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Change agents or defending the status quo? How senior leaders frame workplace gender equality

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Abstract

Senior leaders are usually understood to be ideally positioned to drive the organizational changes needed to promote workplace gender equality. Yet seniority also influences leaders' values and attitudes, and how they interpret evidence of inequalities, determine organizational priorities, and design and implement remedies. This article examines leaders' perceptions of workplace gender equality using system justification theory to explain survey data from Australia's public sector (n = 2292). Multivariate analysis indicates that male and female leaders more positively rate the gender equality climate in their agencies, compared with lower-level staff, and that male leaders show most propensity to defend the status quo. Findings call into question the effectiveness of change strategies that rely on leadership and buy-in of those whose privilege is embedded in existing arrangements, and problematize dominant organizational approaches casting senior leaders as effective change agents for gender equality. The article helps to explain gendered power dynamics, which produce and sustain organizational inequalities and make workplace equality so hard to achieve, and points to ways to strengthen practical approaches to promote equality in organizations.

KEYWORDS
gender equality, leadership, managers, organizational change, social attitudes

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite decades of regulation and a myriad of interventions intended to promote workplace gender equality, many public and private sector organizations remain profoundly unequal (Ainsworth et al., 2010; Colley et al., 2020; Connell, 2006; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). To better understand the seemingly intractable nature of gender inequality in organizations, recent scholarly focus has shifted from an analysis of the individual-level experiences and impacts of workplace gender inequality to a closer examination of the mechanisms that help organizations lock in change. This so-called "organizational turn" (Moen, 2015) seeks to better understand why some equality initiatives are successful, while others fall short of their intended outcomes (Kalev et al., 2006; Wynn & Correll, 2018). For example, previous studies have identified how gender fatigue and backlash have stalled progress in organizations (Colley et al., 2020; Kelan, 2009) and pointed to the limitations of specific initiatives such as bias training and gender-based mentoring and networking (Benschop et al., 2015; Williamson & Foley, 2018).

Senior leaders have long been positioned as crucial agents in shaping the organizational values and practices affecting gendered status hierarchies (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Liff & Cameron, 1997; Ng & Sears, 2012), and in driving organizational change (Schein, 2010). Many modern organizational initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality depend on the capacity and "buy-in" of senior leaders, such as chief executive officers (CEO), to drive the institutional transformations needed to combat workplace inequality (Humbert et al., 2018; Kelan & Wratil, 2018). In recent years, such leader-driven initiatives have become particularly pronounced in some public sector organizations, which have sought to bolster their status as gender equality leaders and employers of choice for women (see, e.g., Australian Public Service Commission, 2016; Rubery, 2013). However, such initiatives rely on the crucial but frequently untested assumption that senior leaders, who are predominantly male, will see and accept that gendered inequalities exist within their organizations, and be willing to enact and champion the policies offering to improve opportunities for more junior employees, even when these may undermine their own privilege and standing. While previous studies have suggested that managerial resistance, fatigue, or backlash are significant factors explaining the lack of progress toward organizational gender equality (Benschop & van den Brink, 2014; Colley et al., 2020; Harding et al., 2017), surprisingly few studies have sought to measure managerial attitudes toward gender equality and gender equality initiatives within their organizations.

In this paper, we examine the assumption that senior leaders are best positioned to lead organizational change to progress gender equality using 2292 survey responses collected from public sector employees to compare perceptions of organizational gender equality among men and women at different levels of seniority. We find that senior leaders are more likely than lower-level employees to believe that gender equality exists within their organizations, and that existing gender equality initiatives are adequate. Senior male leaders of organizations are the organizational actors most likely to hold these positive views.

To explain this outcome, we apply system justification theory, a concept developed in social psychology which posits that individuals within organizations or other social systems have a motivated tendency to rationalize and defend the status quo (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Rarely applied in organizational research, system justification theory is concerned with the ways in which individuals tend to view existing social, economic, and political arrangements as fair and legitimate, and thereby resist any substantive changes that threaten the status quo. This theory, which has mostly been demonstrated in experimental research, offers a useful frame for exploring attitudes held by actors in organizational settings, and for theorizing why organizational change can be slow and difficult to achieve. In using system justification theory to examine senior leaders' willingness to act as change agents for gender equality, we highlight how gendered positional privileges contribute to tendencies to rationalize prevailing organizational arrangements and status hierarchies. We argue that system justification theory is a useful tool for organizational scholars, helping make visible the ways that status quo justification can manifest in the upper echelons of organizational status hierarchies, and constrain progressive social change.

2 | SENIOR LEADERS AS CHANGE AGENTS

Scholarly framings of senior leaders as "institution builders" who create and maintain organizational cultures are virtually universal (Gould et al., 2018; Hambrick & Moen, 1984; Tsui et al., 2006, p. 130). Leaders shape organizational norms; design and endorse structures, systems, and processes; determine priorities and allocate resources; communicate organizational vision; distribute rewards and status; and select and develop successive generations of leaders (Avolio et al., 2004; Detert et al., 2000; Fu et al., 2010; Schneider et al., 2013). Correspondingly, senior leaders are prominent in accounts of organizational change (Hambrick & Moen, 1984; Schein, 2010).

Senior leaders are seen as critical agents shaping and challenging gendered status hierarchies (Liff & Cameron, 1997; Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Ng & Sears, 2012) and their leadership and "buy-in" have been considered integral to diversity initiatives. Leaders help build accountability into structures; generate change through mentorship, advocacy, and modeling; and amplify and endorse diverse perspectives and identities through their everyday practices (Kalev et al., 2006; Kelan & Wratil, 2018; Kilian et al., 2005). Other internal actors, such as diversity officers, human resource practitioners, and middle-level managers may also facilitate the success or failure of gender equality initiatives (Williamson et al., 2020; Page, 2011). However, those at the apex of organizations are largely considered to be the most influential actors in driving the profound structural changes needed to promote gender equality.

Because of these deep-seated understandings of the importance of leaders, and because most organizational leaders are men (de Vries, 2015; Humbert et al., 2018; Kelan & Wratil, 2018), a movement has emerged to more effectively engage male leaders (and men generally) as equality "champions" or "catalysts" to legitimize action, carve out career pathways for women and address institutional bias (e.g., Evans et al., 2014; Prime & Moss-Racusin, 2009). Such initiatives have proliferated, including "Men Advocating Real Change" in the United States, Australia's "Male Champions of Change," "Men as Change Agents" in the United Kingdom, the United Nations' "HeForShe" campaign, and the "AccelerateHER" program, aimed at supporting women entrepreneurs. This movement is grounded in the logical proposition that leaders, and male leaders in particular, hold power to drive change. Yet these may reinforce stereotypes of heroic masculinity and fail to confront the gendered power dynamics producing and sustaining organizational inequalities (de Vries, 2015; Kelan & Wratil, 2018).

3 | CHANGING GENDERED ORGANIZATIONS

Feminist scholars have long theorized how organizations create and sustain gendered power dynamics (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; van den Brink & Benschop, 2012; van den Brink et al., 2010). Central notions are that organizations are "rooted in taken-for-granted assumptions, values, and practices that systematically accord power and privilege to certain groups of men at the expense of women and other men" (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000, p. 554); that organizations are key sites of masculine dominance and power; and that change requires dismantling of practices and processes perpetuating inequality (Acker, 1990, 2006).

Recognizing power raises questions about whether organizational leaders are best placed to lead initiatives that seek to shift control over institutional resources, structures, norms, beliefs, and cultures (Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). Leaders may appear well placed to change power relations but may also have little incentive to dismantle the systems and processes from which they derive their influence, and which they may have played roles in constructing (Benschop & van den Brink, 2014; de Vries, 2015; de Vries & van den Brink, 2016). Managerial perceptions and behaviors may undermine gender equality initiatives, through denial and resistance (Benschop & van den Brink, 2014; Benschop & Verloo, 2011; Colley et al., 2020; Connell, 2006; Wynn, 2019). For example, leaders may hold themselves responsible for addressing gender inequality, but avoid acknowledging the ways inequalities are manifest within their agencies or that they are part of the problem (McClelland & Holland, 2015). Leaders may also recognize that their biases contribute to gender inequality, but not necessarily offer support to intervene (Foley & Williamson, 2019). Such findings echo

studies demonstrating managers' opposition to gender-based hiring practices (van den Brink et al., 2010) and raise questions about leaders' assumed roles as change agents.

Whether leaders, as a group, will mobilize resources to effectively disrupt existing arrangements depends on their understandings and priorities. Female leaders are frequently theorized as more likely to affect change, by eroding homosocial hiring and decision making, to positively impact on organizational equity practices and outcomes (Cook & Glass, 2014; Glass & Cook, 2018; Gould et al., 2018; Stainback et al., 2016). As a precursor to change, leaders of any gender must recognize problems with current arrangements and be cognitively and emotionally inclined to use their privileged position to change established orders (Holt et al., 2007), even when doing so may reflect poorly on them or practices within the institutions they lead. Thus, leaders' attitudes and judgments about equality, such as those our analysis explores, define organizations' prospects for change. Although leaders' attitudes may be distal not actual evidence of action, attitudes are antecedents to agentic behavior, indicating willingness to enact equity, inclusion, and diversity policies (Vinkenburg, 2017; Wynn, 2019). Thus, leaders' attitudes provide important early indicators of the likely success or failure of organizational equality measures.

Surprisingly, studies of leaders' gender equality attitudes are relatively sparse, leaving their commitments to equality agendas largely assumed. A study conducted in the European Union found senior leaders held more discriminatory beliefs than others, believing women were uninterested in positions of responsibility and "less likely than men to fight to make a career for themselves" (Humbert et al., 2018, p. 8). Similarly, Australian research has shown that although many public service leaders acknowledge that women face barriers to advancement, most explained women's underrepresentation in management by emphasizing individual preferences for family commitments above gendered organizational structures or power dynamics (Evans et al., 2014; Williamson & Colley, 2018).

4 | SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION THEORY

System justification theory offers a frame for understanding attitudes among organizational actors. System justification theory holds that people have a powerful motivation to view themselves, their social groups, and the structures shaping their lives favorably, and are therefore inclined to see prevailing status hierarchies as fundamentally fair (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). This motivated tendency to defend the status quo is theorized to occur, in part, to alleviate the psychological anxiety or threat experienced from acknowledging that the systems one operates within or depends upon may be unjust or illegitimate (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Accepting existing status hierarchies and avoiding acknowledging system faults reduces anxiety, dissonance, discomfort, uncertainty, and other psychological threats from confronting flaws in the larger social systems in which individuals are embedded (Jost & Hunyady, 2003).

System justification theory has commonly been used to explain why lower status groups accept or endorse circumstances that perpetuate their disadvantage, and has mostly been tested in experimental settings (for a review, see Jost, 2019). However, system justification theory can also help understand how members of high-status groups justify and defend existing arrangements, including those they have shaped. Here, we apply system justification theory to understand attitudinal disparities inside organizations. Previous research has shown that status quo justification may manifest among groups of workers who construe workplace gender inequalities as "fair, reasonable, and generally representative of the way things should be" (Kay et al., 2009, p. 421), and thus avoid holding existing systems responsible for creating or perpetuating those inequalities (Proudfoot & Kay, 2014). Prior research has also shown that system justifying beliefs may intensify when certain social groups perceive that the prevailing system is under criticism or threat (Friesen et al., 2019).

As the prime beneficiaries and architects of prevailing organizational status hierarchies, senior leaders can be expected to rationalize or defend inequalities and evaluate existing systems favorably (Kay et al., 2009). Indeed, system justification theory would predict that in organizations seeking to enact gender equality, senior leaders who derive privilege from existing status hierarchies may feel threatened by gender equality initiatives and become even more inclined to support the status quo. Likewise, men, who comprise a proportionally larger share of senior leaders, may

also be more inclined to support the status quo than women. To explore this, we examine attitudes toward gender equality by employee rank and gender, using two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 *Organizational leaders will defend the status quo by more positively rating the gender equality climate in their organization than lower ranked staff.*

Hypothesis 2 *Male leaders will defend the status quo by more positively rating the gender equality climate than female leaders.*

While the dynamics of organizational change are of course much more complex and context-specific than these hypotheses imply, our approach nonetheless offers insight into the ways gender and status hierarchies, among other factors, can influence prospects for radical organizational transformation.

5 | STUDY CONTEXT

We examine these hypotheses in the context of the public sector in one Australian jurisdiction. Like elsewhere, Australia's public agencies have long been considered employers of choice for women (Rubery, 2013), and have implemented a raft of initiatives to progress gender equality and provide a model for the private sector (Foley & Williamson, 2018, 2019). Nevertheless, inequalities persist. At state and federal levels, women are over-represented in lower employment classifications, underrepresented in senior leadership, and disproportionately among lower earners (Australian Public Service Commission, 2018b; Government of South Australia, 2018; New South Wales Public Service Commission, 2018, Victorian Public Sector Commission, 2019). While narrower than the private sector, the gender pay gap in public sector employment ranged between 8% and 11% in 2018 (Australian Public Service Commission, 2018a, Victorian Public Service Commission, 2019). Circumstances are similar to the United Kingdom, where the civil service had a gender pay gap of 9% in 2019 (United Kingdom Government, 2019), and New Zealand, where the public sector gender pay gap stood at 12% in 2018 (New Zealand Public Service Commission, 2020).

State and federal public service commissions have sought change primarily by implementing agency-level gender equality strategies and plans, which uniformly stress the role of senior leaders in driving change. The federal Australian public service strategy, for example, directs senior leaders to enact transformation by prioritizing gender equality and holding themselves accountable for inequalities (Australian Public Service Commission, 2016). State-based strategies specifically call upon agency chiefs to champion equality and diversity; support flexible working arrangements for men and women; make visible their commitment to gender diversity; foster more inclusive cultures; set targets for women in senior leadership; call out behaviors and decisions impeding progress; and reform hiring and promotion decisions that inhibit gender equality (Government of South Australia, 2017; New South Wales Government, 2020; State of Queensland Public Service Commission, 2015; Tasmanian State Service, 2016). Plans carry express endorsement from senior governmental leaders and rely on department heads and senior agency leaders to oversee implementation and delivery. In the subsequent sections, we investigate leaders' perceptions of organizational gender inequality and the need for change, to assess whether they are, in practice, best placed to effectively disrupt the established order.

6 | METHOD

To assess whether organizational leaders (Hypothesis 1) and male leaders in particular (Hypothesis 2) endorse the status quo with respect to gender equality, we designed, disseminated, and analyzed a large public sector employee survey. The survey was conducted in mid-2018, in an Australian jurisdiction facing issues typical of public services elsewhere. At the time of the study, agencies were subject to a whole-of-service approach to promoting gender equality, centered on increasing proportions of women in senior executive positions. The approach sought to address wom-

en's under-representation in leadership, because while 70% of all employees were women, women comprised only 35% of senior executives across the service. The central agency responsible for human resources focused on setting targets, securing Head-of-Department support, and encouraging agencies to identify and respond to agency-specific barriers in recruitment and promotion.

The survey captured perspectives on agency and leadership performance with respect to gender equality; access to flexible work and career advancement opportunities; plus employees' rank, age, educational attainment, and gender. Survey development was informed by jurisdictional practice and priorities, and strengths and gaps in other research instruments (e.g., Community and Public Sector Union, 2016; Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2013). It was approved by the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Panel.

6.1 | Sample

Responses were completed by 2377 employees, around 8.6% of all employees. Analysis is limited to the 2292 who reported their gender and substantive employment level. Self-reported data necessarily warrants caution. Senior men were under-represented, perhaps reflecting competing demands, low prioritization of research, or assumptions that survey content covered "women's issues." Notwithstanding, the data allow testing of hypothesized associations between employees' position in organizational hierarchies, gender, and perspectives on gender equality, as a way to explore whether status quo justification may be a factor making organizational gender equality so difficult to achieve.

Based on their substantive employment level, we classified respondents into three categories. First, 82 executive level organizational leaders comprised 3.6% of the sample. These included Heads of Agencies (equivalent to a CEO) and those appointed at Senior Executive or equivalent level. Table 1 shows half of organizational leaders were women (50%), reflecting women's higher survey response rates, not actual gender parity (women comprised 35% of senior executives across the service). Second, other senior managers, who form the feeder group for organizational leaders, comprised 14% of the sample (323 respondents). Again, women were over-represented, comprising 61% of responding senior managers but 50% across the service. By contrast, men were slightly over-represented among staff in non-supervisory middle- and junior-level positions, comprising 35% of respondents and 30% of staff across the service. Table 1 describes the sample. Most respondents (63%) had degree-level qualifications or higher, a figure which rose with seniority. Most staff worked in the jurisdiction's capital city and almost half (48%) had worked in their agency for over 10 years. A quarter (25%) worked part-time (less than 35 h per week), but this was lower both among organizational leaders (12%) and managers at executive feeder level (14%).

6.2 | Analysis

We explored the hypotheses in three steps. First, bivariate analysis was used to examine the proportions of organizational leaders, senior managers, and other staff who agreed or disagreed with each of six statements on agency gender equality (Table 2). Second, recognizing that agency climate for gender equality is a multidimensional construct reflecting perceptions of action and progress and leadership behaviors, responses on the six items were scored (strongly agree = 1, strongly disagree = 5) and summed to form a composite measure, ranging from 6 to 30. As the resulting ordinal scale measure was not normally distributed, Kruskal–Wallis tests helped determine whether differences in median scores based on seniority were statistically significant. Third, to assess whether seniority predicted scores while accounting for potential confounders, a multivariate (binary logistic) model was developed. The dependent variable captured whether respondents' scores on the measure of agency climate for gender equality fell into the lowest quartile, indicating relative support for the status quo. Sensitivity testing conducted using different thresholds provided similar results. Analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 24.

TABLE 1 Sample description

	Organizational leaders (n = 82)		Senior managers (n = 323)		Nonmanagerial staff (n = 1887)		All (n = 2292)	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Gender*								
Male	41	50	126	39	668	35	835	36
Female	41	50	197	61	1219	65	1457	64
Age								
Under 35	2	2	23	7	410	22	435	19
35–54	51	62	206	64	1085	58	1342	59
55 and over	29	35	94	29	392	21	515	23
Education***								
Bachelor level degree or higher	67	82	253	78	1117	59	1437	63
Below degree level	15	18	70	22	770	41	855	37
Care responsibilities								
Has care responsibilities for child <12	22	27	94	29	568	30	684	30
Does not	60	73	229	71	1319	70	1608	70
Has care responsibilities for adult*	33	40	115	36	514	27	662	29
Does not	49	60	208	64	1373	73	1630	71
Location*								
Based in capital city	67	82	220	68	1283	68	1570	69
Outside capital city	15	18	103	32	604	32	722	32
Years in agency								
<2 years	8	10	38	12	383	20	429	19
2–10 years	29	35	86	27	659	35	774	34
>10 years	45	55	199	62	845	45	1089	48
Agency								
Education*	17	21	97	30	327	17	441	19
Primary industries	14	17	49	15	369	20	432	19
Justice	12	15	38	12	270	14	320	14
Human services	7	9	29	9	163	9	199	9
Business and infrastructure	9	11	24	7	154	8	187	8
Health	3	4	23	7	128	7	154	7
Other	20	24	63	20	476	25	559	24
Other work characteristics								
Part-time	10	12	45	14	524	28	579	25
Full-time	72	88	278	86	1360	72	1710	75
Works in female dominated workplace	26	32	135	42	695	37	856	37
Does not	56	68	188	58	1192	63	1436	63

Note: Significance tests were conducted to identify differences by seniority.

*$p < .05$, ***$p < .001$.

TABLE 2 Proportion of staff who agreed with statements about gender equality, by gender and seniority (%)

	Organizational leaders (n = 82)			Senior managers (n = 323)			Nonmanagerial staff (n = 1887)			All (n = 2292)		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
Gender equality has already been achieved in my agency												
Agree/strongly agree	49	44	46	50	32	39	37	25	30	40	27	32
Neutral/unsure	29	22	26	27	29	28	35	34	34	34	33	33
Disagree/strongly disagree	22	34	28	23	40	33	28	41	36	27	41	36
My agency has taken action to promote gender equality in the last 12 months												
Agree/strongly agree	78	51	65	68	50	57	53	41	45	56	42	47
Neutral/unsure	15	29	22	22	31	27	32	39	37	30	38	35
Disagree/strongly disagree	7	20	13	10	19	16	15	20	19	14	20	18
My agency has effective policies in place to progress gender equality												
Agree/strongly agree	66	66	66	64	50	55	52	42	45	54	43	47
Neutral/unsure	27	20	23	25	35	31	37	42	40	35	41	39
Disagree/strongly disagree	7	15	11	10	15	13	11	16	14	10	16	14
Leaders in my agency genuinely support gender equality												
Agree/strongly agree	88	73	81	85	71	76	68	63	65	72	64	67
Neutral/unsure	10	17	13	7	15	12	22	24	23	19	22	21
Disagree/strongly disagree	2	10	6	8	14	12	8	14	12	9	14	12
Senior women behave in ways that promote gender equality												
Agree/strongly agree	68	76	72	58	67	63	47	54	52	50	57	54
Neutral/unsure	17	12	15	25	20	22	34	28	30	32	27	29
Disagree/strongly disagree	15	12	13	18	13	15	19	18	18	18	17	17
Senior men behave in ways that promote gender equality												
Agree/strongly agree	71	51	61	62	45	52	51	40	44	54	41	46
Neutral/unsure	22	27	24	24	27	26	35	33	34	33	32	32
Disagree/strongly disagree	7	22	15	14	28	22	14	28	23	14	28	22

Note: Rounding means figures may not sum perfectly to 100.

7 | RESULTS

7.1 | Bivariate analysis

Table 2 shows the proportions of respondents agreeing and disagreeing with six statements about their agency's gender equality climate. The statements "Gender equality has already been achieved in my agency," "My agency has effective policies in place to progress gender equality," and "My agency has taken action to promote gender equality in the last 12 months" captured perspectives on progress and action. Three remaining statements focused on leadership

support and behaviors: "Leaders in my agency genuinely support gender equality," "Senior women behave in ways that promote gender equality," and "Senior men behave in ways that promote gender equality."

Across all items, higher proportions of organizational leaders than other staff agreed, reflecting more positive perspectives on agency gender equality. Pearson chi-square tests indicated differences according to seniority were statistically significant on all six items ($p < .01$), further underlining organizational leaders' more positive perspectives, compared with lower-level staff. This is consistent with Hypothesis 1. Table 2 also supports Hypothesis 2: Higher proportions of male organizational leaders agreed with the statements than their female counterparts and lower proportions disagreed. Exceptions were on the item "My agency has effective policies in place to support gender equality," for which equal proportions of male and female leaders agreed. For the statement "Senior women behave in ways that promote gender equality," lower proportions of men agreed, demonstrating senior men's more critical assessments of women's leadership behaviors. For this statement, gender gaps were evident at all ranks and overall, with lower proportions of men agreeing than women and higher proportions of men disagreeing (Table 2). Correspondingly, women at all levels were more critical than men of the statement "Senior men behave in ways that promote gender equality." Bivariate analysis thus offers support for both hypotheses. Senior staff and men tended to agree with the statements, suggesting higher likelihood of supporting the status quo, in line with system justification theory. However, further analysis was needed to ensure robustness, and to control for potentially confounding factors.

7.2 | Scale measure

As indicated above, responses on the six items were summed to form a single scale measuring perspectives on the overall agency gender equality climate, with scores between 6 and 30. Cronbach's alpha (0.87) indicated good internal consistency and scale reliability. Mean and median scores for men and women by rank, and standard deviations, are provided in Table 3.

Based on the distribution of the scale measure, Kruskal–Wallis tests were used to determine whether differences in median scores by seniority were statistically significant. Consistent with the bivariate analysis, organizational leaders had lower median scores than others, and differences by seniority were statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 37.9$, $p < .001$). This indicates organizational leaders held more positive ratings of their agency's gender equality climate, reflecting support for the status quo consistent with Hypothesis 1. Interestingly, Mann–Whitney tests indicated that unlike for other staff, gender differences in organizational leaders' median scores on the scale measure were not statistically significant; male leaders did not more positively rate the gender equality climate than women, suggesting Hypothesis 2 may not be clearly supported, at least prior to more robust multivariate modeling. However, for other senior managers and nonmanagerial staff, scores were significantly lower for men than women, indicating higher propensity for men than women to support the status quo.

7.3 | Logistic regression

The steps above test the hypotheses but have not accounted for potential confounders. For this reason, a multivariate model (logistic regression) was used. The binary dependent variable captured whether respondents held broadly positive views on gender equality in their organizations, based on their score falling into the lowest quartile on the agency climate scale measure (indicating higher agreement with statements). Sensitivity tests confirmed the robustness of this threshold.[1]

Independent variables captured associations between respondents' gender and seniority, and the dependent variable. These were constructed as binaries and included to indicate any statistically significant associations between the odds of reporting positive views, and being a male or female organizational leader, senior manager, or other member of staff. Control variables (each coded as no = 0, yes = 1), included having a degree-level qualification, as education

TABLE 3 Mean and median scores on agency climate (*n* = 2276)

	Male	**Female**	**All**
Organizational leaders			
Mean	12.5	14.4	13.5
Median	12.0	13.0	13.0
Standard deviation	4.2	5.3	4.8
Senior managers			
Mean	13.4	15.2	14.5
Median	13.0	14.5	14.0
Standard deviation	4.6	5.1	4.9
Nonmanagerial staff			
Mean	14.9	16.3	15.8
Median	15.0	16.0	16.0
Standard deviation	4.7	4.7	4.8
All			
Mean	14.6	16.1	15.5
Median	14.0	16.0	15.0
Standard deviation	4.7	4.8	4.8

Note: Scores ranged between 6 and 30. Lower scores indicate more positive views.

levels may confound effects of seniority, and account for some differences in respondent scores. Because individual responsibilities, such as caring for a child or adult likely impact on experiences at work and judgments of agency climate, these were included as controls, along with respondent age, and part-time status. Recognizing that workers' perceptions may be shaped by gendered experiences in their day-to-day working environment, we controlled for whether their immediate workplace was numerically female-dominated. Controls also indicated years worked in the agency (constructed as dummies capturing whether they worked for two years or less, or for over 10 years), and whether they worked in the jurisdiction's capital city. The six largest agencies were included as controls for agency effects: health, education, justice, primary industries, human services, and business and infrastructure.[2] The reference group was a middle-aged, full time, nondegree qualified nonmanagerial male without caring responsibilities, working outside the large agencies. Odds ratios (ORs) are reported in Table 4.

Logistic regression results support both hypotheses; seniority and gender predicted support for the status quo with respect to workplace gender equality. ORs for both male (OR = 3.0, $p < .001$) and female organizational leaders (OR = 2.7, $p < .01$), and for men and women in other senior managerial roles (OR = 2.1, $p < .001$ for each) demonstrate associations between seniority and lower scores on the dependent variable, supporting Hypothesis 1. Unlike in the bivariate results discussed previously, the regression model, which accounts for potential confounding factors, found higher ORs for male than female organizational leaders. This indicates male leaders' higher support for the status quo, supporting Hypothesis 2. Similarities between men and women in other senior management roles (but not organizational leaders) are notable, suggesting that for this group, status in the upper echelons of organizational hierarchies was a more salient predictor of attitudes than respondents' gender. Among nonmanagerial staff, being female predicted significantly lower ORs, indicating more critical perspectives on agency gender equality climate (OR = 0.7, $p < .001$).

Other variables were associated with the dependent variable. Being with the agency for under 2 years predicted more positive views on the gender equality climate (OR = 1.5, $p < .01$), as did being aged under 35 (OR = 1.3, $p < .05$). Degree qualifications, on the other hand, and working part-time, were each independently associated with lower odds of viewing agency gender equality more positively (OR = 0.7, $p < .01$), likely because education and nonstandard hours bring more critical perspectives on organizational norms. While care responsibilities had no independent associations,

TABLE 4 Binary logistic regression results (odds ratios), positive view of agency climate for gender equality

	Odds ratios	Standard error
Constant	0.9	0.2
Independent variables		
Gender and seniority		
Male organizational leader	3.0***	0.3
Female organizational leader	2.7**	0.3
Male senior manager	2.1***	0.2
Female senior manager	2.1***	0.2
Female nonmanagerial	0.7**	0.2
Control variables		
Individual factors		
Degree qualified	0.7**	0.1
Care responsibilities for a child <12	1.1	0.1
Care responsibilities for an adult	1.0	0.1
Aged <35	1.3*	0.1
Aged >55	0.9	0.1
Part-time	0.7**	0.1
Work characteristics		
In agency for <2 years	1.5**	0.1
In agency for >10 years	0.9	0.1
Female-dominated workplace	0.9	0.1
Capital city	1.1	0.1
Agency		
Education	0.8	0.2
Justice	0.5***	0.2
Environment and agriculture	0.8	0.1
Human services	0.6*	0.2
Health	0.6*	0.2
Business and infrastructure	0.6**	0.2

Note: Hosmer–Lemeshow chi-square = 13.3; p = .1; Nagelkerke pseudo r-square = 0.08.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

some agency effects were found. Of the six agencies included in the model, four predicted lower support for the status quo. Precise reasons are unclear, but likely reflects specific organizational strategies; that larger-sized agencies have more pronounced gender equality problems; or that action within them is less discernible. Notwithstanding, after controlling for agency, work and individual factors, the regression results offer support for both hypotheses.

8 | DISCUSSION

In examining senior leaders' attitudes to gender equality and the gender equality initiatives in their organizations, we put to the test a key assumption underlying many organizational diversity initiatives; namely, that senior leaders recognize and acknowledge inequality and are motivated to act as change agents. We found that senior leaders were

more likely than lower-ranked employees to defend the status quo with respect to gender equality. Those in the upper echelons of the public sector agencies we surveyed expressed more support for existing arrangements and less need for change. Male leaders voiced the most support for existing arrangements but were not unique in defending the status quo; lower ranked men also expressed more positive views on their organizations' gender equality climates than women. Among senior managers at executive feeder level, however, men's and women's perspectives were similar, suggesting that for these leaders, privilege and rank were a stronger explanator than gender. Women leaders were less likely than their male counterparts to support the status quo, but were more likely to see existing arrangements as acceptable than lower ranked women, after controlling for confounders. This gulf among women may indicate the assimilation of women into workplace cultures, as they climb organizational hierarchies. Women in more senior positions exhibit some disinclination to challenge the systems in which they have succeeded. As such, it cannot be assumed that senior women leaders will, on the basis of their gender, lead organizational change on behalf of lower-ranked women, nor that gender equality might "trickle down."

Scholars have long been interested in the power dynamics that create and maintain inequality regimes in organizations (Acker, 1990, 2006; Liff & Cameron, 1997), and have increasingly turned their attention to understanding why so many diversity initiatives fail (Kalev et al., 2006; Vinkenburg, 2017). While we do not contend to fully explain the complex dynamics in play within these or other organizations, our findings advance understanding of one set of mechanisms making workplace gender equality so hard to achieve. We present system justification theory, which posits that individuals have a strong psychological motivation to see the social systems in which they are embedded as fair and just (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2003), as an explanation for why senior leaders, as a social group, would be more likely than other employees to defend the status quo. While prior studies examining system justifying beliefs have mostly been conducted in experimental settings (Jost, 2019; Osborne et al., 2019), we demonstrate how system justifying attitudes manifest in real-world settings, in organizations. In so doing, we show how individually held attitudes coalesce by rank and gender to sustain existing patterns of power and privilege within organizations, and constrain prospects for gender equality.

Although senior leaders are, in theory, ideally positioned to drive organizational change, their more positive attitudes toward prevailing arrangements and their lack of inclination to disrupt the status quo reflects their position as hegemonic actors who derive their power and privilege from existing systems. Our findings highlight the reality of resistance to gender-based change initiatives, which may, problematically, be manifest among the very groups tasked to lead the charge. System justification research has shown how the tendency to rationalize or defend the status quo intensifies when people perceive that the systems they are dependent upon, or are implicated within, are under criticism or attack (Friesen et al., 2019). External criticism of systems–such as calling into question an organization's commitment to equality—"may instigate a defensive psychological reaction, heightening people's system-justification motive" (Proudfoot & Kay, 2014, p. 179). We show how individual-level reactions combine at different levels of organizational hierarchies to create a collective defense of the status quo, which potentially enables senior leaders to avoid acknowledging the way inequalities are manifest in their organizations, or that they might part of the problem. In this way, our findings help to explain the persistent resistance and backlash to equality initiatives noted in organizational research (Benschop & van den Brink, 2014; Colley et al., 2020; Connell, 2006; van den Brink et al., 2010).

Senior leaders are often theorized as key actors in setting organizational cultures (Schein, 2010), and thus feature in many accounts of organizational diversity initiatives (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Kelan & Wratil, 2018; Mattis, 2001; Ng & Sears, 2012). Consequently, many organizations have adopted gender equality initiatives that depend on the implicit support of senior leaders. Our findings give cause to rethink this strategy. Effective interventions must recognize all points of resistance across status hierarchies within organizations, and use them to forge critical spaces for negotiating change, and for strengthening the recognition and ownership of problems needed for change agency (Lansu et al., 2020). An over-reliance on senior leaders to champion change, and insensitivity to attitudinal differences in organizational hierarchies, will likely be insufficient to produce the desired results. Instead, accountability must be built into organizational processes at every level of the hierarchy (Kalev et al., 2006) and interventions which can

lead to actual change among managers must be designed to mitigate their attitudinal inclinations and biases (Bohnet, 2016; Vinkenburg, 2017).

9 | CONCLUSION

That senior leaders may be anything other than vital to advancing gender equality in organizations is a challenging prospect. Strategies for change require substantial investments in time, energy, resources, and motivational capital, which leaders are well placed to catalyze. Senior leaders' power and influence suggests they have potential to lead change, but doing so requires fully acknowledging problems exist. Our research shows senior leaders' perceptions of gender equality are out of step with their staff and undermine the likelihood they will drive required changes. Findings call to reassess movements built around leaders' championing change. Further, because lower-level men are more likely than women to move up the ranks, their system justifying attitudes risk becoming further calcified in emergent structures and cultures, as they rise to positions of power.

As a preliminary step, organizations should evaluate senior leaders' attitudes, before relying on them to understand inequality and prioritize change. As those with privilege do not always see it, making power and privilege in organizations visible will help strengthen foundations for more effective leadership for change. Indeed, as well as men needing to understand gendered privilege, our study shows need for senior leaders' awareness of status-related privileges, and as such, initiatives should create space to tune in to junior colleagues and share power and resources for change. Lastly, organizations that are committed to achieving equality should focus on building accountability for progressing gender equality into their systems and processes at every level of the organizational hierarchy, rather than relying on senior leaders to enact change voluntarily. This could occur, for example, by tying managers' bonuses, promotions, or tenure to the achievement of key diversity targets.

Inevitably, the study has limitations. Conceptually, leaders' attitudes and perceptions are proxies for actual action and may not perfectly indicate future organizational behavior or gender equality strategy. Change may result from a complex interplay of top-down factors and bottom-up mobilizations, and from policy or other external factors, and a fuller account of the ways leaders respond to gender equality, among competing priorities and forces, is warranted. However, in contexts where organizational leaders have considerable discretion over whether and how they address inequalities, attitudinal measures are valid indicators of organizational orientations.

Additionally, we recognize that leaders' apparent endorsement of the status quo may reflect the nature of evidence they have access to; that is, that their positive assessments are formed through an overview of circumstances in the organization, or early evidence of change, to which lower-level staff may not be privy. However, seeing change underway usually leads people to adjust expectations accordingly, which would cause dissipation of system justifying beliefs among senior staff (Laurin et al., 2010). Further research will help unpack these dynamics and the relationships between status, attitudes, and organizational change. While our study drew on self-reported perceptions at a single point in time, further research should incorporate a wider range of factors that can shape participants' views; and account for the ways views form and change over time. Further, while our research spanned across multiple agencies in the public sector of one Australian jurisdiction, further research should examine men's and women's experiences and perceptions across status hierarchies in a wider range of organizational contexts. Such research should extend outside the public sector, including to highly male dominated industries and organizations, to examine whether system justifying beliefs can operate similarly in contexts of more acute gender inequalities. Finally, longitudinal studies and qualitative research tracking attempts to promote organizational change are needed to further elucidate links between leaders' attitudes, organizational action, and gender equality, to help understand the full range of processes which may catalyze progress, or hold change agents back. In the meantime, however, our findings suggest that committed policy makers and other organizational actors should act boldly to enact binding changes to progress equality, rather than waiting for heroic, senior leaders to use their discretion to lead change.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available because of privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Models using quintile and median as the threshold for the binary dependent variable were developed, leading to similar results.

[2] More specific agency factors were not included in the model because of multicollinearity and model parsimony.

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