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Same, same but different? A comparative study of women's networking for career success in Germany and India

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Abstract
Networking is critical for career success. Unfortunately, women around the globe, particularly in Asia, face various barriers to networking that limit their career opportunities. This exploratory study draws on interviews with 60 career women in Germany and India to examine the networking barriers they face and the strategies they use to overcome them. Despite significant cultural and institutional differences between the two countries, our findings indicate that women in Germany and India encounter comparable barriers. However, German and Indian women use different response strategies to navigate these networking barriers. While German women tend to use indirect strategies, Indian women's strategies are marked by assertiveness and proactive efforts. For instance, by owning their networking journey, actively and collectively creating their own opportunities, defying gendered expectations, and resorting to their family support system, Indian women strive to build their own network or '*jaan-pehchaan*' within organisations. Although some networking strategies can be applicable and pragmatic in specific contexts, our study shows that some strategies can inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes, creating further barriers to women's career equality.

Keywords Gendered networks · Gender equality and equity · Women in the multinational organisation · India · Cross-cultural comparison · Qualitative research

Introduction

The underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions remains significant worldwide, particularly in Asia (World Economic Forum, 2024). Scholars and practitioners have been working on reducing the pertinent underrepresentation of women at senior levels. Among other interventions, such as mentoring (Dougherty

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et al., 2013) and childcare support (Gabriel et al., 2020), networking can be considered a proactive solution that can contribute to overcoming gender imparity in the management positions of organisations (Yu & Shea, 2023). Networks can increase individuals' access to jobs, enable the exchange of information and referrals, enhance reputation and influence, provide emotional support, protect against office politics, and facilitate faster promotion (Ibarra, 1993). However, instead of serving as a solution to gender disparity, networking has been influenced by gender inequality, further exacerbating this issue (Brands et al., 2022). Due to systemic inequalities in formal positions of men and women in organisations, the gendered professional settings and the inclination to interact with same-sex others, the composition and structure of men's and women's networks are different (Ibarra, 1992), which lead to unequal network returns (Woehler et al., 2021).

Prior research on women's networks and networking has focused largely on Western contexts, particularly the U.S. (e.g., Castilla, 2022; Ibarra, 1997). Yet, institutional, social, and cultural differences across countries can shape women's networking practices and their outcomes. Gender role beliefs, work-life norms, and career preferences are influenced by gender role socialisation and cultural values (Eagly & Wood, 1999), while careers unfold within broader macro-level ecosystems (Baruch, 2015; Kossek et al., 2017). These contextual factors underscore the need to examine women's networking within diverse settings.

Accordingly, our study explores and compares how women in different contexts experience networking challenges and navigate them to advance their careers. We selected Germany and India for our research due to their intriguing contexts. Both are ranked among the top five economies globally (World Bank, 2024) and have been led by notable female leaders, Indira Gandhi in India and Angela Merkel in Germany. Nevertheless, significant differences exist in their cultural norms, social expectations, and political histories, all of which affect women's career trajectories. India is characterised by strong gender differentiation (Javidan & House, 2001), where traditional roles depict women as homemakers and men as breadwinners (Budhwar et al., 2005). In contrast, gender roles in Germany are less rigid (Emrich et al., 2004). Moreover, India provides an interesting context for studying women's networking due to a strong emphasis on connectedness (Berger et al., 2020) and maintaining social and family networks (Pandya & Bhangaokar, 2023), which can positively influence women's networking and career outcomes. However, the focus on preserving family harmony often necessitates women to compromise their career aspirations, affecting networking opportunities. These contrasts and characteristics render India and Germany compelling for examining women's challenges and response strategies in networking for career success.

This study contributes to the gender diversity and women's career success literature in two major ways. First, we contribute to the existing literature on women's networking by unravelling the response strategies that women adopt to navigate these difficulties. We respond to the call by Lau et al. (2022) for a paradigm shift from describing the problems to identifying effective solutions. Second, by using a cross-cultural comparative lens to look at the complex dynamics in women's networking, we uncover the shared obstacles, potential solutions and notable differences in the experiences of women in Germany and India. Our study aims to enrich the literature

on women's networking by integrating and contrasting two distinct cultural perspectives from Europe and the Asia Pacific, thereby diversifying the field beyond its current emphasis on Western contexts (Horak & Suseno, 2023).

Literature review

Networks provide access to resources that support both job performance (e.g., information, advice, feedback) and career advancement (e.g., sponsorship, high-visibility assignments) (Woehler et al., 2021). Gender shapes the social norms, contexts, and relational dynamics that influence how networks are formed and utilised (Woehler et al., 2021). As a result, networking outcomes can differ significantly between men and women (Gremmen & Benschop, 2011).

Extant research documents gender disparities in the characteristics and benefits of networks for men and women (Brands et al., 2022). Women tend to have smaller networks of high-status women and fewer connections to influential, high-status men who can facilitate access to career-enhancing resources which ultimately leads to higher career success (Ibarra, 1992). Women's network ties are less helpful for getting promoted (Ibarra et al., 2010). Even when they are in advantageous network brokerage positions, their role is despised, and the benefits of their broker position are reduced (Brands & Kilduff, 2014). Moreover, when women have high-status network contacts, others may confer reduced status to them since having high-status instrumental ties can violate gender norms, others may see women with such ties as lacking communality (Yu & Shea, 2023).

There are different yet interconnected mechanisms that relate to the disparate network characteristics of men and women and uneven career outcomes of networking (Woehler et al., 2021). First, regarding the network structure and characteristics, women tend to form strong, emotionally supportive ties (Ibarra, 1992), whereas men cultivate weaker ties across diverse social circles and managerial levels, which are more beneficial for career success (Ibarra, 1997). As a result, women's ties often yield fewer career benefits compared to men's, whose ties offer more informal support (Ely et al., 2011). Moreover, individuals are more likely to associate with those with similar characteristics (Ibarra, 1992), and gender ties tend to foster stronger bonds and great resource exchange (Woehler et al., 2021). Since women are underrepresented in senior roles (Stainback et al., 2024), both men and women are more likely to build ties with men, who are more prevalent in influential positions and seen as more valuable contacts (Woehler et al., 2021).

Second, the inequality that women face in terms of network characteristics and networking outcomes may stem from gender bias and stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are shared beliefs about behaviours and characteristics that are assumed or taken to be typical of, and appropriate for, women versus men (Ellemers, 2018). Social role theory posits that the traditional differences in social, familial, and occupational roles give rise to distinct societal expectations for men and women (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Traditionally, men are expected to exhibit 'agentic' traits associated with leadership and assertiveness, such as confidence, competitiveness, and a drive for achievement. In contrast, women are expected to embody 'communal' traits associated with nurtur-

ing and care, such as empathy, kindness, and a willingness to help others (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Although these stereotypes are based on past roles, they are still prevalent today, creating expectations about how men and women should behave (Heilman, 2012; Ridgeway et al., 2022). Individuals are inclined to internalise and conform to societal gender role expectations, which leads them to have a sense of how they and others should behave as members of a particular gender category (Ridgeway, 2001). In professional contexts, gender role expectations are more damaging to women than men because the attributes needed to succeed in professional contexts are associated with men (Kossek et al., 2017). The agentic traits associated with men and the beliefs about men's competence and career orientation boost men's confidence in approaching influential contacts (Smith et al., 2012). To avoid backlash, women may display less confidence and assertiveness than men (Rudman & Phelan, 2008), reducing their motivation to build connections with those in higher-status positions (Woehler et al., 2021). Status characteristics theory explains this gender status hierarchy by showing how stereotypes persist in the workplace, where women are typically seen as not having the competencies needed for high-status roles (Berger, Cohen & Zelditch, 1972, Berger, Fisek, Norman & Zelditch, 1977; Terpstra-Tong et al., 2025).

Third, related to gender roles, women's tendency to be reluctant to engage in instrumental activities may also be a contributing factor to the differences between their networks and those of men (Greguletz et al., 2019). Women may worry that these actions will be perceived as inauthentic and overly instrumental (Ely et al., 2011). This is because women are not typically expected to be agentic in their professional lives, which can lead them to hesitate in using their networks to advance their careers (Hewlett et al., 2010).

Fourth, gender differences in both the structure and advantages of networks for men and women can also be partly explained by work-family conflict theory, which highlights the competing demands of work and family roles (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This conflict disproportionately affects women, who more often engage in family caregiving responsibilities (Kossek et al., 2017). Networking events outside regular work hours conflict with family and household responsibilities (Kossek et al., 2017), and even the anticipation of such conflicts can discourage women from participating in career networks and pursuing their careers (Greguletz et al., 2019).

These explanatory mechanisms do not operate independently of one another. The interaction of these mechanisms shapes women's experiences and, if better understood, can be improved through interventions. However, we know little about how these mechanisms manifest in non-Western contexts, as most existing research is based on Western settings. Theorising about women's networking and careers in non-Western contexts, particularly in Asian settings, is limited (Georgiadou & Syed, 2021; Horak & Suseno, 2023). However, cross-cultural research is crucial, as effective networking can accelerate women's advancement to senior roles, where they remain underrepresented globally. Culture significantly shapes how individuals navigate challenges by influencing what is seen as a barrier, how its causes are understood, which solutions are considered viable, and what responses are deemed culturally appropriate (Kuo, 2011). Against this backdrop, we examine women's networking experiences through a cross-cultural comparison of India (an Asian context) and Germany (a Western context). Our study is guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do women in Germany and India experience networking challenges?
Research Question 2: How do women in Germany and India navigate these networking challenges?

Methods

Research design

Given the limited knowledge of women's methods of overcoming networking challenges, especially in non-Western settings, we conducted an exploratory study. Qualitative methods enable researchers to gain insights into individuals' personal thoughts, emotions and experiences while allowing the flexibility to investigate emerging themes and topics (Myers, 2013). The qualitative approach enabled us to take an actor-centred perspective, enabling a nuanced understanding of women's subjective, contingent and dynamic networking experiences (Reuber & Fischer, 2022).

Sample and context

In line with qualitative studies, we pursued purposeful sampling (Coyne, 1997). We interviewed women who work at hierarchical levels where there is at least one management level above and one level below in our sample for the following reasons. First, individuals who work in middle-level and upper-level managerial positions invest more time in building and maintaining networks compared to employees in entry-level positions (Michael & Yukl, 1993). Second, women at these levels will likely have gained substantial experience in their career journey. Our interviewees worked for companies in a wide variety of industries, such as pharmaceuticals, energy, information technology, tourism, education, forestry, and manufacturing. Tables 1 and 2 provide socio-demographic information on the interviewees in Germany and India, respectively. In the following, we provide contextual information about India and Germany.

India's gender equality landscape

India provides a rich context for our study. India is a developing economy and already the world's fifth-largest (IMF, 2024), with a growing pool of working-age individuals (Seong et al., 2023). India has undergone significant transformations in terms of gender equality. Ongoing economic growth since the early 1990s (Fletcher et al., 2017), heightened individualism (Santos et al., 2017), improved access to tertiary education, and changing profiles of women (Ghadially, 2007) have notably shifted attitudes toward women, especially in urban areas, in India (Pandya & Bhangaokar, 2023). India was the first developing nation to adopt affirmative action through the implementation of a gender quota for board directors (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). India has seen the emergence of globally recognised female leaders, including Leena Nair, the CEO of Chanel; Revathi Advaithi, the

Table 1 Socio-demographic characteristics of the German interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Marital status	Children	Position	Industry	Years in position	Total work experience
GER1	48	Married	Y	Team Manager	Pharmaceuticals	3	20
GER2	43	Married	Y	Head of Travel Management	Tourism	8	20
GER3	55	Single	N	Head of Customer Service	Building Materials	4	28
GER4	37	Married	Y	Compliance Division Manager	Banking	3,5	11
GER5	42	Engaged	Y	Operations Division Manager	Banking	3	14
GER6	54	Married	Y	Head of Human Resources	Banking	9	26
GER7	30	Single	N	Product Development Manager	Food	1,5	5
GER8	49	Married	Y	Head of Application Development	Chemical	7	26
GER9	44	Married	Y	Head of Operations	Biotechnology	2	14
GER10	44	Divorced	Y	Marketing Manager	Biotechnology	1	14
GER11	44	Married	Y	Director of Sales	Print and Media	< 1	20
GER12	42	Married	N/A	Director of Human Resources	Print and Media	5	16
GER13	31	Married	N	Head of Product Development	Pharmaceuticals	1	7
GER14	43	Married	Y	Head of HR Business Partner	Medical technology	1	17
GER15	42	Married	Y	Head of Exhibition Projects	Automation	< 1	20
GER16	35	Married	N/A	Business Process Manager	Automation	< 1	11
GER17	42	Single	N	Group leader	Technology	1,5	9

Table 1 (continued)

Interviewee	Age	Marital status	Children	Position	Industry	Years in position	Total work experience
GER18	41	Married	N	Head of Financial Management	Forestry	2	14
GER19	35	Single	N	HR Controller	Metal and Defence	4	10
GER20	44	Married	N/A	Senior Human Resource Expert	Automation	<1	16
GER21	41	Married	N/A	Project Manager	Automation	1,5	26
GER22	41	Married	Y	Regional Advertising Manager	Retail	2	24
GER23	36	Single	N	Business Development Executive	IT	3	11
GER24	41	Single	N	Head of Procurement	IT	2	18
GER25	42	Married	N/A	Material Qualification Manager	Pharmaceuticals	3	14
GER26	33	Single	N	Production Planning Manager	Automotive	1,5	5
GER27	35	Single	N	Senior Project Manager	Energy	2,5	9
GER28	38	Divorced	Y	Office Manager	Oil and Energy	3	12
GER29	50	Married	Y	HR Business Partner	Energy	22	31
GER30	30	Married	Y	Process Area Coordinator	Automotive	7	7

CEO of Flex; and Indra Nooyi, the former CEO of PepsiCo, who grew up and were educated in India before becoming internationally renowned female leaders.

Despite the significant advancements compared to the past, progress in enhancing the status of women in the workplace and their representation in upper echelons is stagnating in India (Agrawal & Singh, 2022). According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, India ranked 129th of 146 countries in terms of overall indices and 142nd in terms of economic participation and opportunity (World Economic Forum, 2024). While 43% of the tertiary educated graduates are women, the percentage drops to 25% among entry-level professionals in India (Woetzel et al., 2018), 17% on board, and 6% in C-level roles (Kersley et al., 2021). This is

Table 2 Socio-demographic characteristics of the Indian interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Marital status	Children	Position	Industry	Years in position	Total work experience
IND1	29	Married	Y	Tender Engineer	Energy	1	7
IND2	38	Married	Y	Enterprise Solution Specialist	IT Consulting	14	14
IND3	33	Married	Y	Sales Manager	Financial Services	4	10
IND4	35	Divorced	Y	IT Services Delivery Manager	IT Services	5	15
IND5	N/A	Divorced	Y	Consultant	Education	5	15
IND6	36	Married	Y	Sales Manager	Security	3	12
IND7	30	Married	Y	General Accounting Analyst	IT Services	4,5	6
IND8	37	Divorced	Y	Finance Analyst	IT Services	6	15
IND9	43	Married	Y	Senior Director	IT Services	6	18
IND10	30	Single	Y	Software Test Engineer	IT Services	5	7
IND11	38	Married	Y	Team Lead	Financial Services	4	10
IND12	38	Divorced	N	HR Manager	HR Services	5	10
IND13	48	Married	Y	Asst. HR Manager	Financial Services	13	30
IND14	40	Married	Y	Senior Technical Writer	IT Services	5	15
IND15	39	Married	Y	Business Development Manager	Education	4	19
IND16	32	Married	Y	Sales Manager	HR Services	2	10
IND17	35	Married	Y	R&D Manager	IT Services	3	10
IND18	31	Married	Y	IT Software Tester	IT Services	1	7
IND19	33	Married	Y	IT Manager	Banking	2	12
IND20	35	Married	Y	Product Manager	Pharmaceuticals	4	10
IND21	37	Married	Y	IT Consultant	IT Services	5	16

Table 2 (continued)

Interviewee	Age	Marital status	Children	Position	Industry	Years in position	Total work experience
IND22	33	Married	Y	Senior Financial Analyst	IT Services	4	11
IND23	36	Married	Y	Data Scientist	E-commerce	7	10
IND24	35	Married	Y	Finance Associate	E-commerce	3	8
IND25	38	Married	Y	HR Manager	Manufacturing	4	10
IND26	37	Married	Y	Asst. Finance Manager	Education	2	8
IND27	40	Married	Y	Product Manager	Manufacturing	6	15
IND28	35	Married	Y	IT Software Developer	IT Services	4	10
IND29	37	Married	Y	Finance Officer	Construction	3	12
IND30	35	Divorced	Y	R&D Manager	IT Services	4	11

unfortunate, as promoting gender equality is essential not only from individual, moral, and social viewpoints but also for economic growth (Woetzel, 2018).

India is distinguished by its immense diversity in terms of languages, dialects, and religion, as well as by its highly complex social structure with over 3000 castes (Budhwar & Bhatnagar, 2009). Despite substantial diversity within the country, India also exhibits some common cultural traits that are evident across the nation, such as a collectivist mindset, reverence for authority and status, prioritising personal relationships, a desire for in-group belonging, and an emphasis on family and context (Berger et al., 2020). A prevailing norm in India is that most girls are raised to be submissive, with roles and capabilities viewed as distinct from those of boys (Budhwar et al., 2005). This socialisation, which begins at an early age, affects women's lives in all areas, particularly in their participation in the economy and professional life. The role of women in Indian society is associated with being a mother and nurturer; therefore, women are expected to dedicate themselves to their families and homes, while men are viewed as the primary breadwinners (Budhwar et al., 2005; Sharma & Kaur, 2019). Rigid gender roles restrict women from employment (Gundewar & Chin, 2020), and those who are employed face a conflict between family and career demands. This has implications for women's networking and its outcomes in India, where connections and connectedness are critical (Berger et al., 2020).

Indian perspectives on networking The key feature distinguishing the Indian business and social system from Western practices is the emphasis on informal, in-person social and cultural exchanges in business and personal relationships (McCarthy et al., 2012). For this reason, the meanings, perceptions, and connotations associated

with networking are likely to differ between the Indian and Western contexts, such as Germany. The strong emphasis on informal, in-person social and cultural exchanges is rooted in India's ancient practice of '*jaan-pehchaan'* (Klarin & Sharmelly, 2024). The Hindi concept of *jaan-pehchaan* translates to "who you know" and highlights the significance of "familiarity" and "the right connections" for achieving one's goals (Zhu et al., 2005, p. 71). However, the concept extends beyond merely knowing someone; it is a unique practice of forming strong, trust-based social bonds (Berger et al., 2020). These bonds are gradually built through shared experiences and mutual understanding, often evolving into deep, supportive relationships over time (Berger et al., 2020). *Jaan-pehchaan* demonstrates how favours are exchanged and managed in India and carries an emotional connotation of a long-term bond, similar to Chinese *guanxi* (Zhu et al., 2005). Even with institutional reforms, modernisation, and efforts to reduce bureaucracy in India, *jaan-pehchaan* continues to hold strong relevance largely because of the country's deeply rooted collectivist culture (Klarin & Sharmelly, 2024).

Jaan-pehchaan can be a double-edged sword for women in India, presenting unique opportunities while also creating some challenges. In India, where personal relationships are highly valued (Berger et al., 2020), women can cultivate meaningful connections through *jaan-pehchaan*. These connections may help Indian women challenge biases, access career resources, and potentially serve as sponsors for women's careers. On the other hand, *jaan-pehchaan* can further aggravate networking barriers women face in the professional arena by perpetuating exclusion. Owing to greater social freedom (Jayachandran, 2015), men generally have wider social networks, as they can more easily access informal events such as after-work social gatherings. As a result, they frequently dominate influential social circles where *jaan-pehchaan* is established, leading to the exclusion of women. Consequently, women are less likely to benefit from informal networks driven by *jaan-pehchaan*, irrespective of their competencies, expertise, or skills.

Germany's gender equality landscape

Germany is the third-largest economy worldwide and the largest economy in the European Union (IMF, 2024). Germany ranks 7th out of 146 countries in terms of gender equality in economic participation and opportunities, access to education, health and survival, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2024). One of the most important factors enabling Germany to score high in this ranking is the laws enacted and enforced to provide equal rights to women. According to the Women, Business and the Law Index, which measures the laws that influence women's economic opportunity across 190 economies, Germany is one of 14 economies that provide women with equal legal rights to men across all measured aspects (World Bank, 2024).

German culture emphasizes personal growth, autonomy, individual rights, and self-sufficiency, similar to other individualistic cultures (Schwartz, 1994). Germany reflects stronger gender egalitarian values compared to India, meaning it assigns less differentiated roles to women and men (Emrich et al., 2004). However, gender ste-

reotyping remains prevalent in Germany, where men are still typically seen as more agentic and less communal than women (Steinmetz et al., 2014).

Germany has one of the highest female employment rates in the EU at 77.4%, compared to the EU average of 70.8% in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025) . However, the rise in women's employment is largely due to the increase in part-time work; nearly half of the women (49.8%) work part-time, while the rate for men is below 13% (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2024). Furthermore, women in Germany are predominantly employed in 'gender-typical' (i.e., women-typed) occupations where gender accounts for a significant majority, typically exceeding two-thirds of the workforce (Ahrens & Scheele, 2022). Women-dominated occupations rarely provide promising career possibilities, have low prestige, and offer limited income prospects (Hausmann et al., 2015). This is reflected in the ongoing disparities in the representation of women and men in prestigious decision-making positions in Germany. Women account for only 18% of executive board positions, and only nine women hold CEO positions at the top 200 companies in Germany (Sondergeld et al., 2024). In short, despite Germany's relatively progressive views on women, with less traditional values and norms, and its efforts to promote gender equality through work and family policies, women in Germany still face challenges in their career paths.

German perspectives on networking Private and professional networks are commonly used for career advancement in Germany (Krug, 2013). In German, there is a term called *"Vitamin B"* that colloquially refers to obtaining career advantages, such as securing a job, through one's network. The "B" represents the German word "Beziehungen," meaning connections, relationships, and contacts. However, using *"Vitamin B"* often carries negative connotations (Wolff, 2012). One reason could be that German culture is characterized by a high-performance orientation (Brodbeck et al., 2002), which emphasizes merit, measurable results, and achievement over individuals and relationships (Javidan, 2004). In cultures focused on high performance, success is frequently linked to individual effort and competence (Brodbeck et al., 2002). Therefore, the use of networks (or "*Vitamin B"*) for one's personal career gains may lead to feelings of moral discomfort (Kubbe, 2018) and dependency.

The different ways networking is perceived in India versus Germany provides an interesting contrast for examining women's experiences with networking challenges.

Data collection

To better understand the challenges and strategies from the perspective of those who have experienced them, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Semi-structured interviews enabled us to compare across answers and to stay flexible to adapt to the natural flow of each interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Shortly after each interview, we started to analyse the data. This provided us with two main advantages. First, the concurrent data collection and data analysis helped us to understand whether we had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Second, the interviews we conducted informed

our interview guidelines, thereby we refined our interview guidelines based on the input we had in our preliminary interviews.

Our interview guidelines included questions to elicit women's career journeys, explore their views on networking, investigate the barriers they face when forming and benefiting from networks, and the strategies they use to overcome or avoid these barriers. Before conducting the interviews, we informed the interviewees about our research objectives and ethical protocol and ensured the interviewees of anonymity.

We started the interviews with background questions about the interviewees' demographic characteristics, followed by questions about their views on networking and their networks. We then inquired about their experiences with establishing and utilising networks. We were interested in understanding whether they face any challenges in establishing and utilising networks, and if so, what these challenges are and how they avoid or overcome them. We asked our interviewees to recall specific incidents where they actively used their networks for their careers to better understand their feelings, perceptions, and experiences regarding what they find challenging and how they navigate through these challenges.

Our interviews ranged in length from 30 min to 2.5 h, with an average duration of 75 min. Although we asked the same questions to each interviewee to ensure comparability, with minor adjustments made as necessary, the interview durations varied. This variation primarily reflects the fundamental issue of how much the participant is willing to discuss the topic or the intricacy of the experiences they choose to share (Irvine, 2011). Some interviews were conducted face-to-face, while others were conducted through video conferences, depending on the interviewees' convenience and preference. The data collection period was from April 2022 to February 2023. With the prior consent of our interviewees, we tape-recorded the interviews and then transcribed them verbatim. The interviews with Indian respondents were conducted in English or Malayalam, an official language in South India, upon the request of some participants from Kerala, as they felt more comfortable expressing their thoughts in their mother tongue. As the second author is fluent in Malayalam, she was able to accommodate this request. The interviews with German respondents were conducted in German. Conducting interviews with interviewees in their native languages facilitated openness and cooperation of the interviewees as both the interviewees and the interviewers have linguistic equality (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004). To enable comparisons, we translated all interviews that were not in English into English. During and after translating the interview data into English, preserving the nuances and subtleties of the interviewees' words was challenging, similar to other cross-cultural qualitative studies (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004). The researchers and research assistants helped with translation and interpretation to find the appropriate term in English. We also checked the original languages in case of questions/uncertainties during data analysis.

Data analysis

Our data analysis was guided by the step-by-step approach recommended by Gioia et al. (2013). We started our data analysis by generating first-cycle codes while continuing to collect data (Saldaña, 2013). We followed an iterative process of first-order

analysis, refining our interview guidelines, reviewing relevant literature, and conducting further interviews. This allowed us to adapt our interview guidelines based on emerging insights and a deeper understanding of what is truly important, which in turn facilitated a more nuanced perspective on women's genuine experiences.

Following the suggestions by Gioia et al. (2013) before and during the data analysis, we did not consult the relevant literature exhaustively and thoroughly; instead, we reviewed the relevant studies only to understand whether we revealed any new insight and whether we reached theoretical saturation or not. In this way, we could maintain our inductive approach. Along with descriptive, process and values coding, we used in vivo coding (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). For instance, the quote "When I need something within my network, I prefer not to ask for it directly. Instead, I would prepare something interesting for others, creating win-win situations" was labelled "creating win-win situations". If a respondent's statement addressed various aspects, we added multiple codes to that statement.

As the study proceeded, we began searching for similarities and differences among the emerged codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Considering the first-order codes we assigned, we compared our participants' responses in the German dataset with each other and checked whether any pattern had emerged. We did the same for our participants' responses in the Indian dataset. Using the emerged patterns, we grouped the first-order codes into second-order categories, which are more abstract and comprehensive according to their relevance.

Finally, we generated two integrated data structures, one for challenges and one for women's response strategies, that combined our first-order codes and second-order categories into overarching dimensions. For instance, we associated "refraining from experiencing benevolent patronising" and "negative perception of networking" with the second-order category "taking a passive approach to networking."

We compared the statements of women in Germany with those in India. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we identified similarities in the networking challenges faced by women in both countries and differences in their response strategies.

Findings

The first subsection addresses the challenges women in Germany and India face in developing, maintaining, and mobilising their networks (RQ1). The second subsection (RQ2) explores women's attitudes toward these challenges and the strategies they use to navigate them, presented separately for each country.

Networking challenges

We identified that the networking challenges faced by German and Indian women are thematically similar. As seen in Figs. 1 and 2, the second-order categories "being excluded from powerful networks", "taking a passive approach to networking", "internalising gender social roles", and "facing work-family

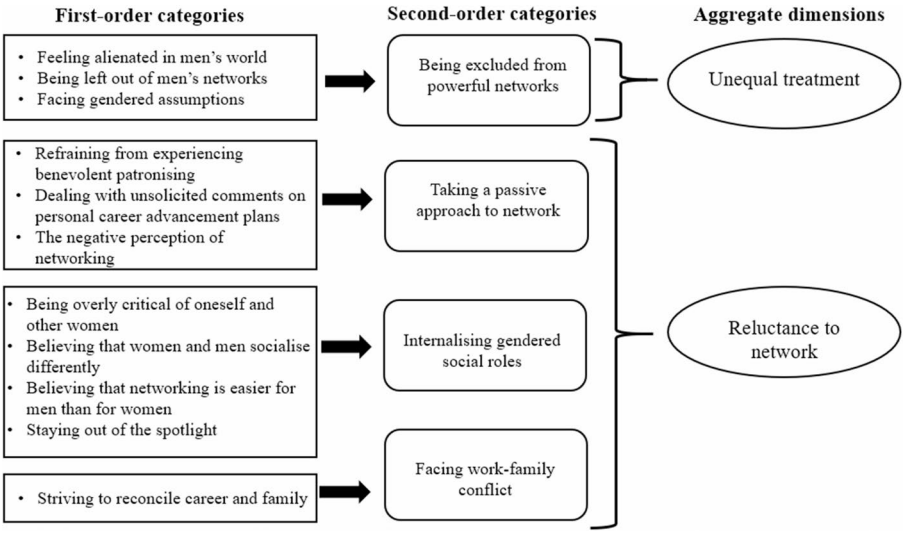

Fig. 1 Women's experiences with networking challenges in Germany

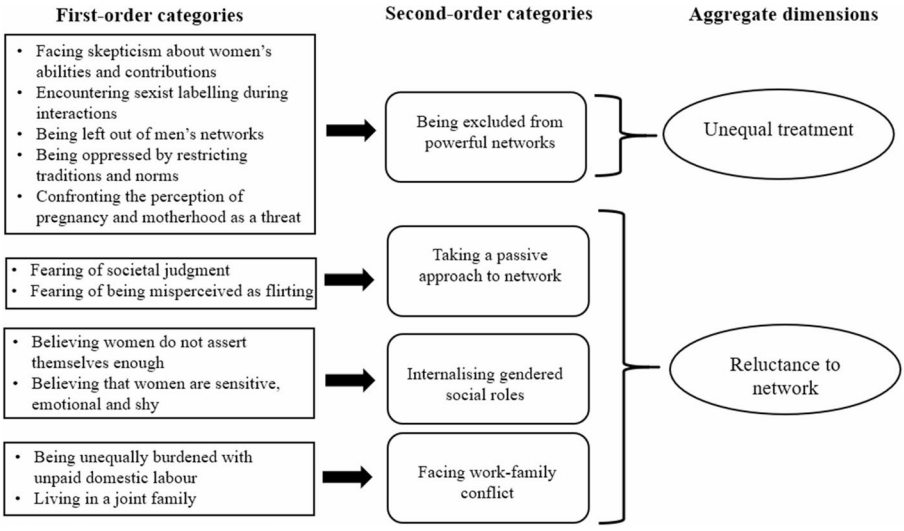

Fig. 2 Women's experiences with networking challenges in India

conflict" summarise the challenges reported by both Indian and German women. However, the underlying reasons (first-order codes) differ.

In both countries, women reported exclusion from influential networks, confirming prior research (e.g., Greguletz et al., 2019). For instance, a manager from an IT services firm in India (IND4) noted that her male colleagues often interact informally with the CEO and senior managers, such as through cricket. Similarly, most German

respondents felt alienated from men's networks for not being invited to informal gatherings by their male colleagues across all levels, including board members.

Taking a passive approach to networking poses another challenge to women's effective networking in both countries. While the challenge appears to be the same, the underlying reasons that contribute to it differ. We identified that Indian women's passivity towards networking is mainly because of their fear of societal judgment and being misperceived while interacting with men. Women in India think that their efforts to network with men may be misconstrued by others as them "flirting". An Indian consultant explains how women networking with men can result in unfounded rumours and how it affects her networking efforts:

> *"We come from a culture where a man and woman… if they go for a coffee for two days, and on the third day, it is a rumour. I still face it. Nothing has changed. When I hear these rumours in the office, I wonder, have we not gone from school or college to offices? These are the same rumours I heard in schools, and I am hearing today. What has changed in my life here? We come from the cultural rack, and there is this issue that you know of a women's network. This restricted me from entering a network, and I questioned myself before I started networking, especially with men." IND5.*

The fear of being misperceived is linked to the fear of societal judgment. An Indian product manager attributed the passive approach of some women to networking to the following reasons:

> *"In some Indian communities, there may be a stigma attached to mixing work and social life, especially for married women. Networking events or professional gatherings may be viewed with suspicion or disapproval, particularly if they involve interactions with male colleagues or strangers." IND27.*

In contrast, German women's passivity towards networking arises from two other main factors. First, many women avoid interacting with powerful men due to their patronising behaviours (Hideg & Shen, 2019). Second, the negative image of networking hinders effective networking (Greguletz et al., 2019). This challenge stems from the negative perceptions that our interviewees and others have about networking.

Internalised gender roles emerge as another central theme of our analysis of Indian and German women. Some of our Indian respondents attributed the gender differences in network returns to women's shyness and being emotional instead of assertive. Interestingly, Indian women raised this issue as a problem that other Indian women face, but not as their own problem. We grouped this under internalising gender social roles because some of our Indian respondents ascribed women's disadvantaged position to women's reservedness and not engaging in self-promotion, which aligns with the gender social roles. German women perceived themselves as modest or overly self-critical.

> *"In between [during a networking event] I sometimes thought "Oh God, I'm the mum here". No, not the mum. But it's like I realize I'm just one of the older*

people and it's passed me by a bit. […] I have my difficulties to give my input without being asked. […] Maybe that's why I think to myself, "What should I contribute?", that I feel too unimportant. That's a feeling, but that's also okay." GER8.

Finally, work-family conflict emerged as a central theme for both Indian and German women, aligning with previous research (e.g., Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, 2001). In India, norms of filial piety and conservative gender roles hinder women's networking for career success. Indian women often live with parents or in-laws who uphold traditional norms, with mothers-in-law frequently exerting significant influence (Varma et al., 2006). Cultural expectations compel women to adhere to their in-laws' rules, imposing traditional roles of "housemaker" instead of "breadwinner" (Naqvi, 2011). These limitations force them to forgo career activities like networking, as reflected in our findings.

"You know, in-laws' will always want you in the front to manage everything, and so cooking or whatever it is, yes. So, it is a real challenge for me to get back home by 6.30 or 7 o'clock. […] if I'm late at home, also, I get warning from my in-laws. And if the job is not completed in the office, I had to stay back late in the office, that was a real challenge. So, managing was really difficult. But still, I had to do that and have done it." IND6.

Likewise, in Germany, women frequently faced a conflict between attending after-work networking events and spending time at home with their children. Despite recognising the conflict as a significant inhibitor of networking, German women emphasised that prioritising their families was a deliberate choice.

Response strategies

While we identified similar networking challenges in Germany and India, we found significant differences in how women respond to them across the two countries. To provide deeper insights, we present the findings for each country separately in the following.

German women's response strategies to navigate challenges

Our findings revealed that women in Germany have five different overarching response strategies to navigate networking challenges. Figure 3 provides an overview of these five overarching response strategies and a further breakdown of more specific strategies.

Becoming a sought-after network partner oneself Some German respondents preferred not to pursue networking opportunities actively. Instead, they focused on enhancing their competencies, performance, and expertise, positioning themselves as "attractive network partners" others would approach. This indirect strategy helped them counteract barriers, such as alienation, exclusion, and gender-based assump-

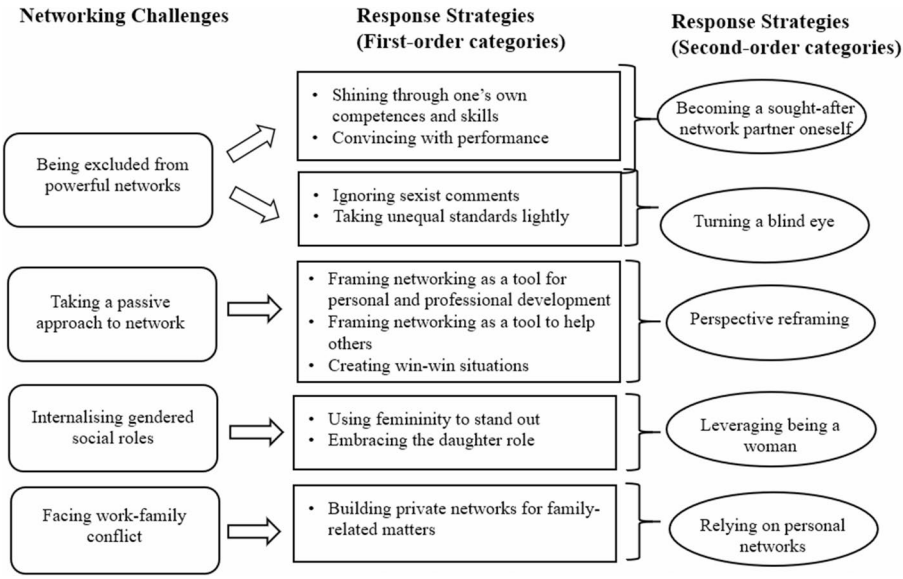

Fig. 3 Women's response strategies in Germany

tions often associated with networking. As shown in Fig. 3, the strategy comprises two elements. The first, which we termed "shining through one's own competencies and skills," is illustrated by the response of a head of marketing at a biotechnology company:

> *"I've always worked with people who have seen a lot of potential in me and have actually always pushed me to the next level as a result. So, the internal changes [promotions] I made here [within the company] did not come from my initiative. I was always asked whether I could imagine doing this and that [e.g., being promoted to a management level]." GER10.*

The second element, "convincing with performance," is illustrated by a quotation from an operations division manager at a bank, who emphasised the importance of strong job performance as a foundation for leveraging her network for career success.

> *"When I moved from the strategic area to the first leadership role at that time, I met with the divisional manager at that time… I knew him from a project, but what is important is that I always convinced with performance. That is, I got his attention. I did something, I was an employee at the time, he was already the head of the department from another area and he thought I was good. […] So, in this respect, it wasn't network support in the sense of vitamin B [in German colloquial language, vitamin B refers to leveraging personal contacts for one's benefit] or meeting at an event, but he was convinced of me, he saw potential in me and then supported me in my career." GER5.*

Turning a blind eye Some women cope with unequal treatment and sexist behaviour by choosing to downplay or overlook it. Several interviewees indicated that they deliberately interpret sexist behaviour in a more benign manner or attempt to disregard it altogether. For example, the head of human resources at a bank stated that being a woman may offer certain networking advantages, provided that one does not place excessive emphasis on the differing standards applied to men and women.

> *"When I was a lawyer, I was the only woman on my floor. It's a basic prerequisite to be professionally good, not necessarily for men to be able to play, but for women it is. And if you take that a little lightly, then it can very well be an advantage." GER6.*

She further explained that she had intentionally chosen to interpret certain remarks, perceived by other women as sexist, as harmless flirting, in order to avoid being disturbed by them.

> *"I have always used this in such a way that as a woman I was not annoying or unpleasant, but I always tried to make my colleagues happy to work with me. That was always my theme and I was relatively relaxed when I heard a stupid remark. Other women got upset straight away and thought it was sexist. I took it as flirting and somehow went along with it a bit. I don't think you lose anything in that. And if you can manage that somehow." GER6.*

The sexist comments and behaviour are not always directed towards women themselves, but towards women in general, which equally harms women. A compliance division manager of a bank explained her attitude towards sexist comments she has witnessed as follows:

> *"In board meetings, I have seen board members talking about wanting new offices where they have beautiful women. And that's really bitter, well, and this board meeting was last year. So, it's not like I'm saying that was 10 years ago, and unfortunately that's the bitter truth. […] in the board meeting when they talked about beautiful women, I thought: "I did not hear that". I said that out loud, but I didn't say anything against it and then the other CEO laughed and said "Yes, that was politically incorrect"." GER4.*

Perspective reframing Our second identified barrier was passivity towards networking, stemming from a negative perception of it and a reluctance to experience patronising behaviour. We found that women in Germany strive to reframe networking to tackle the potential negative perceptions that it may evoke. These framings are mostly for themselves to be able to benefit from their networks guilt-free (Casciaro et al., 2014). More specifically, we found that some of our respondents frame networking as a personal and professional development tool, while some frame networking as a tool for helping others. Furthermore, women emphasised that they endeavour to be as transparent as possible about their intentions when building new contacts and benefiting from their networks.

Second, 'creating win-win situations' has emerged as a common strategy among German women to navigate the negative perception of networking. Women strive to show (potential) network partners that networking with them would result in a win-win situation for both parties. A business development executive of an information technology company articulated her strategy as follows:

> *"[…] the optimal approach when seeking assistance from my networks is to frame it from an opportunity perspective. […] When I need something within my network, I prefer not to directly ask for it (laughing). Instead, I would prepare something interesting for others, creating win-win situations." GER23.*

Showing that networking will result in a win-win situation for every party involved, women can justify why they engage in networking activities (Casciaro et al., 2014), such as being beneficial to the other party while demonstrating clearly what they can offer to their potential network partners who may be sceptical of their competence or contribution. The following quotation by a senior human resource expert shows that creating win-win situations also helps her feel comfortable using networks because it benefits the company or the other party.

> *"I felt fine about it [using her network] because if I see that something can potentially benefit both the company and me, I am comfortable with it. If it were solely for my benefit, I might have had some doubts, but if I saw it as a win-win situation, and maybe even a win-win-win involving the other person, I had no issues reaching out to people." GER20.*

Leveraging being a woman To counteract the reluctance to network, often shaped by internalised gender roles, some respondents expressed that they have been using their womanhood to their advantage. While some respondents increased their workplace visibility by adopting a feminine look to facilitate networking, others felt that simply being a woman in a male-dominated environment made them appear "unique and exotic," which they saw as an advantage for being remembered.

> *"[…] I was under 30, you know what I mean, a young woman and blonde woman and umm, sporty woman and so on and being a lawyer that I think has, so has brought me a lot. And I'm someone, I don´t know, I've got my lipstick on, and oh no idea. (laughing) Just a little bit, you know, fancy, like you do in the lawyer's office. You used to come to the office in costume. That was the dress code. And when I started, costumes with skirts and booties every day. I think that helps. And I think that was a networking facilitator for me." GER12.*

The second way we identified to leverage being a woman is by "embracing the daughter role." The manager of a bank explained how she finds being a woman advantageous for getting help from experienced male managers in her network for her career. She associated this to the "manager-father" role, providing advantages she believed she would not have received if she were a man, hence leveraging her being a woman:

"There were male managers who were much older than me who supported me, almost like a manager-father role. That will probably happen less to a young male employee in that form, because I think that they were really, well, they were all very mature men, very experienced managers, who really saw the potential: "Okay, I have to support her so that she can develop". That, as I said, will probably be much more difficult with a male employee." GER5.

Relying on a personal network Lastly, as we covered in the previous subsection, one of the major challenges women face in networking is reconciling family and work. Most respondents stated that building a private network to rely on regarding this challenge is crucial. This emphasises the importance of networking in overcoming the challenges associated with it.

"[…] a personal network, especially when it comes to family and career, is very important. Because at the latest when you work while having children, you know how important your personal network is. Because you can't rely on any institutions and other things, you need a network to rely on." GER8.

Indian women's response strategies to navigate challenges

As women in India encounter deep-rooted structural, cultural and systemic barriers in networking, they seek ways to establish and utilise networks by (1) owning their networking journey, (2) actively creating their own opportunities, (3) defying the gendered expectations and (4) resorting to their family support system. Figure 4 provides

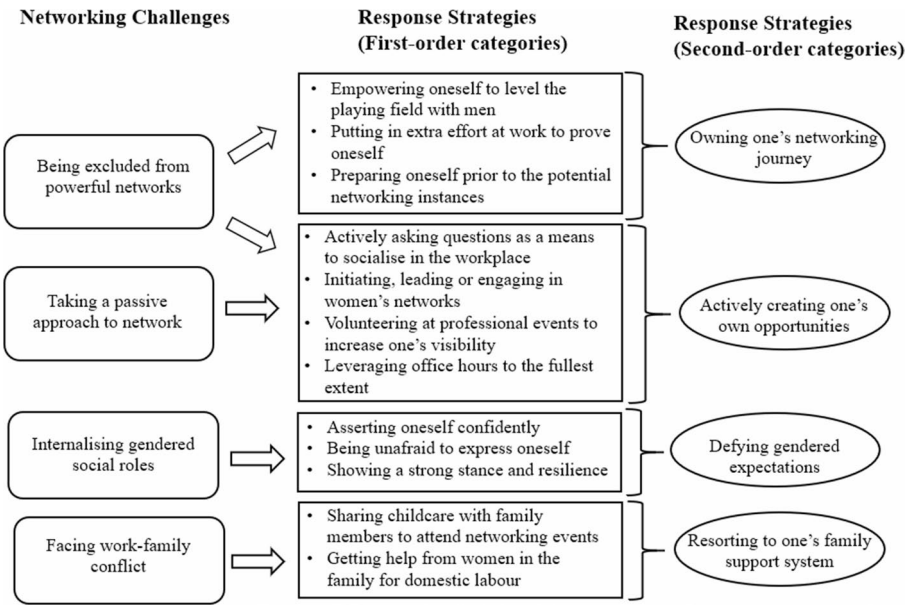

Fig. 4 Women's response strategies in India

an overview of these four overarching response strategies and a further breakdown of more specific strategies.

Owning one's networking journey The first overarching response strategy consists of three strategies (see Fig. 4), which enable Indian women to own their networking journey to withstand the challenges they face in networking. First, respondents emphasised the importance of equipping themselves to effectively engage in networking, especially in male-dominated professional settings where they face exclusion from powerful networks. Multiple respondents expressed that they invested time enhancing their networking and communication skills by attending workshops and reading self-help books. For instance, a senior director at a consulting company expressed her perception of how she could articulate her position and put forth her arguments:

> *"If I want to put forward my point on the table, I need to improve my communication, or indeed to improve my networking, or I need to improve my presence, I need to improve how I showcase myself. This is what I have done in the past." IND9.*

Second, to tackle the scepticism about their abilities and contributions, career-oriented women in India perceive that they need to put in extra effort at work to prove themselves. An engineer narrated:

> *"You should be good at your work so that no one can challenge you. I would say if there is a guy who is an 80% performer well then, I should perform 100%. That's it. I mean we need to put extra effort, because as women we are facing challenges. This is very clear. Why I am saying 100% is that we have to be the best. That's how it works." IND1.*

Third, our respondents reported making preparations prior to networking to mitigate the risk of not being taken seriously and to avoid potentially uncomfortable situations. Some of our respondents stated that they try to "create a base" (IND12), i.e., to find common ground with potential network partners before they approach them. Similarly, other respondents explained that before they attended a networking event, they conducted research about attendees, speakers, or organisations involved. This was a useful strategy for them to feel confident.

Actively creating one's own networking opportunities One of the most common themes that emerged from the Indian women's responses is that they are proactive in creating their own networking opportunities. First, numerous respondents described that they actively ask questions as a means of conversation starters. An engineer explained this as follows:

> *"If I am in a call, or in a meeting, if somebody is talking about something which I do not know about. I just go and ask, 'this is what we were talking about, I*

didn't understand, can you explain to me?' It is a very good way to reach. If the person is reluctant, it's okay. But this is my way of going up." IND1.

An IT manager of a bank asked for feedback from individuals across all levels of the hierarchy as her networking strategy:

"Whenever I have some time, I interact with people a lot, not only on the career aspects, but on a lot of things… This is one small strategy, which I follow… I just ask feedback from all the kinds of people that I am interacting with. I collect feedback in a very friendly manner." IND19.

Second, the majority of our respondents indicated that they participate in women-only networks as a response strategy to being excluded from men's networks. For instance, a sales manager of a security company expressed that she connects well with other women, which increased her motivation to support other women:

"I network particularly with women. We have about 12 or 13 ladies in my company. I have ladies' group all the time. We establish connections with one another. If they ask for assistance or require anything, I can simply connect with them." IND6.

Several interviewees even initiated and led women's networks. A consultant in an education company who leads a businesswomen's network not only expands her own network but also contributes to other women's empowerment:

"So, in the organisation that I am working in now for the last two and a half years, I have been heading with another colleague, who is in a senior management position, the businesswomen's network within the organisation. It is where we gather women and have very open conversations, you know, about challenges… we have lots of unconscious bias conversations, how to negotiate your salary, promotions, how to enhance your skills while at work, and you know, maintaining a work-life balance, which is something women do not have." IND5.

The strategy of engaging in women-only networks also helps women avoid social judgment or misinterpretations caused by interacting with men, which can lead Indian women to adopt a passive attitude towards networking. Figure 4 illustrates how the strategy of actively creating one's own networking opportunities responds to both exclusion from powerful networks and adopting a passive approach to networking.

Third, voluntarily working in some company and industry initiatives is another prevalent strategy of women in India. Their motivation is to increase their visibility in their organisations and to reach out to wider circles and contacts outside the company. For example, an IT manager stated that although she volunteers in some programs with little interest, she finds taking part is useful for her to increase visibility and ensure recognition by powerful figures:

"I do take part in some other organisational initiatives. For example, we have technology days in the office once a year. It is a huge event. I volunteer and put so much energy into this program together with other people. Usually, I am part of those kinds of things. Also, I go for MC [Master of ceremony] programs. Actually, I am not that interested in doing this work, but we have to take part in all these programs to create internal visibility for building our careers. Because the next time I go to the head of [Company], he will remember me. That is what I do." IND4.

Fourth, since time is a scarce resource for most of our respondents, who are navigating both work and domestic responsibilities, trying to utilise office hours to the fullest extent is frequently mentioned by our Indian respondents. For instance, an engineer described that she can only invest time in networking during office hours. Therefore, she tries to utilise the time spent in the office for networking as much as possible:

"See, what I can do is just the office hours. So, it is just that coffee time, so I take the time, go with different people in different timings. I don't approach the same person always. It is just that you should be dynamic with the people. I talk to the manager, I also talk to someone who is not related to my work, I talk to my team also, whom I'm sitting with. So this is how I do." IND1.

Defying the gendered expectations Some Indian respondents attributed the challenges women face to a perceived lack of assertiveness, reflecting a partial acceptance of communal gender roles traditionally ascribed to women. However, we noticed that Indian women framed this issue as a problem faced by other women in India, not as their own personal issue. While the vast majority of our respondents expressed that they felt disregarded and underestimated throughout their careers, they had learned to defy the gender stereotypes and behaviours expected of women. Our participants described how they challenged, let alone conformed to, expectations of them to be compliant, to keep quiet even when they thought something was wrong, and to be humble. For instance, an IT professional stated:

"As a woman, especially in male-dominated tech spaces, it sometimes felt intimidating to approach people or express my ideas. There were times when I felt overlooked or underestimated. But I learned to persist…" IND18.

A business development manager depicted how she makes sure to be heard during interactions with others at work by asserting herself confidently:

"I make sure everyone listens to me; I make so much noise and I make sure, you know, I'm heard. So, I think that has to be there at every moment. Because the more you are, you know, loud and clear. That's when you'll be heard and they will also consider you." IND15.

A sales manager of a financial services company explained how she is determined to express herself and to stand up not only for herself but also for her female subordinates while motivating them to advocate for their own rights:

> *"I am not somebody who cares, if it is 100 men, 70 men or 2 men, if I want to say something I will say something I say something, I will be the loudest voice in the room you know metaphorically and literally. But what also happens is some of the women who report to me would say that 'your voice is louder you go and represent me' which is fine, which is what a manager supposed to do but not all the time. Sometimes I would want them to stand up for themselves and say that, you know, 'I deserve better than this!" IND3.*

Resorting to one's family support system The final prevalent response strategy that we identified among our Indian interviewees is asking for support from their families for domestic and caregiving responsibilities to be able to attend networking events and to maintain oversight of their work. When respondents reported challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities, we asked how they navigated these demands. Some respondents mentioned that they were lucky to have family support, they acknowledged their family members as their "pillars" and "backbones" while recognizing that not everyone can get this kind of support. For instance, a finance team leader narrated:

> *"My mom has been my biggest support. So, you know, she's been my major backbone for me to you know, go work, because when I'm at work, I know that I have another mother for my kids. So, she's been my big biggest support system." IND15.*

Discussion

This study examined cross-national similarities and differences in women's networking challenges and response strategies. While women in both India and Germany reported comparable challenges, their interpretations of the sources of these challenges diverged significantly. German women frequently attributed their networking difficulties to individual factors such as modesty, shyness, and self-doubt (Greguletz et al., 2019). This individual perspective often obscured the systemic nature of the barriers they faced and reinforced the belief that such challenges could be overcome through personal effort alone. In contrast, Indian respondents demonstrated greater awareness of how culture, societal norms, and other systemic barriers constrained their networking opportunities. Although many emphasised the need for radical change in these structures, they also expressed uncertainty about how such transformation could be achieved. In response, they took control of their careers and strived to stand firm against these restrictions by owning their networking journey, actively and collectively creating their own opportunities, defying gendered expectations and resorting to their family support system.

Theoretical contributions

Our study contributes to the gender and networking literature in the following ways. First, we contribute by illuminating the response strategies that women adopt to navigate networking challenges. Prior research offers recommendations for networking strategies for women, including cultivating high-status ties (Lyness & Thompson, 2000), holding brokerage positions (Mehra et al., 2001), building diverse networks (Ibarra, 1992), and creating close-knit circles with external contacts (Yang et al., 2019). However, these recommended strategies are based on Western contexts, mainly the US. Thus, they may not be effective for women in other contexts. Indeed, our respondents' experiences underscore how contextual factors shaped by the perpetuation of masculine ideals and societal norms (Ridgeway et al., 2022) influence women's networking challenges and their response strategies.

Second, using a cross-cultural lens, we uncover both shared challenges and diverse response strategies in women's experiences in Germany and India. While Indian women's responses are characterised by assertiveness and active efforts, German women often adopt a more indirect approach, positioning themselves as sought-after network partners and taking a passive role. This finding may seem contradictory given Germany's direct culture (House, 2006), but it reflects the "culturally dependent negative moral connotations of networking in Germany" (Greguletz et al., 2019, p.1248). Furthermore, German culture emphasises self-sufficiency, personal autonomy, and self-actualisation, which relate to individualism (Brewer & Venaik, 2011; Hofstede Insights, 2024). Thus, German women might view networking challenges as individual problems to manage by shifting perspectives, taking stereotypical comments lightly, or focusing on self-improvement. In contrast, the assertive strategies of Indian women may arise from the overt gender bias and discrimination in India (World Economic Forum, 2024), leading to a heightened awareness of barriers that necessitate self-assertive, agency-driven responses.

One may wonder how Indian women develop agentic response strategies to networking challenges amid a prevailing submissive culture, where they are often expected to be subservient due to patriarchal institutions and conservative norms. India's rich spiritual tradition plays a significant role in this dynamic (Prakash & Bhawuk, 2019). While traditional gender roles assign women a subordinate status (Budhwar et al., 2005), Hinduism also features powerful, assertive goddesses who embody independence alongside those who conform to traditional roles (Srivastava, 2024). India's diverse culture enables individuals to navigate contradictory values like assertiveness and submissiveness, which may appear paradoxical from a Western viewpoint (Kumar et al., 2019). This adaptability helps explain how assertive strategies can coexist with submissive tendencies. Moreover, contemporary Indian women in corporate settings affected by globalisation might see their careers as integral to their identity and essential for financial stability (Shanmugam, 2017). Consequently, they may view networking as crucial and actively tackle networking challenges to protect their careers and livelihoods. By showing how social roles create networking challenges for women and how women transcend these roles by combining assertive and submissive tendencies, we extend understanding of social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Third, we emphasise the need for a context-sensitive theory of gendered networking. In collectivist, patriarchal societies like India (Budhwar et al., 2005), women's networking strategies are shaped more by informal, family-based norms than by formal opportunities. The strategies identified under 'actively creating one's own networking opportunities' (e.g., initiating women's networks and volunteering at events) reflect Indian women's collectivistic orientations. They strive to build their own network or '*jaan-pehchaan*' within organisations. Informal ties, including family connections and women's initiatives, play a larger role in career advancement, suggesting that institutional voids are filled through relational mechanisms (Berger et al., 2020).

Relatedly, we identified 'resorting to one's family support system' as a strategy through which Indian women receive collective support to balance career aspirations with cultural expectations, particularly after motherhood (Shanmugam, 2017). However, it presents risks and limitations. First, it fosters dependency on external factors for women's networking and career success. When family support systems are fragile, such as relying on ageing parents' health or goodwill, career opportunities tied to this support can become vulnerable. Second, it does not challenge the norm that women are primary caregivers (Budhwar et al., 2005) and may reinforce traditional gender roles, portraying women's careers as 'supported' rather than independently developed. Third, it may not be accessible to all women in India, which may widen inequalities. While our findings suggest this strategy helps women's networking and career success in India, it obscures structural challenges like inadequate childcare services (Wanglar, 2021), imposing additional burdens on families to compensate for institutional failings.

Similarly, commonly cited strategies among German respondents, such as 'leveraging being a woman' and 'turning a blind eye' to unfavourable instances, carry the high risk of reinforcing gender stereotypes (Fernando et al., 2019). These response strategies do not challenge the lower status of being a woman or question the value assigned to stereotypically feminine traits and roles (Calás & Smircich, 1993). Instead, they preserve perceived gender differences, thereby limiting women's potential to outgrow restrictive norms of femininity (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Rather than blaming the victim for failing to challenge the status quo, it is essential to interrogate the underlying mechanisms and systems that lead to the adoption of such strategies.

Practical implications

Examining women's networking experiences across cultural contexts enhances understanding of their diverse needs and informs more effective support strategies. This is especially relevant for multinational enterprises (MNEs) with subsidiaries in diverse sociocultural contexts (Bader et al., 2022; Kemper et al., 2019). For example, in Germany, where individualism is a prominent cultural value (Hofstede Insights, 2024), women can benefit from awareness trainings that address the tendency to blame their individual actions for the challenges they face. Because this tendency obscures the broader systemic barriers women face and reinforces the notion that overcoming them is solely an individual responsibility. While our study identified effective response strategies, it is unrealistic to expect women to overcome deeply

rooted structural barriers alone (Adya, 2008). Thus, collaborative efforts at both policy and organisational levels are necessary.

Our study shows that organisational support for women's networking must be sensitive to cultural contexts. For example, interventions to include women in informal male networks may succeed in Germany but risk harming careers in India due to unfounded rumours and societal judgment. Consequently, Indian women seek to create their own networking opportunities primarily within their organisations. Organisations should acknowledge women's efforts and treat networking as a strategic activity by integrating it into performance evaluations and promotions. Additionally, organisational leaders should allocate resources for women's networking and engage with it. To promote accountability, India's Ministry of Labour and Employment could introduce incentives, such as tax deductions, for companies that actively support women's professional networks through documented initiatives, including networking events and formal programmes.

Despite the policy framework established by the Maternity Benefit Act and Palna Scheme for Childcare and Creches, available facilities are inadequate in India. Governmental bodies must enhance public crèches and day-care facilities at workplaces. The accessibility and affordability of private childcare must be improved through incentives and subsidies. Additionally, campaigns to destigmatise crèche use should emphasise its benefits for children's development and working mothers' rights, alleviating their guilt for leaving children for work (Naqvi, 2011) and fear of societal judgment.

Addressing networking challenges for women and enhancing their response strategies is vital not only for organisations' social responsibility but also for attracting and retaining female talent in India that MNEs can utilise. Western MNEs in the Asia-Pacific region may have greater flexibility to diverge from restrictive local norms and engage underrepresented female professionals in leadership roles (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2025; Siegel et al., 2019). To achieve this, MNEs should increase their investments in gender equality efforts to foster inclusive environments and organisational cultures that promote women's networking and career growth, especially where broader societal progress is slow (Terpstra-Tong et al., 2025). For instance, MNEs should facilitate 'informal networking opportunities' during work hours, involving high-status organisational actors to establish connections with female employees in a professional setting. Although 'informal networking' may seem contradictory when institutionalised, it may be one of the few viable ways in both countries for women to access influential networks. In addition, subsidised childcare, inclusive workplace cultures, and cross-gender sponsorship should be standardised across contexts to address structural and social barriers. Finally, regular monitoring and transparent reporting on women's networking participation and inclusion outcomes should be embedded in organisational and policy-level accountability frameworks.

Limitations and future research directions

This comparative study focused on women in two different country contexts, most of whom work in male-dominated industries. However, the gender composition of industries may also shape women's networking experiences (Woehler et al., 2021).

Future research could add a further layer of comparison by examining professional contexts, such as industry gender composition, occupational norms, organisational cultures, alongside national contexts. Given our finding that context plays a critical role, future research could examine women's networking experiences in cross-cultural settings, particularly among female expatriates. For instance, future research could investigate how women can build networks to secure expatriation opportunities (Varma & Stroh, 2001; Stroh et al., 2000) and how they may leverage networking (Varma et al., 2001) to overcome obstacles while on assignments abroad, and during the repatriation process.

In line with our inductive approach, we used purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011), which led to a non-random and relatively small sample. As such, our findings are context-specific and not representative of Germany and India. We encourage future studies to build on this foundation by testing our exploratory findings through large-scale surveys. Given India's substantial regional, cultural, and socio-economic heterogeneity (Tisdell, 2021), future research could examine how women's networking experiences vary within the country. Some of our insights may also extend to other South Asian contexts, such as Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, where gender-segregated social structures persist (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). Finally, comparing women's networking challenges in East Asian developed countries with those in Western contexts offers another promising direction for research.

Despite its limitations, this study advances understanding of women's networking by moving beyond the predominantly Western focus in prior research. Comparing Germany and India allows us to identify shared patterns as well as context-specific dynamics, offering a richer basis for designing policies that more effectively promote gender equality and career advancement. The insights generated here open new avenues for research on women's networks, diversity management, and global careers.

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Data availability The research data of this study cannot be shared publicly. The data are, however, available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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