

The Role of CSR in Promoting Gender Equality in the Workplace

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Abstract: Corporations address gender equality issues in the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development. As in other areas of CSR, various standards, certifications, and similar initiatives have been proposed to promote gender equality. Despite an increasing number of self-regulation and signaling schemes being proposed, their study has been overlooked by the scholarly literature. This article tries to shed light on these standards through a two-stage exploratory study. First, the main worldwide initiatives that focus on gender equality standards are scrutinized and mapped. Second, their main characteristics are analyzed, based on a content analysis of the information disclosed by organizations that foster the most relevant initiatives. A systematic analysis of relevant gender equality standards is provided. This work highlights a dispersion and lack of uniformity in terms of missions, results, measurement, and even the definition of gender equality or the term used to refer to it. No framework has prevailed. Gender equality standards lack gender mainstreaming and intersectionality is invisible. The business case appears to be the main driver of gender equality standards. The present study is one of the first attempts to thoroughly examine the institutional design of gender equality standards, their standard-setting process as well as their enforcement. We suggest a rethink of the policies that promote the gender equality standards in organizations, as well as a need for collaborative work between managers and policymakers towards the use of common terminology, indicators, and uniformity regarding the terms to be certificated.

Keywords: CSR

I. INTRODUCTION

Standardization is a significant aspect of society and standards are used in more and more areas (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000). The growing concern related to social and environmental issues (Cantele et al., 2023; Gazzola et al., 2022) has led to commercial certification systems based on voluntary sustainability standards (VSS) increasingly appearing on the international agenda (Fernandes Martins et al., 2022), as they are considered a major governance tool for sustainability (Bissinger et al., 2020; Rubio-Jovel, 2023). These standards are voluntary codes, guidelines, or processes used by organizations to formalize, systematize, and legitimize a very diverse set of managerial activities or tasks (Boiral & Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2015), and they tend to use a similar methodology regarding their creation, structure, implementation process and monitoring by a third party (Testa et al., 2018).

Therefore, the paper makes several contributions. Firstly, it improves the general understanding on underexplored GE standards, mapping the ones with an external audit process and those that do not have one. Secondly, it contributes to providing significant knowledge about the operational functioning of 20 GE standards. Thirdly, it delves into the study of the origin, geographical coverage, objectives, and drivers of the GE standards that have an external audit process, as well as their implementation processes, structure, and benefits that they claim to provide to companies. Fourthly, it shows the connections between CSR and VSS, which has recently been identified as a knowledge gap in the literature by Fernandes Martins et al. (2022), who consider VSS as potential instruments for the management of CSR. Finally, it offers practical implications for managers, and especially for policymakers, as it provides a systematic analysis of relevant GE standards.

This paper is organized as follows. After the introduction is a brief integrative review of the GE standards topic, the theoretical framework supporting the paper, as well as a summary of this topic's limited scholarly literature. The third

section presents the methodology of this empirical study, and the fourth section considers the research results. The final section includes the discussion and conclusions.

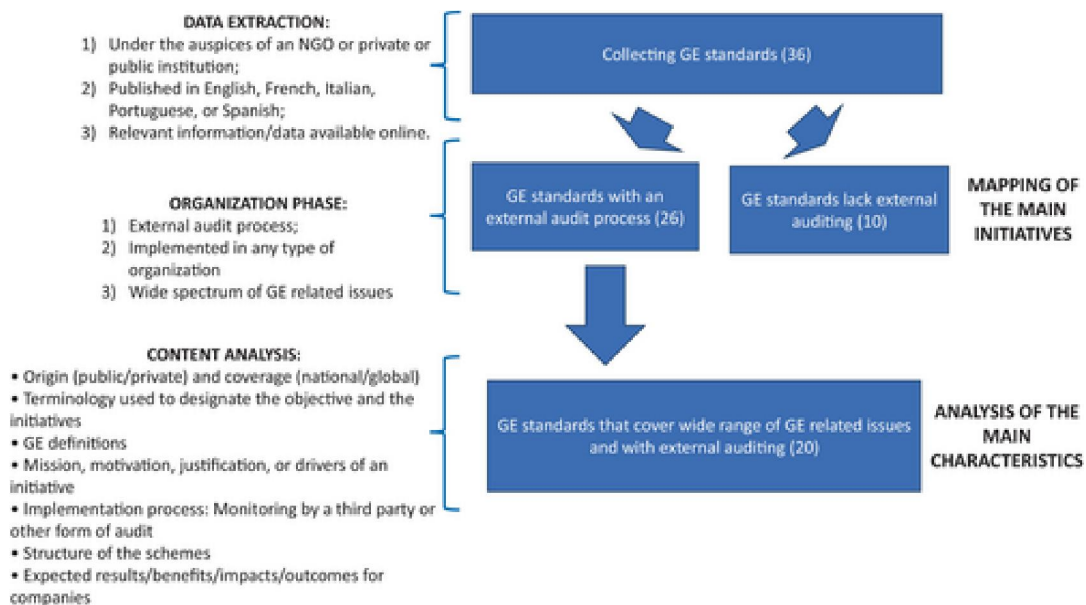
II. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

In times of globalization of the supply chains, standardization seems to be a new, alternative form of regulation (i.e., self-regulation) to traditional public regulation (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2020). The growth of voluntary business regulation on a global scale reflects the expansion of legitimate authority in the global economy beyond states and the increasing use of alternative regulatory instruments to regulate business, including self-regulation (Vogel, 2008). Certified management standards are considered as decentralized private institutions due to the fact that participation is voluntary and because dispersed agents, rather than a central authority, reward participation or sanction non-participation (Ingram & Silverman, 2002; King et al., 2005).

Thus, much research is devoted to studying variation in the institutional design of VSS, paying particular attention to the standard-setting process as well as their enforcement (Marx et al., 2021), but academic research specifically focused on GE standards is limited (Albrechtsen, 2019). Despite their growing number and potential impact, GE standards have been little explored; and the scholarly literature has underlined the need to foster research on this issue (e.g., Tzanakou et al., 2021). This exploratory study therefore aims to shed light on this specific field. More specifically, this work aims to respond to the following research questions: *What are the main GE standards initiatives? What are the main characteristics of the GE standards initiatives? In particular, what is the origin and geographical coverage of these standards? Which are their objectives and drivers, as well as their implementation processes, structures and benefits that they claim to provide to companies?*

III. METHODOLOGY

In order to address the research questions, an exploratory empirical study was planned based on a qualitative content analysis of GE standards. This “research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278), has been used extensively in the literature to empirically analyze sustainable reports, corporate certifications, and standards (e.g., Boiral & Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2017; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2016; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2023).



The study was developed on a two-step structure. First, a desktop research was conducted with the aim of mapping the main GE initiatives. The information was collected using general tools. A computer search of the Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar databases was conducted. Diverse keywords were used (i.e., “gender equality certificates”,

“gender equality standards”, “gender standards”, “gender voluntary sustainable standards”, “gender labels”, “gender initiatives”, “gender corporate standards”). To be considered in the analysis, the initiatives had to: (1) be conducted under the auspices of an NGO or private or public institution; (2) be published in either English, French, Italian, Portuguese, or Spanish; and (3) have relevant information/data available online. The application of these criteria resulted in 36 GE initiatives that offered a complete map of them, which varied in general purpose, scope, and methodology (see Figure 1).

Second, the 36 GE initiatives were redefined using 3 additional criteria to give more consistency to content analysis and to allow a process of homogenization. The initiatives had to: (1) have an external audit process; (2) be able to be implemented in any type of organization (public, private), regardless of its sector, activity, or size, and (3) cover a wide spectrum of GE related issues. The first two criteria led to 26 initiatives in the field of GE with an external audit process and 10 initiatives without one (Tables 1 and 2). The third criterion narrowed down the selection to 20 initiatives covering broad aspects of GE. Therefore, the content analysis was focused on the first 20 GE standards collected in Table 1.

GE initiatives with an external audit process.

Initiative	Year (last version)	Country	Responsible organization
<i>Economic Dividends for Gender Equality (EDGE) Certification</i>	2011	Global	Private: EDGE Certified Foundation
<i>Gender Equality European and International Standard (GEEIS) Certification</i>	2010	Global	Private: Arborus Endowment Fund and its founding members, large companies
<i>Gender Equality Seal for Public and Private Enterprises (GES)</i>	2009	Global	Public-Private Partnership: United Nations Development Program (UNDP), national governments, private sector companies and civil society
<i>AENOR Gender Equality Certification Model (SGIG)</i>	2020	Spain	Private: AENOR, certifying entity
<i>GEN (Gender Equality Now) Certification</i>	2018	United States of America	Private: GEN (Gender Equity Now) a non-profit corporation in Washington State
<i>SGI2010 Standard (Equal Opportunities Management System)</i>	2018	Spain	Private: Igualia, private consultant company
<i>GE Certification, Bollino Rosa (Pink Label)</i>	2017	Italy	Private: Winning Women Institute
<i>The Women in Governance (WiG) Parity Certification</i>	2017	Canada	Private: WiG, a not-for-profit organization
<i>The Quality Management Model with Equity (Modelo de Calidad con Equidad de Género (MCEG))</i>	2016	Uruguay	Public: National Institute of Women – Ministry of Social Development
<i>National standard INTE 38-01-01 Management system for gender equality in the workplace</i>	2015	Costa Rica	Public: National Institute for Women – INAMU
<i>Gender Equality Seal: Igualando RD (Sello de Igualdad de Género: Igualando RD), NORDOM 775 Certification</i>	2015	Dominican Republic	Public: Ministry of Women and the UNDP
<i>Mexican Standard NMX-R-025-SCFI-</i>	2015	Mexico	Public: Inter-institutional council

<i>2015 on Labor Equality and Non-Discrimination (Norma Mexicana NMX-R-025-SCFI-2015 en Igualdad Laboral y No Discriminación)</i>			made up of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, the National Institute for Women and the National Council to Prevent Discrimination
<i>Seal of Labor Equity "Equipares" (Sello de Equidad Laboral "Equipares")</i>	2013	Colombia	Public: Ministry of Labor and the Presidential Council for Women's Equity with technical support from the UNDP
<i>Chilean Standard NCh3262 and the Equal Conciliation Seal</i>	2012	Chile	Public: National Service for Women and Gender Equity and the Ministry of Women and Gender Equity.
<i>Equal Opportunities Model (FEM), A Gender Equality Certification</i>	2011	Turkey	Private: The Women Entrepreneurs Association of Turkey (Kagider), a non-governmental organization
<i>Equality in the Workplace Award (Distintivo Igualdad en la Empresa)</i>	2010	Spain	Public: The Institute of Women, an independent organization which is attached to the Ministry of Equality
<i>Equality Mark Certification</i>	2010	Malta	Public: National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE)
<i>The Equality Label (Le Label Égalité)</i>	2004	France	Public: Ministry responsible for equality between women and men, diversity and legality of opportunities
<i>The Total E-Quality Label</i>	1997	Germany	Private: non-profit association TOTAL E-QUALITY Deutschland e.V.
<i>Positive Actions Program (Programme des Actions Positives – MEGA)</i>	1993	Luxembourg	Public: Ministry of Equality
<i>EFR Model</i>	2006/Conciliation of work and personal life	Spain	Private: Másfamilia Foundation
<i>Audit Workandfamily (Audit Berufundfamilie)</i>	1999/Conciliation of work and personal life	Germany	Private: Non-Profit Hertie-Foundation
<i>The AENOR Certificate of Equal Remuneration</i>	2020/Wage gap	Spain	Private: AENOR
<i>Equal-Salary certification</i>	2010/Wage gap	Global	Private: EQUAL-SALARY, a non-profit organization
<i>Athena SWAN Charter Award</i>	2005/Research performing organizations	United Kingdom. Now Global	Private: Advance HE
<i>3% Certified</i>	2012/Advertising world	United States of America	Private: The 3% Movement

The content analysis of selected GE standards was conducted following a systematic process previously carried out in this type of analysis (e.g., Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2022; Manes-Rossi & Nicolo', 2022) involving the extraction and overview of the standards, the development of the categorization framework, the analysis and interpretation of information, and the selection of illustrative quotations.

The fieldwork was conducted between March 2023 and September 2023. To that end, the work focused on an in-depth analysis of the descriptive information disclosed by the organizations that foster the 20 GE standards.

Finally, based on this systematic process, a set of topics that were recurrently cited were coded and analyzed. This preliminary categorization framework was further developed and reorganized through a data analysis process. This process, followed by the collection of information from the GE standards, involved the development of the framework of the categories, categorization, analysis, and interpretation of the information on illustrative quotations. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the development of the categories is not based on existing theories, but rather on the relevant information delivered in the standards. As such, the categories related to the analyzed GE standards' main characteristics were defined. Figure 1 summarizes the seven most recurrent themes that emerged in the content analysis of the 20 scrutinized GE standards.

In the following section the main findings of this analysis are summarized. The section is structured around the mapped GE standards (4.1) and their main characteristics (4.2), which include representative quotations of the analyzed information.

IV. RESULTS

Main initiatives for voluntary corporate certification in the field of GE

Table 1 summarizes the main initiatives for voluntary corporate certification in the field of GE standards with an external audit process. Among the identified initiatives are some GE standards that cover a wide range of GE related issues (sexual harassment, equal

opportunities in recruitment, career and personal development opportunities, equality culture, etc.). Other initiatives focus on particular areas such as reconciliation of work and family life (e.g., *Audit Beruf und familie* in Germany, *Empresa familiarmente responsable* (EFR) in Spain) or equal salary (e.g., *Equal-Salary certification*), or apply to a specific sector (*Athena SWAN Charter award* in research performing organizations/3% certified to retain and promote women in advertising agencies).

Origin (public/private) and coverage (national/global)

Considering the nature of a certifying/standardizing body, reference might be made to public initiatives when public administrations intervene in the process as standardizers or as accreditors, and to private certifications where private bodies carry out these functions (Melero-Bolaños & Ramírez-Sobrino, 2011).

Finally, public-private partnerships (e.g., Germany's Total E-Quality) and non-governmental organizations (e.g., Turkey's Kagider, United States of America (USA)'s GEN, and Canada's WiG) also seem to be the origin of most private initiatives with national coverage (7 out of 10). Additionally, there are three private companies that promote their own certificates: AENOR (Spain), Winning Women Institute (Italy) and Igualia (Spain). In this case, there are consulting companies behind the certificates, which offer companies their services at a national or international level.

Terminology used to designate the objective and the initiatives

The initiatives lack a unified or homogenous term when they refer to their objective. Some refer to *GE*, which is the most widespread term (11 out of 20), but in several cases they add an additional concept: *GE plus women empowerment*(GES), *GE plus conciliation* (Chile), or they only refer to *Equality* (Luxembourg).

GE definitions

Regardless of the terminology used, the initiatives also do not agree on any definition for their objective (if indeed they do give a definition). In fact, only 50% of the studied schemes define the term they have used.

Among the initiatives with a public origin, four do not define their concepts (or at least the definitions are not easy to find); and the rest (6) do not agree on definitions. The exceptions to this are Costa Rica, Mexico, Uruguay, and Malta, which offer similar ones.

Mission, motivation, justification, or drivers of an initiative

There is no consensus on the purpose or mission of the studied initiatives; each one gives a different reason for their creation. This can be due to the fact that, as most of the schemes operate at a national level, there is a plurality of formats, understandings and priorities that co-exist (Tzanakou et al., 2021), as they take into consideration the particular context and circumstances they try to address. This need to adopt a “flexible approach for customization and uptake by different national contexts” has been suggested in the event of adopting a European-wide initiative for universities and research organizations (Nason & Sangiuliano, 2020).

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This work has identified 26 initiatives for voluntary certification in the field of GE standards with an external audit process, and 10 initiatives which no external auditing. The 20 initiatives studied through the content analysis showed that they have been developed by both public and private entities, that the majority are monitored by a third party and that just a few of them have a global coverage.

To conclude, considering the limited amount of academic research on GE standards, we hope this work can raise awareness and inform research lines for future academic works.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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