

Gender Discrimination and Turnover Intention among Women Managers: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This literature review explores the link between gender discrimination and turnover intention (TOI) among female managers, focusing on two major forms of workplace bias: unequal promotion opportunities and sexual harassment. Guided by Social Exchange Theory and Equity Theory, the review synthesizes research that explains how structural inequalities contribute to higher turnover rates among women in leadership. Consistent findings indicate that limited advancement and hostile environments often lead to disengagement and intent to leave. Special attention is given to the measurement of turnover intention, with a critical analysis of commonly used survey items to assess how well they capture women's workplace experiences. The review also considers how cultural and industry contexts shape these outcomes, noting particularly strong effects in male-dominated sectors and societies with rigid gender norms. While much of the current literature is based in Western settings, recent studies from Asian economies such as China reveal comparable trends with local variations. This review concludes by outlining future research directions, including the need for more cross-cultural insights and practical evaluations of organizational interventions. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of addressing workplace discrimination not only as a matter of fairness, but also as a core element of effective retention strategies.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Turnover Intention, Female Managers, Promotion Inequality, Workplace Harassment

Introduction

Women's participation in the global workforce has increased substantially over recent decades. However, women remain markedly underrepresented in senior leadership and top decision making positions. Numerous studies and international reports indicate that the leadership pipeline continues to narrow sharply at higher organisational levels, despite women's growing educational attainment and professional qualifications (McKinsey & Company, 2022). This persistent leadership gap has become a central concern in

contemporary social science research on workplace equality, organisational justice, and sustainable talent management, as women's exits from managerial roles are increasingly understood not merely as individual career choices but as outcomes shaped by structural and cultural constraints within organisations.

Within this broader context, employee turnover intention has emerged as a critical issue for organisations seeking long term sustainability and competitive advantage (Başer et al., 2025; Zhang & Chan, 2025). Turnover intention is widely recognised as a strong proximal predictor of actual voluntary turnover and a key indicator of organisational health (Zeyrek et al., 2023; Park et al., 2024). For women in managerial roles, turnover intention is particularly consequential. Managerial positions typically involve heightened performance expectations, greater visibility, and deeper engagement with informal power structures that govern promotion and resource allocation. When women managers encounter persistent gender based barriers, their intention to leave may reflect not only job dissatisfaction but also deeper concerns regarding fairness, safety, and long term career viability.

Among the various forms of workplace gender discrimination, unequal promotion opportunities and workplace sexual harassment have been consistently identified as especially detrimental to women's retention. Promotion inequality reflects structural exclusion from advancement pathways, leadership development opportunities, and sponsorship networks, while sexual harassment represents a hostile or unsafe work environment rooted in power asymmetries (Barbosa, 2024; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Although these issues are often examined separately in the literature, they frequently co occur in practice and may jointly intensify women managers' withdrawal cognitions. In the Chinese context, these dynamics may be further shaped by institutional and cultural factors such as hierarchical organisational structures, strong family role expectations, and social norms surrounding "saving face," which can discourage reporting of harassment and constrain women's responses to perceived injustice (Chen et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2023).

To explain how gender discrimination translates into turnover intention, this review is guided by Social Exchange Theory, Equity Theory, and Herzberg's Two Factor Theory. Social Exchange Theory suggests that when women managers perceive an imbalance between their contributions and organisational rewards, particularly in terms of promotion and recognition, the psychological contract between employee and organisation may be weakened, leading to withdrawal intentions (Ahmad et al., 2023; Kilroy et al., 2023). Equity Theory further emphasises comparative processes through which women assess fairness by evaluating their input outcome ratios relative to male colleagues and to their own career expectations. Perceived inequity in these comparisons can generate dissatisfaction and motivate intentions to leave (Kooli, 2023). Herzberg's Two Factor Theory complements these perspectives by distinguishing between motivators, such as achievement and advancement, and hygiene factors, such as interpersonal relationships, safety, and organisational climate. The absence of motivators and the deterioration of hygiene conditions, including exposure to harassment, are both likely to undermine job satisfaction and increase turnover intention (Herzberg, 1966; Hu et al., 2022).

Despite a growing body of research on gender discrimination and employee turnover, several important gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses on women employees in

general, with relatively limited attention to women managers as a distinct group facing unique promotion dynamics, power relations, and visibility pressures. Second, promotion inequality and sexual harassment are often treated as separate research streams, resulting in limited synthesis of their combined effects on turnover intention. Third, although job satisfaction is frequently examined as an outcome variable, fewer studies systematically position it as a mediating mechanism linking discrimination to turnover intention, particularly within the Chinese cultural and institutional context. Finally, measurement practices for turnover intention vary considerably across studies, and it remains unclear whether commonly used scales adequately capture the gendered workplace experiences of women managers (Xie et al., 2024; Yi et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this literature review aims to synthesise empirical evidence on how unequal promotion opportunities and workplace sexual harassment influence turnover intention among women managers, with particular attention to the Chinese context. It further seeks to clarify the theoretical mechanisms linking gender discrimination to turnover intention by integrating insights from Social Exchange Theory, Equity Theory, and Herzberg's Two Factor Theory, with a specific focus on the mediating role of job satisfaction. In addition, the review critically examines how turnover intention has been conceptualised and measured in prior studies, identifying methodological limitations and directions for more context sensitive future research. By situating women managers' turnover intention within broader social and theoretical debates on gendered organisations and workplace justice, this review underscores that addressing gender discrimination is not only a matter of fairness but also a strategic imperative for organisational retention and leadership sustainability.

Methodology

A systematic search strategy was implemented to identify relevant academic literature. Comprehensive searches were conducted across four major academic databases: Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). The search included both English and Chinese keywords. The English search terms used were: "turnover intention" AND "women managers" AND ("promotion opportunities" OR "sexual harassment" OR "job satisfaction"). The Chinese keywords were: "离职意向" AND "女性管理者" AND ("晋升机会" OR "职场性骚扰" OR "工作满意度").

The inclusion criteria specified that only peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2023 would be considered. Studies needed to be empirical (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods), focus on female managers in corporate environments and provide a clear analysis of gender discrimination factors related to turnover intention. Studies were excluded if they focused on non-managerial employees, presented only macro-level analyses without gender differentiation, or came from non-peer-reviewed sources such as reports or theses.

Table 1
Search Strategy

Item	Description
Databases Searched	Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, CNKI
English Keywords	"turnover intention" AND "women managers" AND ("promotion opportunities" OR "sexual harassment" OR "job satisfaction")
Chinese Keywords	"离职意向" AND "女性管理者" AND ("晋升机会" OR "职场性骚扰" OR "工作满意度")
Inclusion Criteria	Peer-reviewed journal articles (2010–2025); empirical studies; focus on female managers in corporate settings; clear analysis of gender discrimination factors
Exclusion Criteria	Studies on non-managerial employees; macro-level studies without gender focus; non-peer-reviewed sources (e.g., reports, theses)

Analytical Framework

To interpret the findings of the selected studies, this review adopts an analytical framework grounded in three key theoretical perspectives: Social Exchange Theory, Equity Theory, and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory. Social Exchange Theory provides insight into how perceived inequities in career advancement opportunities can disrupt the psychological contract between female managers and their organisations (Ahmad et al., 2023; Kilroy et al., 2023; Terpstra-Tong et al., 2025). When women feel that their efforts and loyalty are not reciprocated through fair promotional pathways, a sense of betrayal may arise, potentially increasing their intention to leave. Equity Theory further deepens this understanding by emphasising how women compare their input-output ratios with those of their male counterparts (Kooli, 2023; Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business, 2025). When these comparisons highlight significant disparities, particularly in promotion outcomes, feelings of injustice and dissatisfaction can emerge, fostering a desire to disengage or withdraw from the organisation.

Additionally, Two-Factor Theory serves to contextualise the motivational factors influencing female managers' job satisfaction and turnover intention. According to this theory, job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are influenced by two distinct sets of factors: motivators and hygiene factors. In contrast, hygiene factors, such as salary, interpersonal relationships, and workplace safety, do not necessarily promote satisfaction but can lead to dissatisfaction when absent or perceived as inadequate. By applying this theory, the review can differentiate between the absence of positive motivators and the presence of negative workplace conditions as distinct pathways through which job dissatisfaction and eventual turnover intentions are formed among female managers.

Quality Assessment

To ensure the credibility and relevance of the selected literature, each included study underwent a rigorous quality assessment process. This evaluation focused first on methodological rigour, considering elements such as sample size, research design, and the reliability and validity of the measurement tools employed. Studies with robust data

collection and analysis methods were prioritised, as these offered stronger empirical support for the review's conclusions. Second, the studies were assessed for their theoretical contribution, specifically whether they advanced existing frameworks or offered novel insights into the relationship between gender-based workplace experiences and turnover intention among female managers.

In addition to methodological and theoretical criteria, the studies were also evaluated for their contextual relevance to the experiences of Chinese female managers. Given the cultural and institutional uniqueness of the Chinese workplace environment, studies set in or directly relevant to China were especially valued for their applicability (Chen et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2023). Finally, the review considered the practical implications each study provided for organisational practice. Preference was given to research that offered concrete recommendations for improving retention, promotion fairness, and workplace satisfaction for women in leadership roles (Cao et al., 2021; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). This multidimensional assessment approach ensured that the literature included in the review was not only academically sound but also practically meaningful and contextually appropriate.

Conceptualisation of Turnover Intention

The turnover intention has been widely conceptualised in organisational behaviour literature as the cognitive and emotional inclination of an employee to voluntarily leave their current organisation. According to Zeyrek et al. (2023), it is defined as "a conscious and deliberate willingness to leave an organisation." This definition underscores the intentional nature of the construct, distinguishing it from impulsive or externally driven exits such as layoffs or forced resignations. Park et al. (2024) and Hur and Abner (2024) emphasised that turnover intention represents the final cognitive stage before actual turnover behaviour, making it an essential predictor of real employee attrition. Furthermore, research by Kanchana and Jayathilaka (2023) and Yi et al. (2024) positions turnover intention as the single strongest predictor of voluntary employee departure, reinforcing its practical relevance for human resource management and organisational sustainability.

A key feature of turnover intention is its volitional nature, meaning it arises from the employee's decision-making process rather than external impositions (Zhu et al., 2023). Additionally, it carries a temporal element, reflecting an employee's likelihood to leave shortly. It is also viewed as a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive (thoughts about quitting), affective (emotional detachment or dissatisfaction), and behavioural (preparatory actions like job searching) components. These dimensions together offer a holistic understanding of an employee's disengagement process and help organisations detect early warning signs before actual turnover occurs.

Measurement of turnover intention varies across studies but generally relies on standardised scales designed to assess these different dimensions. One of the earliest and most frequently cited methods is the 3-item scale used by Wang et al. (2023), which focuses on thoughts of quitting, intention to search, and intention to leave. A more comprehensive approach is used in the study of Xie et al. (2024), who developed a 6-item turnover intention questionnaire with improved reliability and broader dimensional coverage. Furthermore, researchers have adapted these instruments to fit different cultural contexts, particularly in Asia. For example, Huang and Zang (2023) and Smith et al. (2024) revised standard items to align with Chinese

workplace norms and expectations, ensuring that cultural nuances such as collectivism and authority dynamics are taken into account when assessing turnover intention among employees, especially female managers.

Summary of Turnover Intention Measurement Scales

Turnover intention remains a vital issue in organisational behaviour and human resource management research, as it serves as a robust predictor of actual employee turnover. The reviewed literature demonstrates significant diversity in theoretical approaches, research contexts, and methodological frameworks in addressing TOI. This critical review analyses multiple studies on TOI, comparing their conceptual foundations, variables studied, research methods, and the implications they yield. The comparative analysis also emphasises strengths, limitations, and the broader contribution of each work, thereby identifying both consensus and divergence in this body of research.

Across the studies reviewed, a commonality is the adoption of behavioural intention theory as the foundational framework. Most researchers approach TOI as a cognitive process influenced by affective, attitudinal, and environmental factors. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and Social Exchange Theory (SET) are frequently employed to explain why employees develop intentions to leave. For example, Abet et al. (2024) draw on TPB to examine how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control influence turnover intentions. However, their reliance on self-reported perceptions limits the robustness of causal claims.

In contrast, studies such as Kaur and Singh (2026) offer a broader perspective by including dimensions such as the motivation to seek alternative employment and the perceived ease of doing so. This multi-dimensional approach enriches the understanding of TOI but may face challenges in isolating the most influential component. Similarly, Albashrawi et al. (2025) take a minimalistic approach, employing a single-item binary measure of TOI. While this offers clarity and ease of interpretation, it lacks the depth of more complex scales and may oversimplify nuanced intentions.

Many of the studies differentiate between intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing TOI. For example, Ardi and Anggraini (2023) measure TOI through items capturing thoughts, plans, and actions related to quitting, providing a process-oriented view. Their method reflects the internal cognitive and emotional stages preceding actual turnover, though it lacks a longitudinal design to validate behavioural outcomes.

Leadership and emotional factors are also critical. Elshaer et al. (2023) focus on the emotional drive behind TOI, highlighting the influence of affective states. This perspective is particularly relevant in high-stress sectors such as hospitality and healthcare, where emotional labour plays a significant role. However, their model could be strengthened by including workplace support or burnout as moderating variables. Meanwhile, Ammari and Gantare (2025) investigate TOI among nurses in the context of COVID-19, linking health-related anxiety with intentions to leave the profession. This contextual specificity provides timely insight, though generalizability beyond healthcare is limited.

Cultural and contextual variables further shape TOI. Jiang et al. (2022) use reverse-coded Likert items to explore TOI but do not disclose exact wording, posing challenges to replication.

Their study, conducted in China, subtly integrates cultural norms but misses an opportunity to analyse collectivist influences explicitly. A similar gap exists in Masih et al. (2025), where TOI is used as a mediating variable without disclosing its operationalisation, thereby reducing transparency.

In terms of methodology, structural equation modelling (SEM) is commonly employed. For instance, Elshaer (2024) utilises SEM to test a concise three-item model of TOI focused on future intentions. This model is practical and efficient, but may not fully capture the dynamic and evolving nature of employee attitudes. Alshmemri (2025) contribute by using the validated TIS-6 scale, incorporating elements like job search motivation and perceived job alternatives. Their study advocates for longitudinal tracking, a much-needed advancement in a field dominated by cross-sectional designs.

Various authors proposed different dimensions and items to measure turnover intention (TOI). As shown in Table 2, Yildiz et al. (2021) used 3 items to measure turnover intention and the intention to search for a new job. Zhang et al. (2021) used 6 items (TIS-6) to assess resignation consideration, motivation to search, and the likelihood of finding a new job. Lin et al. (2021) focused on turnover intention due to COVID-19 with 3 items. Other studies, such as Hu et al. (2022), proposed 6 items across 3 dimensions: the possibility of resigning, motivation to seek another job, and the likelihood of obtaining an external job. Jiang et al. (2022) employed 4 items using a Likert scale, but the exact wording was not provided. Additionally, some studies, such as Alyahya et al. (2022) and Ahmad Saufi et al. (2023), explored the mediating role of TOI, while Abet et al. (2024) used 6 items based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour to assess intent and motivation to leave.

Gender Differences in Turnover Intention

Global Patterns

Extensive meta-analytic research has consistently revealed notable gender differences in turnover intentions across various industries and cultural contexts. Women tend to exhibit higher turnover intentions than men in comparable job roles, indicating that gender may serve as an important moderating factor in understanding employees' responses to organisational justice. These differences are particularly pronounced at senior management levels, where structural barriers, limited advancement opportunities, and gendered expectations often lead to increased dissatisfaction and disengagement. McKinsey and Company (2022) found that the gender gap in turnover intention widens with ascending leadership ranks, suggesting that women are more likely to exit organisations when faced with stalled progression or lack of recognition at higher levels. Furthermore, female employees are often more sensitive to workplace climate factors, such as perceived fairness, safety, and inclusion. Barbosa (2024) emphasised that factors like organisational culture, sexual harassment, and exclusionary practices have a significantly stronger predictive power on turnover intentions among women than among men.

Table 2

Measurement of TOI

Author(s) & Year	Items / Dimensions	Description
(Yildiz et al., 2021)	3 items	Measures intention to leave and search for a new job.
(Zhang et al., 2021)	6 items (TIS-6)	Considering resignation, motivation to search, probability of finding a new job.
(Lin et al., 2021)	3 items	Intention to leave nursing due to COVID-19.
(Hu et al., 2022)	6 items, 3 dimensions	1) Possibility of resigning, 2) Motivation to seek another job, 3) Possibility of getting an external job.
(Jiang et al., 2022)	4 items	Likert scale; reverse-coded (exact wording not given).
(Alyahya et al., 2022)	Not specified	TOI used as mediator; item wording not disclosed.
(Bowers et al., 2022)	1 item (coded)	Binary-coded: Likelihood of leaving within a year.
(Elshaer et al., 2023)	3 items	Measures emotional drive and the likelihood of leaving the career.
(Ahmad Saufi et al., 2023)	Not specified	Explores HRMPS' effect on TOI, with WLB as mediator.
(Ardi & Anggraini, 2023)	7 items	Measures thoughts, plans, and actions related to leaving the job.
(Elshaer, 2024)	3 items	Focuses on future intentions to leave.
(Aboudahab et al., 2024)	Adapted items	From the Michigan Organisational Assessment Questionnaire.
(Abet et al., 2024)	6 items	Based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour, it assesses intent and motivation to leave.

Implications for Research and Practice

From a managerial standpoint, these insights underscore the urgent need for gender-responsive retention strategies, particularly in building sustainable pipelines for female leadership. As shown in Table 3, research reveals that women tend to exhibit higher turnover intention than men across different cultures and industries, with this trend becoming more pronounced at senior levels due to structural barriers such as limited recognition, exclusionary work environments, and lack of psychological safety. In the Chinese context, the drivers of turnover among female professionals often centre around work-life imbalance and a mismatch between personal values and organisational culture factors that are deeply rooted in local socio-cultural expectations (Deloitte, 2021; Zhaopin, 2021).

To respond effectively, organisations must adapt their human resource strategies to reflect the evolving realities of gender roles in China. This includes promoting flexible work arrangements, implementing gender-inclusive leadership development initiatives, and strengthening anti-harassment mechanisms. By aligning workplace policies with shifting societal attitudes, employers can not only improve female employees' job satisfaction but also reduce the risk of voluntary turnover, particularly among high-potential female managers.

In short, fostering inclusive organisational cultures and ensuring equitable career advancement are not just ethical imperatives they are strategic necessities for talent retention in a competitive market.

Table 3

Demographic Profile of Respondents and Gender-Sensitive Implications

Category	Key Findings	Representative Sources
Global Patterns	Women show higher turnover intention than men across cultures and industries.	Lu et al. (2023); Özkan (2023); McKinsey and Company (2022); Barbosa (2024)
	More pronounced at senior levels due to structural barriers.	
China-Specific Findings	Key factors: lack of recognition, poor inclusion, unsafe work climate.	Zhaopin (2021); Deloitte (2021)
	Chinese female managers express rising dissatisfaction and a higher intent to leave.	
	Turnover drivers differ: work-life imbalance and value misalignment are more prominent.	
Implications	Reflects the strong influence of local culture.	Ling et al. (2024); Yuan et al. (2024); Xie et al. (2024); Zhang and Chan (2025)
	Need for gender-sensitive retention strategies.	
	Recommended interventions: flexible work, inclusive leadership programs, anti-harassment policies.	
	Align HR policies with evolving gender norms in China.	

Theoretical Integration

Turnover intention among Chinese female managers can be comprehensively understood through an integration of Social Exchange Theory, Equity Theory, and cultural contextualization. From a social exchange perspective, many women perceive a breach in the psychological contract with their organisations, where their significant investments such as education, time, and performance fail to yield proportionate returns in terms of promotions, recognition, or fair compensation. This imbalance violates the norm of reciprocity, prompting feelings of injustice and withdrawal. Equity Theory further explains how dissatisfaction arises through various comparison mechanisms. Internally, women assess the mismatch between their efforts and outcomes; externally, they compare their career progress with male colleagues; and historically, they evaluate their current status against their career expectations. Overlaying these psychological mechanisms is the powerful influence of Confucian cultural norms, which uniquely shape female managers' workplace experiences. Strong family obligations intensify work-life strain, the cultural imperative of “saving face” discourages reporting of workplace harassment, and hierarchical structures often normalise subtle gender inequities. Together, these theories and cultural factors create a complex framework that explains why turnover intentions are especially salient among Chinese female managers.

Practical Implications

To address the high turnover intention among Chinese female managers, both organisational and policy-level interventions are essential. At the organisational level, promoting equity in career advancement through transparent promotion criteria and ensuring gender-balanced

candidate pools can reduce perceived discrimination. Implementing unconscious bias training and anonymous systems for reporting harassment, along with bystander intervention and cultural sensitivity programs, fosters a more inclusive and respectful workplace environment. Additionally, retention-focused initiatives such as targeted sponsorship programs, flexible work arrangements, and family-supportive policies are crucial in supporting women's career continuity and satisfaction. On a broader scale, policy recommendations include mandating gender diversity disclosures in corporate reports, strengthening legal protections against workplace discrimination and harassment, and reforming parental leave systems to support dual-gender caregiving. Corporate governance reforms that embed gender equality into leadership evaluation metrics can further institutionalise accountability and drive systemic change.

Conclusion & Future Directions

This review highlights the significant impact of gender discrimination, particularly limited promotion opportunities and workplace harassment, on turnover intention among Chinese female managers. These factors primarily influence turnover intention by undermining job satisfaction. The unique cultural aspects of China, such as strong familial expectations and hierarchical organisational structures, exacerbate these dynamics, adding additional barriers for female managers. Addressing these issues requires organisations to move beyond surface-level diversity efforts and implement structural reforms that tackle the root causes of gender inequity.

Future research should focus on developing culturally grounded theories that take into account the specific challenges faced by female managers in China, using longitudinal, intersectional research designs. Identifying and understanding the complex interplay of factors influencing female managers' retention will be crucial. Ultimately, for organisations to retain talented female leaders, they must create environments where women's contributions are genuinely valued and rewarded, which is essential not only for equity but also for long-term organisational success in an increasingly diverse global market. Additionally, future studies should address current gaps in the literature, such as the over-reliance on Western-centric theories, the use of cross-sectional designs, and the neglect of intersectionality in research.

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