are a feature of the recruitment cycle where employers have complete control and can immediately make changes. However, how gender is framed in job adverts is under-examined (Jännäri et al., 2018). This argument has implications for the HR profession, where women are underrepresented in leadership roles. If progress cannot be made in women-dominated HR, often perceived as the custodian of equality, it does not bode well for overall women's workplace representation.

This article analyses findings from a study of gendered wording, expressions of equality, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) and flexible working arrangements in HR job adverts at different hierarchical levels. We advance debates about how patriarchy, a social system of power shaping gender relations, where men dominate as legitimate and natural figures of authority (Katila & Meriläinen, 1999), acts through gendered norms and stereotypes to maintain unequal power relations in organisations (Mavin & Yusupova, 2023). We extend the barriers faced by women in organisations by highlighting how job adverts are hidden gendered HR practices (Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022). Utilising the work of Gaucher et al. (2011) we interrogate masculine and feminine language in 'real' HR job adverts and extend this by identifying further gendered agentic and communal language (Eagly & Carli, 2018) in operation. We theorise how gendered job adverts reproduce patriarchy and the masculine discourse of leadership where women are secondary, acting as a barrier to women's representation at senior levels. This masculine discourse of leadership contributes to the (re)production of a negative cycle sustaining gendered hierarchical segregation in the HR profession. The findings can potentially influence ongoing academic debates and change gendered HR practices.

Our article is structured as follows: We synthesise the extant literature to understand how gendered stereotypes contribute to gendered HR practices hindering women's career progression. We then present an overview of the methods employed, followed by an analysis of findings in which we have examined job adverts from several perspectives. Finally, we offer a discussion and conclude by making recommendations for practitioners, highlighting avenues for future research and the study's limitations.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Human Resources: Gendered work?

The HR profession presents a valuable context to problematise how hidden gendered HR practices contribute to women's underrepresentation in senior roles. Firstly, HR is a profession which exemplifies occupational segregation (women-dominated) (Reichel et al., 2020) and gendered hierarchical segregation (men occupy the most senior roles) (Bierema, 2009; Cohen, 2015).

Secondly, workplace equality is central to the role of people management and, therefore, should underpin the Human Resource Management (HRM) function (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018). Recent research demonstrates how women leaders leave organisations that do not prioritise EDI and how younger women place a higher premium on working in an equitable and inclusive workplace (Krivkovich et al., 2022). Interventions to address gender inequality are geared towards 'fixing the woman', not challenging institutional barriers or addressing inequality as a systemic issue (Acker, 1990; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). While HR practitioners may be associated with EDI policies, this does not necessarily translate into equality in practice (Woodhams & Lupton, 2006). Indeed, HR functions are generally the custodians of policies to promote EDI, yet they do not always embody such values within the function; arguably, they do not lead by example. For example, Ackah and Heaton (2003) found that men were more likely to secure internal promotion with higher earnings after completing a formal HR qualification than women counterparts. Bierema (2009, p. 80) notes, 'HR is one of the few professions with more female managers than men, yet men make more money and hold the top jobs'. This context points to the 'patriarchal dividend' of privilege experienced by men working in women-dominated occupations who receive preferential treatment and accelerated career progression (Schwiter et al., 2021).

Thirdly, the HR profession is riddled with contradictions and tensions, not least because of its proximity to and potential for challenging deeply embedded patriarchy, which acts through gendered norms and stereotypes to maintain unequal power relations in organisations (Mavin & Yusupova, 2023). Individuals and organisations often take sex and gender for granted and fail to recognise gender identities beyond the binary (Connell & Pearse, 2015). Indeed, as Lorber (1994, p. 25) notes:

there is no essential femaleness or maleness ... once gender is ascribed, the social order constructs and holds individuals to strongly gendered ... [however they] may vary on many of the components of gender and may shift genders temporarily or permanently, but they must fit into the limited number of gender statuses that society recognises.

Scholars (such as Butler, 1990) have debated whether differences between sex and gender are because of biology or culture. Recognising that gender norms and stereotypes impact variously on diverse identities beyond 'woman' or 'man', British culture remains rooted in the idea of only two sexes, supported through language and social systems (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Therefore, as gender is constructed, it is recognised within a particular category. While binary categorisations are challenged by queer theory, which sees gender as fluid rather than fixed (Connell & Pearse, 2015) and challenges traditional notions, such as those who identify as non-binary (Abe & Oldridge, 2019), there are widely shared gendered stereotypes about how women and men think and behave which construct stereotypical expectations reflecting gendered differences. These 'impact the way women and men define themselves and are treated by others', and empirical studies demonstrate how gender stereotypes affect how people 'attend to, interpret, and remember information about themselves and others' (Ellemers, 2018, p. 275).

Gender stereotypes are the traits and behavioural expectations associated with gender (Koblinsky et al., 1978); occupational gender stereotypes encapsulate views on appropriate occupations for different genders (Berkery et al., 2013). This gendering influences young people's careers (O'Reilly et al., 2019), how leadership is constructed and how the ideal leader is viewed (Scholten & Witmer, 2017). Occupational gender stereotypes lead to a biased assessment of women's qualifications, skills, and performance at work (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and unequal access (Ng & Sears, 2017). Regarding leadership, gender stereotypes arise from associations of men with masculine agentic behaviours and women with feminine communal behaviours (Eagly & Carli, 2018). Stereotypes continue to inhibit women from accessing leadership roles (Berkery et al., 2013) because women are associated with communal characteristics (e.g., trust, compassion, altruism, kindness, helpfulness) and men with agentic ones (e.g., power, influence, competence, achievement, status, autonomy, assertiveness, ambition) (Galanaki et al., 2009; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012). Agentic leaders are stereotyped as focusing on themselves and communal leaders on the development of others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Gender stereotypes are often used to rationalise patriarchal organisations and why men continue to dominate organisational leadership roles (Mavin et al., 2019).

Following this thinking, the growing HR focus on employee involvement, training, and development could benefit women because communal characteristics (e.g., welfare, support) are necessary (Simpson & Lenoir, 2003). However, this focus only supports women in lower-level managerial roles, as the gender stereotype sees women as facilitators (Pichler et al., 2008) rather than leaders. Women in senior roles face a double bind; they do not receive the benefits of communal behaviours because, according to the gender stereotype, these are 'expected' from them. In contrast, men who demonstrate 'unexpected' feminine communal behaviours are rewarded, for example, through promotions (Eagly & Carli, 2018). Women are vilified and punished when they demonstrate 'unexpected' masculine agentic behaviours (Eagly & Carli, 2018). Even in women-dominated professions, the 'qualities associated with men and masculinity are more highly regarded and rewarded than qualities associated with women and femininity' (Williams, 2015, p. 390). This double bind is further complicated for HR as a women-dominated profession, as women can accept the social construction of masculine norms and adapt to male gender scripts in organisations so that gender hierarchies are maintained and reproduced (Hanappi-Egger, 2015).

HR has earned its board membership as a strategic partner at the neglect of other stakeholders (Marchington, 2015); women, particularly, have been negatively affected (Dickens, 1998). In doing gender in organisations, people construct and perform jobs in specific ways because those jobs are structured to demand certain gender displays (Byrne et al., 2021). Senior HR roles have become significantly stereotyped as more masculine and agentic, and women have been left stranded in lower-level management (Cohen, 2015). In orienting itself as a strategic partner (Marchington, 2015), HR has become an occupation reflecting gender segregation (Basfirinci et al., 2019), with men holding senior roles in a women-dominated profession. Without proactive intervention, this situation will continue as stereotypes influence career choices at an individual level and hiring decisions at an organisational level, maintaining occupational segregation (Clarke, 2020). If leadership in HR is patriarchal, enmeshed with masculine ideals, then this can act as a barrier to those who do not fit the ascribed gender norms, including women, even when, ironically, HR is the advocate of organisational inclusivity practices.

The HR profession, as the custodians of EDI practices (Ciuk et al., 2022; Umeh et al., 2023), is responsible for proactively challenging and breaking down gendered stereotypes in action in organisations. HR practices are subjective, with judgements made about others. When making judgements, we use a binary model of gender, ascribing characteristics aligned with masculine and feminine stereotypes (Clarke, 2020), such as those found in Appendix 1. Subjective judgements are influenced by language, the way we transmit social and cultural norms and attitudes. As the function leading on people and EDI, it is reasonable to expect that HR practices focus on language that promotes equality and inclusivity and actively communicates how an organisation's use of language can influence and perpetuate stereotypes (Goodhew et al., 2022). However, as women leaders positively impact language in organisational documents (Lawson et al., 2022), the lack of women in senior HR roles may impact language use.

Consequently, our two research questions are:

RQ1: How is HR's gendered hierarchical segregation reflected in its recruitment-advertising practices?

RQ2: To what extent is HR perpetuating women's underrepresentation in senior HR roles through gendered job adverts?

2.2 | Gendered wording in job adverts

Job adverts are a valuable organisational tool used to attract potential external recruits. They outline the employer's ideal candidate, often indicating the required knowledge, skills, and qualifications, driving applicants to self-select (Breagh, 2008). Additionally, equal opportunities and diversity statements help applicants determine how attractive an organisation is and impact their inclination to apply (Mullany & Cordell, 2021; Triana et al., 2021) by signalling the organisation's value of workplace diversity (Flory et al., 2021) and increasing the visibility of diversity (DePatie et al., 2022). As noted, this is particularly true for women who increasingly value and prioritise EDI (Krivkovich et al., 2022). Scholars have analysed job adverts to examine labour market factors, including exploring the required competencies (e.g., Hirudayaraj & Baker, 2018). However, an under-examined feature is how gender is framed in job adverts (Jännäri et al., 2018).

Gaucher et al. (2011) report on a study suggesting that gendered wording in job adverts contributes to gender inequality and occupational segregation in traditionally men-dominated occupations. In the first stage of their research, they analysed over 4000 job adverts for evidence of gendered wording using a list of masculine and feminine words drawn from earlier studies (see Appendix 1). In the second stage, they examined whether the presence of gendered wording affected the appeal of a job to men and women through several experimental studies. Notably, where job adverts contained proportionately more masculine words, it was often assumed that the occupational incumbents were men. In the final phase of their research, using further experiments, they made subtle changes to job adverts to increase the proportion of masculine or feminine words to establish if this affected

individuals' perceptions about whether a job is appealing. They found that women were less inclined to apply where an advert contained a higher proportion of masculine words, but men were unaffected. Conversely, job adverts containing more feminine words did not affect women's or men's application intentions.

Semantic analysis was employed by Askehave and Zethsen (2014) to investigate gender bias in 39 Danish executive job adverts. They found that most stereotypical masculine traits were dominant within the adverts. Continuing the theme of leadership, Horvath and Sczesny (2016) examined whether linguistic forms influence women's perceived lack of fit against German leadership job adverts, finding that women were deterred from vacancies advertised in the masculine form. Set in a Belgian university context, Wille and Derous (2018) determined how the content of job adverts expressed as traits versus behaviour affected women's application intentions. Traits can be expressed as adjectives describing something someone does or has (e.g., strong communication skills, i.e., nouns). Conversely, a behaviour explains how someone performs (e.g., adjusts communication style, i.e., verbs) (Wille & Derous, 2018). Wille and Derous (2018) found that women were less inclined to apply for roles if they held negative meta-stereotypes about personality traits. In other words, women were disinclined to apply if they perceived men to hold negative perceptions about their personality traits (e.g., women are overly emotional).

In 2020, Breese et al. published a study which essentially contested the existing literature. Contextualised with the Information Technology (IT) industry, which is typically men-dominated, they found that most job adverts used more feminine language proportionately (using the same words as Gaucher et al. (2011)). Nevertheless, there has been limited impact on the increase of women working in IT. One explanation was that women lost their jobs more than men due to COVID-19. Another study (Oldford & Fiset, 2021) set in a men-dominated industry, in this case, Finance, concluded, consistent with earlier works, that high agentic language may contribute to the occupational gender imbalance. Finally, the only known study (Tokarz & Mesfin, 2021) set in a women-dominated occupation used gendered words (Gaucher et al., 2011) to determine if there was any impact between librarian instructors and managers. The findings indicate that senior-level job adverts were more masculine despite librarianship being a women-dominated occupation. Subsequently, Tokarz and Mesfin (2021) called for research to consider who is responsible for creating job adverts and their gender make-up. We respond to this call by examining HR, a women-dominated profession responsible for job advert production. Most recently, Arceo-Gomez et al. (2022) compared gender-targeted and non-targeted adverts in Mexico and found a more significant salary gap in non-targeted adverts. They argue that adverts seeking agentic characteristics (stereotyped to men) advertise higher salaries than those seeking communal characteristics (stereotyped to women).

This study contributes to the debate about gendered job adverts in four ways. Firstly, we use Gaucher et al.'s (2011) findings to illustrate the presence of masculine and feminine language in real HR job adverts and extend this by demonstrating additional gendered agentic and communal language (Eagly & Carli, 2018). Secondly, we build on existing literature and contribute new understandings of how gender is portrayed in job adverts (Jännäri et al., 2018); only the second known study to investigate job advert wording in a women-dominated setting (Tokarz & Mesfin, 2021), extending the debate to consider traits versus behaviours, EDI, and flexible working arrangements. Thirdly, we address the imperative for gendered HR practices within organisational norms to become visible and analysable (Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022; Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011) by theorising how gendered language in job adverts serves as a subtle yet systemic mechanism perpetuating patriarchy and institutional inequality (Gaucher et al., 2011). Fourthly, by adopting a gender stereotype perspective, we propose that HR is complicit in gendering through senior role job adverts, maintaining gender stereotypes by unreflexively favouring agentic traits typically associated with men and masculinity.

To extend current understandings of the impact of gendered wording in job adverts in a women-dominated setting, we first use the established work of Gaucher et al. (2011) and second, agentic and communal gendered language (Eagly & Carli, 2018) as analytical frameworks. To strengthen our study, we also draw on traits and behaviours (Wille & Derous, 2018) to include an additional analytical lens in identifying the gendered nature of job adverts. The novelty in our study is the focus on different hierarchical levels within a women-dominated profession and the use of 'real' job adverts rather than experiments. In doing so, we respond to calls for the gendered HR

practices hidden within organisational norms to become visible and analysable (Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022; Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011) because gendered wording may be a subtle but systemic mechanism by which institutional inequality is maintained (Gaucher et al., 2011).

3 | METHODS

While research has shown that gendered wording sustains gender inequality in men-dominated occupations (Gaucher et al., 2011), whether such wording deters women's career progression in women-dominated occupations is under-researched. We extend current knowledge by exploring whether gendered wording in HR job adverts could lead to the underrepresentation of women in senior HR roles. In this article, we report on the findings of a study examining the presence of gendered wording in job adverts, which is part of a larger research project.

3.1 | Data collection

We selected the HR profession for three reasons: firstly, it is an occupation in which the authors have first-hand experience and thus have an in-depth understanding. Secondly, it has historically been and continues to be a women-dominated occupation (Reichel et al., 2020). Finally, despite being a women-dominated occupation, women are underrepresented in senior-level roles (Bierema, 2009).

To identify if gendered wording was a notable feature of HR job adverts, we used a sample of 158 job adverts posted on *PM Jobs*,¹ the official job site of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). *PM Jobs* was deemed an appropriate source of job adverts due to its affiliation with the CIPD, the UK's professional HR body.

Our sample included all job adverts posted on *PM Jobs* between June and August 2021, provided they met two criteria. Firstly, the advert was posted directly by the employing organisation. Excluding any jobs posted by recruitment agencies ensured that the agency's standard wording would not affect our findings. Secondly, we only included paid roles in our analysis; thus, volunteer and trustee roles were not considered. As the object of analysis was homogeneous (i.e., HR job adverts published on the same website), the sample size was deemed sufficient (Mayring, 2022). All vacancies, but one, were based in the UK; the international role's salary was not specified; hence, currency conversion was not required.

3.2 | Data analysis

We initially employed a mixed methods content analysis approach (Creamer & Ghoston, 2013; Patala et al., 2019) to analyse the job adverts. Mixed methods content analysis was deemed appropriate as it provides 'conceptual and analytical flexibility' (Duriiau et al., 2007, p. 2) by combining the rigour of quantitative methods with the richness that qualitative methods offer.

In the first stage of our analysis, we auto-coded each advert in NVIVO 12 to identify the frequency of masculine- and feminine-coded words (Appendix 1) based on the work of Gaucher et al. (2011). NVIVO's query function automatically codes all masculine and feminine words to build rigour into our process. The authors then manually checked the coding in each advert for context, and adjustments were made. For example, if the number of feminine-coded words used in an advert exceeded the number of masculine-coded words within the same advert, the advert was labelled feminine-coded. The reverse was labelled masculine-coded, and an equal representation of masculine and feminine words rendered the advert neutral.

The following example shows wording taken from a job advert coded as masculine. All masculine-coded words are underlined, and feminine words are highlighted in bold.

Example 1

Salary: £40,000–60,000

Sector: Local and national government

Level: Manager

Location: London

Summary: Masculine coded; written as traits

You are a [company] leader with a **responsibility** to embrace and lead change; be outcome-focused; and put [the company's] residents at the very heart of everything we do and every decision we take. You will live and breathe our values and behaviours. Your professional accountability is to develop and deliver a first-class, modern, and inventive people business partnering function across [the] services. A member of the extended HR and OD leadership team and the [company] leadership community, you will help to shape and deliver the organisational development plan and contribute to the practical implementation of our [...] transformation programme.

In the second example, the wording was taken from a job advert coded as feminine.

Example 2

Salary: Not specified

Sector: Construction

Level: Adviser

Location: International

Summary: Feminine coded; written as traits and behaviours

The HR Advisor will be **responsible** for, and work closely with, their assigned Directorates to deliver services that **support** business operations and excellence. The postholder acts as the recruitment partner and **trusted** advisor to staff and managers on all HR matters in the employee life-cycle.
- Shows continuous learning orientation.

Once the advert wording had been coded, we analysed the salary level and job title, as both indicate role seniority (Cardoso et al., 2016; Knight, 2017). We standardised the posted salary by creating salary bands, for example, £40,001–£60,000. Where a salary range was advertised, the lowest end of the band was used for the analysis. In instances where the salary was not specified, only the job title indicated seniority. Where a pro-rated salary was advertised, the full-time equivalent salary was included in the analysis for consistency. We cross-referenced the salaries against the Reed HR Salary Guide (2021) for accuracy.

In the second stage of our analysis, we coded the advert's section that describes the desired applicant profile to identify if the wording was expressed in terms of traits or behaviours. Wille and Derous (2018) and Born and Taris (2010) have shown that women are less attracted to job adverts expressed using traits, whereas the same profile expressed in terms of behaviours does not affect their attraction to the role. For example, 'strong communicator' is a trait-based description (something someone has), whereas 'adjusts communication style' is a behaviour-based description (something someone does). Therefore, where the number of traits in a job advert exceeded the number of behaviours, the job advert was coded as masculine. If the number of behaviours exceeded the number of traits, the job advert was coded feminine. Where an equal number of traits and behaviours were present, the job advert was coded neutral.

In the third stage, to deepen analysis, following Mullany and Cordell (2021), we explored how practices such as EDI were expressed. Additionally, we looked at the mention of flexible working as Cardoso et al. (2016, p. 516) suggest, 'women may limit the set of job opportunities to jobs with particular characteristics (e.g., the flexibility of work schedules)'. Based on Mullany and Cordell's (2021) work, the inclusion of EDI statements was categorised in one of four ways: (1) legal compliance, in which the organisation does no more than confirm their compliance with the Equality Act (2010); (2) affiliation, in which employers present their organisational values as affiliated with EDI; (3) encouragement, in which individuals from marginalised groups are actively encouraged to apply; or, (4) expectation, in which EDI practices are embedded within the role description.

Despite the rigour of the analysis, we became increasingly aware of how the job adverts used gendered language beyond the words operationalised by Gaucher et al. (2011), leading to a fourth analytical stage. We worked collaboratively to develop an interpretative analytic framework based on the language of agentic (masculine) and

communal (feminine) stereotypes (Eagly & Carli, 2018), where agentic reflects the notion of 'getting ahead', and communal refers to 'getting along' (Entringer et al., 2022). We completed an interpretative analysis of 30 original job adverts at the Associate Director and Director level. The additional masculine and feminine words that surfaced in this analysis are shown in Appendix 3. Returning to the earlier examples 1 and 2 and applying an agentic and communal interpretive framework where the masculine-coded words are underlined and feminine words are highlighted in bold, the masculine words increased and previously obscured feminine words appeared (as below).

Example 1—Interpretative coding

You are a [company] leader, with a **responsibility** to embrace and lead change; be outcome-focused; and put [the company's] residents at the very **heart** of everything we do and every decision we take. You will live and breathe our **values** and behaviours. Your professional accountability is to **develop** and deliver a **first-class**, modern, and inventive people business partnering function across [the] services. A member of the extended HR and OD leadership team and the [company] leadership community, you will help to **shape** and deliver the organisational development plan and **contribute** to the practical implementation of our [...] transformation programme.

Example 2—Interpretative coding

The HR Advisor will be **responsible** for, and **work closely** with, their assigned Directorates to deliver services that **support** business operations and excellence. The postholder acts as the recruitment partner and **trusted advisor** to staff and managers on all HR matters in the employee life-cycle.

- Shows continuous learning orientation.

This process resulted in seven roles being re-coded as masculine, three roles being re-coded as feminine and one role being re-coded as neutral.

3.3 | Reliability and validity

Our study's reliability was driven by reproducibility (intercoder reliability) (Weber, 1990). For the parts of the analysis which were subject to interpretation (e.g., job seniority), each author independently assessed the job title against the XperTHR's job levels,² especially in cases of overlap between different levels (e.g., HR Manager)—this form of intercoder agreement (Mayring, 2022) allowed for comparing each author's assessment. Any discrepancies were discussed until an agreement on the level was reached. Further reliability was achieved by using NVIVO 12 as an analytical tool; the automated text search functionality ensures that no words were missed through human error associated with manual coding (Duriau et al., 2007; O'Kane et al., 2021; Weber, 1990).

We used Krippendorff's (1980) notion of semantic validity to examine the computer-automated coding for contextual appropriateness. For example, 'depend*' is considered a feminine word but is often used in job adverts about salaries, for example, 'depending on experience'; such instances were removed to avoid skewing the results. Contextualised words were also removed, for example, 'Trust' when it referred to an NHS Trust or 'force' when referring to the police. Furthermore, as Mayring (2022) suggests, semantic validity can be based on the judgements of experts; we were able to apply our in-depth knowledge of the content of job adverts gained through our HR practitioner experience.

4 | FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

To determine the extent to which HR contributes to gendered hierarchical segregation and women's underrepresentation in senior roles, we initially analysed the job advert data from different perspectives to understand if there were notable differences in presentation at different seniority levels. First, our analysis of gendered wording

by sector did not surface any trends; industries typically considered men-dominated (e.g., construction) did not show a higher proportion of masculine-coded HR vacancies (Appendix 2) across all job levels. In other words, the content of HR job adverts remains relatively standard, and the HR profession remains women-dominated even in men-dominated industries. Moreover, masculine-coded senior-level job adverts were present in women-dominated industries (e.g., education). This finding is interesting because the coding of job adverts for HR roles was consistent across industries regardless of whether women or men typically dominate the industries. Similarly, there were no emergent patterns when examining the wording used in different geographical regions. Contextually, women are the majority of HR practitioners, and it is usual for HR practitioners to move between industries; it follows that scripting job adverts is a somewhat routine and transferable HR practice.

4.1 | Word frequency

Table 1 shows the most frequently appearing masculine and feminine words across all the job adverts in our analysis.

The dominance of the most frequently occurring feminine and masculine words is unsurprising. Despite efforts to position itself as a strategic partner (Marchington, 2015), HR is typically considered a 'support' function in organisations, and entry-level/junior roles (e.g., HR Administrator) mainly describe job accountabilities in supporting the services the function delivers. Words stemming from lead, such as leader and leadership, associated with senior roles (e.g., HR Director), unsurprisingly feature at the top of frequently used masculine words. This finding emphasises the gendering of job adverts for HR entry-level/junior roles where mainly women are appointed and for HR senior roles where men are generally appointed.

4.2 | Salary level

To understand if gendered wording could deter women's access to higher-paid jobs, contributing to their lack of representation, we sorted the vacancies by salary (Figure 1). Figure 1 shows that the job advert wording becomes more masculine as the salary increases. In response to RQ2, this finding suggests that gendered wording (Gaucher et al., 2011) comprises a barrier to women's access to senior-level roles (Ellwood et al., 2020), even in the HR women-dominated profession. This gendered framing of job adverts indicates the entrenched nature of gender norms and stereotypes in HR practice, constraining women's representation in senior roles.

Figure 1 excludes any roles where the salary was not expressed numerically, for example, if terms such as 'negotiable' or 'competitive' were used. In 8% of our sample, we found that a salary range was not explicitly stated. As Robertson and Williams (2018) note, ambiguity contributes to gender bias against women. Significantly, the word 'competitive' is considered masculine, active stereotypes position competitive women as nonfeminine

TABLE 1 Most frequently appearing masculine and feminine words.

Feminine		Masculine	
Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
Support	541	Lead*	419
Respon*	190	Challeng*	104
Commit*	139	Ambitio*	58
Understand	62	Individual	55

(Mavin & Yusupova, 2023), and gender stereotypes constrain women from advocating as freely and effectively for themselves, which impacts salary negotiations (Wade, 2001).

Our second analytical approach revealed a different story (Figure 2). Only three vacancies from our sample had more behaviours than traits. However, considering the infrequency in which behaviours are used in job adverts over traits, it is difficult to determine the impact of using traits or behaviours with salary levels. Nevertheless, the lack of behaviours indicates a problem that job adverts are generally orientated towards men in their presentation (Born & Taris, 2010; Wille & Derous, 2018), reflecting the embedded gendering in this HR practice.

Six job adverts, which used Director in the title, offered a salary of more than £100,000. As these vacancies were the highest paying in our sample, we consider them in more detail (Table 2). All six roles were advertised as full-time, permanent positions. Two of the roles express the job advert using masculine language (Gaucher et al., 2011) and traits (Born & Taris, 2010; Wille & Derous, 2018) without mentioning EDI or flexibility (Cardoso et al., 2016; Mullany & Cordell, 2021). While one advert mentions EDI and flexibility mid-advert, the language remains masculine-biased and expressed in terms of traits. One advert is worded more neutrally without a bias towards traits or behaviours but lacks any mention of EDI or flexibility. Similarly, one advert uses masculine language and a balance of traits and behaviours. However, it has a greater focus on EDI at the end of the advert yet lacks flexible working practices.

Out of the six adverts, only one appears to be less masculinised by expressing the vacancy in terms of behaviours (Born & Taris, 2010; Wille & Derous, 2018), positions EDI as a statement of encouragement (Mullany &

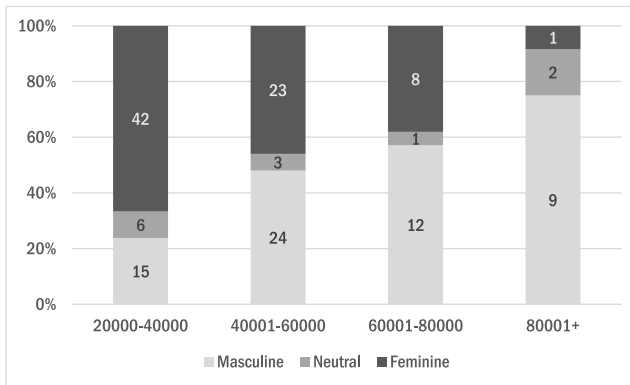


FIGURE 1 Job advert gender coded by salary.

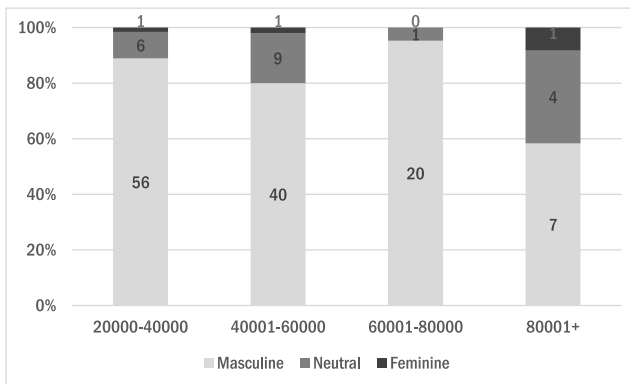


FIGURE 2 Job advert behaviour/trait coded by salary.

Cordell, 2021) and offers a self-proclaimed award-winning flexible working approach (Cardoso et al., 2016). However, even this vacancy is coded masculine in terms of the language used (Gaucher et al., 2011), reinforcing the argument that as the seniority level of roles increases, so does the masculine wording. In response to RQ1, adopting multiple analytical lenses to examine the contents of these highest-paid adverts uncovers a hidden gendered HR practice (Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022) in which language in job adverts may be used to legitimise executive pay levels (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018), and sustain hierarchical segregation in a women-dominated profession.

4.3 | Job title

To recognise the wide variation of salary levels across different sectors and geographies, we analysed the coded jobs by job title. Analysing the job adverts by title included adverts where the salary was not specified. Table 3 shows the indicative titles and seniority levels using XpertHR's job levels. Following Freedman (2014), the titles were clustered into four broad career stages.

In Figure 3, the job titles are presented in ascending level of seniority based on Table 3, that is, the entry-level/junior titles (HR Administrator, HR Assistant, HR Trainee) on the left and senior (HR Director) on the right.

Figure 3 presents a similar picture to Figure 1, where the use of masculine language increases with the seniority of roles. In this, the most junior HR roles (e.g., HR Administrator) are almost exclusively feminine-coded. However, about half of the more senior roles (e.g., HR Director) are masculine-coded. In response to RQ1, these findings reiterate how gendered wording (Gaucher et al., 2011) in job adverts contributes to hierarchical gender segregation in HR as a barrier to women accessing senior-level roles (Ellwood et al., 2020).

TABLE 2 Highest paid jobs ads.

Ref.	Gendered language	Trait/behaviour	Equality, diversity, inclusivity	Flexibility
1	Neutral	Neutral	Nil	Nil
2	Masculine	Masculine	Nil	Nil
3	Masculine	Neutral	Paragraph at end	Nil
4	Masculine	Masculine	Mentioned mid advert	Mentioned mid advert
5	Masculine	Masculine	Nil	Nil
6	Masculine	Feminine	Encouragement	Award-winning

TABLE 3 Generalised job titles.

Level	Indicative HR titles	Generalised title
12	HR Director; Director of HR	Director
14	Head of HR	
15	Senior Business Partner; Head of HR	Manager
16	HR Manager	
20	HR Manager; HR Business Partner	
21	HR Adviser; HR Business Partner; Team Leader	Adviser
22	HR Adviser	
23	HR Administrator	Admin
24	HR Administrator; HR Assistant; HR Trainee	

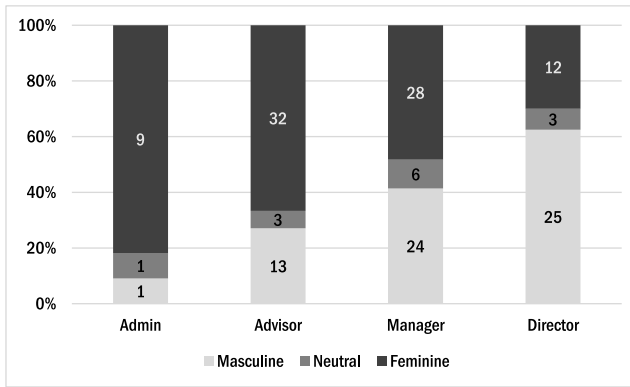


FIGURE 3 Job advert gender coded by seniority.

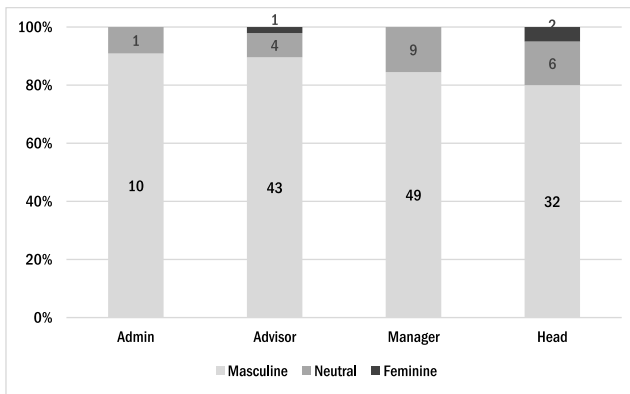


FIGURE 4 Job advert behaviour/trait coded by seniority.

Again, our second analytical approach revealed a different story (Figure 4). Despite the few roles that used more behaviours than traits, a reverse pattern suggests that the more senior the vacancy, the more likely behaviours are used than traits. One explanation could be that recruiters are more likely to invest their time crafting adverts for senior-level vacancies, thus expressing the requirements regarding behaviours. Arguably, traits can be taken directly from a job description or person specification for more junior roles, with less time spent making the role appear more attractive to potential applicants. As Wille and Derous (2018, p. 471) indicate, ‘recruiters typically do not spend much attention to how job ads are formulated’. These findings indicate an unreflexive acceptance of gender scripts in HR job adverts, contributing to maintaining and reproducing gender hierarchies (Hanappi-Egger, 2015).

4.4 | Equal opportunities statement and flexible working

Figure 5 shows the EDI statement categorisation against the salary for the job. The distribution of EDI categorisations was relatively even across the salary levels.

EDI is a central feature of the HRM function (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018) and is a typical role accountability of many HR positions; thus, its prominence is not unexpected. Particularly at the senior level, organisations seek to drive EDI initiatives strategically. Indeed, four job adverts were for EDI specialists and contained some EDI wording in the job title. However, 82 vacancies (just over half of our sample) did not contain an EDI compliance statement

despite its central role in HRM. This absence was most notable at the higher end of the salary scale, where 58% of vacancies advertising a salary greater than £80,000 did not mention EDI. This finding is notable in the context of Krivkovich et al.'s (2022) study, demonstrating that women in senior roles leave organisations that do not prioritise EDI, and younger women place a higher premium on working in equitable and inclusive workplaces. Women are making choices not to apply to or work for organisations that do not reflect EDI commitments and cultures. Instead, in response to RQ1, the selective use of EDI statements is another hidden gendered HR practice (Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022) which contributes to hierarchical segregation and reinforces institutional barriers (Acker, 1990; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019).

Examining the categorisation of EDI from a job title perspective, as shown in Figure 6, paints an even starker picture.

In this case, 61% of the director-level job advert sample excluded any EDI statement. While some job adverts (17%) mentioned flexible working, it was often expressed that the individual should expect to be flexible, for example, travel for work or be based on-site with some negotiated home working. Alternatively, the organisation appeared open to discussions about flexible working rather than an embedded practice. In fewer cases (14%), flexible working was stated more positively, focusing on working from home or the organisation's desire to promote work-life balance (6%). In two cases, the organisation advertised their flexible working offering as award-winning.

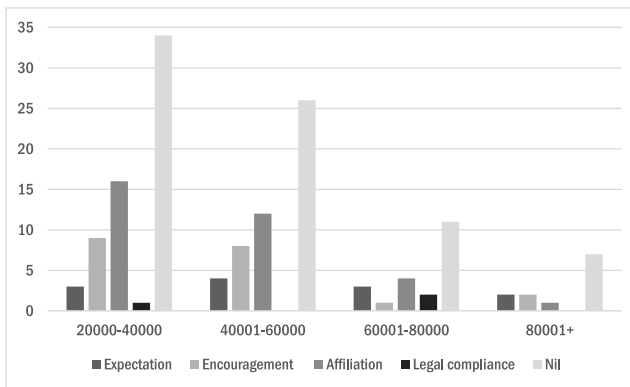


FIGURE 5 Equality, diversity and inclusivity categorisation by salary.

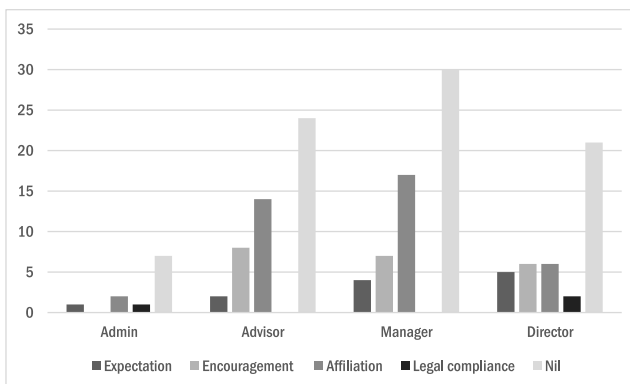


FIGURE 6 Equality, diversity and inclusivity categorisation by seniority.

Surprisingly, few adverts contained no mention of work-life balance, considering how many organisations have been forced to accommodate homeworking in response to restrictions related to COVID-19 (Pass & Ridgway, 2022). This is a significant contradiction for HR practice; being accountable for leading EDI and the lack of explicit EDI statements will likely present challenges to organisations in retaining and attracting women.

4.5 | Organisations with multiple vacancies

Interestingly, there were 19 instances where an organisation advertised two or more vacancies. Advertising multiple roles provided a valuable opportunity to see if gendered wording was present at different levels within the same organisation. In eight cases, although the vacancies advertised were of a different salary and seniority level, the coding was the same within all adverts, that is, all feminine-coded or all masculine-coded. In five cases, the salary and seniority levels were the same, but the adverts were coded differently, that is, one advert was masculine coded while the other was feminine coded. There are patterns reflective of the broader data analysis in the six remaining cases, as shown in Table 4 (organisation names have been pseudonymised for anonymity). As the role salary or seniority increases, so does the use of masculine words in the job advert. While this sample is small and certainly not intended to be generalisable, it indicates inherent systemic issues across industries about how senior job adverts are likely to contain more masculine wording. These adverts appeal less to women applicants (Gaucher et al., 2011; Wille & Derous, 2018), inhibiting women's progress to senior positions and, in turn, potentially contributing to the gender pay gap (Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022).

4.6 | Interpretative analysis

The interpretative analysis (30 original job Associate Director and Director-level adverts) informed by agentic and communal gendered language (Eagly & Carli, 2018) coded 19 cases as masculine, 10 as feminine and one as neutral.

TABLE 4 Organisations with multiple job adverts.

Organisation	Generalised job title	Salary range (£)	Coding
GovCo1	12 Director	>100,000	Masculine
	12 Director	90,001–100,000	Feminine
PubCo1	15 Department Manager	50,001–60,000	Masculine
	21 Adviser/Partner/Team Leader	40,001–50,000	Feminine
CharCo1	20 Manager/Partner	40,001–50,000	Neutral
	21 Adviser/Partner/Team Leader	30,001–40,000	Feminine
PrinCo1	21 Adviser/Partner/Team Leader	40,001–50,000	Masculine
	22 Adviser	40,001–50,000	Feminine
HealthCo1	12 Director	70,001–80,000	Masculine
	12 Director	70,001–80,000	Masculine
	15 Department Manager	40,001–50,000	Feminine
PubCo2	14 Functional Head	50,001–60,000	Masculine
	15 Department Manager	50,001–60,000	Masculine
	21 Adviser/Partner/Team Leader	50,001–60,000	Feminine

The analysis indicated how, at senior HR levels, the language in the job adverts primarily conveys masculine wording, emphasising the requirement for a person who 'fits' the agentic masculine mould as self-focused and outcomes-driven. The job adverts included additional masculine words to Gaucher et al. (2011), such as strong, driven, deliver, perform, strategic, and transform. The analysis did surface more communal, feminine words, emphasising a relational focus and working with others, in addition to those of Gaucher et al. (2011) (e.g., develop, collaborate, engage, empower, enable, motivate, advice). Although this analysis made visible previously obscured masculine and feminine words (see Appendix 3), compared to the initial analysis, there were five more masculine-coded roles, three fewer feminine-coded roles and two fewer neutral-coded roles. Taking into consideration how agentic language 'disfavours women, who are perceived as compassionate and communal' (Dunlop & Scheepers, 2022, p. 437) and how, in leader evaluation research, agentic characteristics are valued (higher status) whereas communal characteristics are not (lower status) (Smith et al., 2019) the interpretative analysis did not materially change the previous coding of the job adverts.

The study's findings surface tensions and contradictions in the HR profession; women dominate in HR and are typically responsible for preparing job adverts, while gendered job adverts constrain women's progress and representation in senior roles—yet having more women in leadership roles positively affects the language used in organisational documents (Lawson et al., 2022). Responding to the call to explore how gendered HR practices are hidden within organisational norms (e.g., Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022), the study makes visible how HR job adverts are a hidden gendered HR practice that contributes to women's oppression through their potential exclusion from leadership positions. Gendered job adverts contribute to the reproduction and maintenance of the gendered status quo (Mavin et al., 2019) of HR's hierarchical segregation, where women dominate yet remain underrepresented in senior roles.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study set out to problematise job adverts as a hidden gendered HR practice in a woman-dominated profession. To achieve this purpose, we asked how the gendered hierarchical segregation of HR is reflected in job adverts and to what extent HR sustains women's underrepresentation in senior leadership roles. In response, we examined 158 HR job adverts from various industries to identify whether there were examples of gendered language at entry/junior and senior levels. Job adverts form an applicant's first interaction with an organisation and can have lasting impressions. As women leaders exert agency in career choices, particularly in relation to EDI (Krivkovich et al., 2022), then gender inclusivity in job adverts is crucial.

Our findings show that as the HR role salary or title seniority increases, the proportion of masculine words in the job adverts increases, and the prevalence of EDI statements and flexible working practices decreases. A broad dichotomy between adverts focused on 'support' and those focused on 'leadership' in HR job adverts also appears. HR is inherently considered a support service (Mayo, 2020); thus, the inclusion frequency of the word 'support' is unsurprising. However, it is interesting that only more entry-level/junior roles use a broader range of feminine-coded words. Reflecting on the origins of the HRM profession, its initial focus on welfare issues (Marchington, 2015) was aligned with work considered stereotypically feminine, characterising the profession as 'a woman's world' (Worman, 2011). This stereotyping remains reflected in the current use of feminine wording in adverts for more entry-level/junior roles (Cohen, 2015; Pichler et al., 2008), where women dominate.

While the extant research (Gaucher et al., 2011) shows that gendered language does not deter men applicants, it can be argued that if gendered agentic language contributes to women's exclusion in certain occupations, they will be over-represented in others.

In senior HR job adverts, the wording centred around leadership (coded masculine), echoing the argument of Pichler et al. (2008) that HR senior roles have become significantly more masculine and stereotyped as the focus turns to business acumen (Barney & Wright, 1998). The dominance of masculine, higher-status agentic language in

leadership job adverts indicates the dominant patriarchal discourse of leadership at work. This agentic language operates to maintain unequal power relations in organisations (Mavin & Yusupova, 2023) and reinforce women's lower status through gender stereotypes and by 'delegitimising women's leadership' (Stead et al., 2024, p. 65).

In gaining a 'seat at the table' as a strategic partner, HR is unreflexively perpetuating gendered agentic traits of leaders; job adverts for senior roles carry the traits typically associated with men (Eagly & Carli, 2018; Williams, 2015). This finding signals how job adverts contribute to a systemic reproduction of women's exclusion from senior roles, even in a women-dominated occupation, therefore extending Oldford and Fiset's (2021) study in a men-dominated industry, which found that high agentic language may contribute to the occupational gender imbalance. Following the work of Gaucher et al. (2011), the continued gendering of job adverts in HR perpetuates hierarchical segregation. It constrains women's representation, with a disproportionate number of men occupying senior ranks (Cohen, 2015).

This language dichotomy in job adverts could also inform why women are less likely to apply for senior-level roles (Ellwood et al., 2020). Even in cases where senior-level job adverts were expressed in neutral or feminine terms, there was no mention of other factors that would encourage women applicants, such as EDI statements or promotion of work-life balance. Such omissions could indicate that the 'ideal' incumbent demonstrates male stereotypical characteristics, that is, not 'burdened' by family, and may reinforce existing stereotypes that deter women from applying to senior roles (Berkery et al., 2013). This omission is an interesting contradiction as HR is the custodian and driver of equality and well-being practices (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018). Nevertheless, in senior-level job adverts, the EDI commitments appear tokenistic or 'tick-box' rather than emblematic of the organisation's culture.

The study demonstrates that the HR profession, responsible for reducing inequalities, produces gendered job adverts which reinforce systemic gender barriers (Acker, 1990) and constrain women's representation at senior levels. This reinforcement has implications for the broader professions which are recognised as patriarchal and gendered (Hearn, 1982) and which 'all have a common and recurrent theme—a continual process of masculinization' (Bolton & Muzio, 2008, p. 283), including the 'marginalization, downgrading and exploitation of women and women's work' (p. 281). HR is not leading by example, and gendered job adverts contribute to the continual process of masculinisation in the profession.

In sum, we argue that job adverts are an example of a hidden gendered HR practice (Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022) where HR practitioners, predominately women, may (inadvertently) be complicit in reinforcing gender stereotypes and institutional barriers. As HR is considered the organisational guardian of recruitment practices and the EDI advocate (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018), when applying a gender stereotype lens, we would expect to see exemplified neutrality for this egalitarian group (Schuster et al., 2023), reflected in the content of HR job adverts. However, our findings revealed that the wording used in job adverts reinforced gender stereotypes by framing senior roles as favouring masculine traits, while the expressions of EDI and flexible working are seriously lacking. This practical evidence demonstrates how jobs are constructed and structured to demand certain gendered displays (Byrne et al., 2021). Therefore, gendered job adverts are a further hidden barrier women face in organisations that reproduce and maintain the gendered status quo (Mavin et al., 2019).

5.1 | Contribution to knowledge

Our contribution to knowledge is four-fold. Firstly, we utilise the work of Gaucher et al. (2011) in demonstrating masculine and feminine language in actual HR job adverts and extend this by identifying further gendered agentic and communal language (Eagly & Carli, 2018) in operation. Secondly, we advance the current literature base and contribute new understandings of how gender is framed in job adverts (Jännäri et al., 2018) through the second known study to examine job advert wording within a women-dominated profession. We extend the inaugural study

by Tokarz and Mesfin (2021) by examining expressions of traits versus behaviours, EDI, and flexible working arrangements in HR job adverts at different hierarchical levels.

Thirdly, we respond to calls for gendered HR practices hidden within organisational norms to become visible and analysable (Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022; Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011) by theorising how gendered wording is a subtle but systemic mechanism by which patriarchy and institutional inequality is maintained (Gaucher et al., 2011) using 'real' job adverts.

While at first, gendered job adverts may appear relatively inconsequential in relation to the (currently unsolvable problem) of gendering in organisations. The dominance of agentic masculine language reflective of 'getting ahead' (Entringer et al., 2022), particularly as the job role increases in power and leadership level, indicates entrenched patriarchy where women are secondary. As the dominant discourse of Western organisational leadership, patriarchy is saturated with the higher status agentic masculine norm and laden with inequalities and discourses that invite people to adopt certain views in organisations; the study offers insight into how discourse is taken up through language 'to make sense of and construct the world' (Delbridge & Ezzamel, 2005, p. 607) in the everyday language of gendering and gender stereotypes in organisations. Therefore, how wording is used in job adverts is critical to reinforcing or disrupting both patriarchy and the masculine leadership discourse. In this study, the dominance of masculine wording reinforces both.

Fourthly, by adopting a gender stereotype lens, we suggest that HR is complicit in gendering through senior role job adverts, reinforcing gender stereotypes by unreflexively prioritising higher status agentic traits associated with men and masculinity. Thus, despite HRM practices supposedly centring around EDI (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018), HR is not leading by example in reducing systemic practices of inequality. Rather, gendered HR adverts provide evidence in practice of how jobs are constructed and structured as gendered (Byrne et al., 2021).

We extend current literature and theorise how gendered job adverts hinder women's senior-level representation. This barrier contributes to the (re)production of a negative cycle sustaining hierarchical segregation in the women-dominated HR profession where men dominate in senior roles.

This negative cycle comprises a lack of women in leadership, which constrains the potential for positive changes in the language of organisational documents (Lawson et al., 2022). Women are making career decisions based on organisational commitment to EDI (Krivkovich et al., 2022) and published organisational EDI statements impact applicants' inclination to apply (DePatie et al., 2022; Flory et al., 2021; Mullany & Cordell, 2021; Triana et al., 2021). There is a lack of commitment to EDI in senior role job adverts, and gendered language in HR job adverts perpetuates gender stereotypes at different hierarchical levels, legitimising higher pay levels for senior roles mostly held by men (Dundon & Rafferty, 2018) and constraining women's career progress.

Thus, as the study shows, 'gendered language in job adverts [and lack of EDI presence] likely serves as a covert, subtle, gendered institutional practice that ultimately serves to reinforce existing gender inequality, keeping women out of areas that men ...typically occupy' (Gaucher et al., 2011, p. 111), even in a women-dominated occupation. This irony of gendering in HR demonstrates the deeply rooted nature of patriarchy's system of power at work. We, therefore, add gendered job adverts as a hidden HR practice to the labyrinth of barriers (Eagly & Carli, 2018) women face and to understand how women are kept out of leadership power in HR.

5.2 | Practical implications

We offer three suggestions to HR practitioners and individuals responsible for recruitment advertising to reduce the chances of job adverts deterring women applicants. While the recommendations have emerged from job adverts specific to the HR profession, we believe that these suggestions are relevant to all recruitment adverts.

Firstly, beyond HR implementing in practice its own HR-led unconscious bias training, gender decoder systems can be used to check the wording in job adverts carefully to reduce the use of masculine words and achieve at least an overall coding level of neutral, an equal number of masculine and feminine words throughout the advert. In

addition, person specifications should be expressed as behaviours rather than traits to increase gender inclusivity. We call on HR and recruitment practitioners to be gender aware when crafting job adverts as research (e.g., Gaucher et al., 2011) has shown the impact subtle word differences can have. We build on this argument as our findings show the infrequency with which characteristics are expressed as behaviours in job adverts. This gap presents an immediate opportunity, easily within the control of organisations, to adjust their approach to crafting recruitment adverts to present behaviours rather than traits. Given the targeted advertising of social media platforms used in recruitment, it is also essential. Indeed, it has recently been discovered (Powell, 2021) that Facebook filters who see job adverts based on gender. There is an opportunity to train artificial intelligence to highlight the use of gender-coded language so it can be addressed (Sundaram, 2021).

Secondly, statements relating to EDI should be embedded throughout the job advert and expressed as a job expectation. As Mullany and Cordell (2021) have argued, they should not be included at the end of the job advert to avoid the perception of tokenism. Similarly, flexible working should be expressed as an inclusive work policy to promote work-life balance and be immediately apparent rather than at the end of the advert (Cardoso et al., 2016). This expression is essential as our findings have shown this is not apparent even in HR adverts. This absence is a concern as HR should be at the forefront of driving the EDI agenda, yet this is not articulated in HR job adverts.

Finally, we call for employers to be transparent about role salary, as research has shown that no explicit salary statement often results in women accepting lower wages (Leibbrandt & List, 2015; Robertson & Williams, 2018). Furthermore, the use of 'competitive' to describe a salary is a stereotypical masculine word. Only 8% did not overtly detail the salary in our sample of HR job adverts. However, this still presents room for improvement, especially if HR is to lead by example to drive women's workforce participation at all employment levels.

5.3 | Limitations and future research

A limitation of the study is that we cannot assess the direct impact of gendered job adverts on women and men applicants and appointees for each vacancy analysed. However, this limitation presents an avenue for future research to examine the impact of gendered job adverts on applicants and appointees.

The context of this study has been limited to jobs advertised on a single website, *PM Jobs*. There is an opportunity for future research to examine gendered language in different socio-cultural contextual settings and languages and from many sources.

The study was focused on hierarchical segregation and women's underrepresentation; we recognise many marginalised groups and intersecting categories of difference and hope that future research will consider the impact of job adverts on other marginalised identities. We also recognise that a shortfall in our method is positioning language as binary and homogenising notions of masculine and feminine.

A further research avenue from the study is interrogating how HR perpetuates patriarchal power systems in organisations by examining language in internal documents, for example, annual reports, organisational mission statements, values, and performance and promotion criteria, for gender bias and impact on women's internal career progression.

The study examines job adverts in HR, a women-dominated profession responsible for EDI in the wider organisation, yet HR job adverts are gendered. Future research would be valuable to examine how language impacts women's representation in men-dominated occupations and/or those occupations that do not consider EDI a core functional accountability. Finally, the study has the potential for extension across the professions, all characterised by patriarchy (Hearn, 1982) and the persistent process of masculinisation (Bolton & Muzio, 2008), by examining the contribution of gendered job adverts to hierarchical segregation and women's underrepresentation in senior roles.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <https://pmjobs.cipd.co.uk/>.

² <https://www.xperthr.co.uk/help-and-support/xperthr-salary-surveys-job-levels/155269/>.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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