It's Not You, It's Me—Women's Denial of Gendered Inequalities in the Event Industry

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Gender, Work & Organization

WILEY

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

It's Not You, It's Me—Women's Denial of Gendered Inequalities in the Event Industry

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Received: 27 June 2024 | **Revised:** 28 February 2025 | **Accepted:** 12 July 2025

Keywords: denial | discrimination | gender | gendered inequalities | workplace bias

ABSTRACT

Gender inequalities are a persistent barrier to career progression, including in industries predominantly occupied by women. This study used a Delphi study in the United Kingdom and Australia to analyze women's experiences of careers in the event industry—an inherently gendered context. We show that societal and business factors combine to create gendered inequality regimes, and this creates a wicked problem—women make up most of the workforce, but this is not reflected in the number of women in senior roles. This exploratory research suggests that women in events employ denial as an identity-preservation strategy to cope with pervasive gender identity threats. This denial impacts women's individual career progression, as well as undermining collective struggles against group discrimination. We conclude by proposing a new model that explains contributing factors to gendered discrimination in female-dominated industries, perspectives that can explain the adoption of denial as a coping strategy for women developing their careers within this, and the ways in which this can support the persistence of gendered inequality regimes.

1 | Introduction

A greater number of women than ever are in the workforce, yet few make it to senior positions. Globally, just 29% of senior managers are women, and in the United Kingdom, women hold 8% of senior leadership positions and 7.9% of CEO positions; in Australia, the numbers are 30% and 17.1% (Catalyst 2021). There are persistent gender-related barriers to career advancement, including the motherhood penalty and caregiving burdens (Azmat and Ferrer 2017), gender pay gaps (McKinsey & Company 2023), lack of flexibility (Kossek et al. 2021), lack of managerial support, and workplace sexism (Hideg and Shen 2019).

This study explores how gendered inequalities manifest in one service industry context to shed light on issues that are pertinent to this part of the economy. Service work has been described as deeply gendered (K. L. Dashper 2013; K. Dashper 2018; Costa et al. 2017; K. Dashper et al. 2023); it is often perceived as women's work, and these workforces are dominated by women. Despite this, in hospitality, travel, and leisure businesses, for example, women hold only 30% of executive committee, director, or board roles and 39% of roles with direct reports, and 20% of companies have only one woman on their board (MBS Intelligence 2022).

In the event industry, the situation is even worse. 76.9% of people working in the industry identify as women, but only between 16% and 27% of women are at the CEO, directorial, or MD level (IBTM 2022). This has occurred despite increasing numbers of women entering higher education in event management, to the extent that 90% of event management students in the United Kingdom are women (Thomas 2017). Barriers for women working in events include the requirements for worker flexibility to incorporate long workdays, often outside of "typical" working hours, including evening and weekend work;

travel away from home; low pay; temporary contracts; and an urgent, high-pressure, high-risk environment (Abson 2021; Bladen et al. 2023).

Research has identified barriers to women's career development in a range of business contexts, but studies on the event industry and event work remain very limited (Platt and Finkel 2020). As K. Dashper et al. (2023) suggest, it is likely that persistent and unaddressed gender inequalities in the service industries affect career success for women in events. Yet, there is still much we do not know, including why, when, or how these gendered barriers occur. Neither do we have any insight into women's perceptions of these issues nor their strategies to overcome them. Several scholars have made calls for research on gender and careers within the event industry (e.g., Thomas 2017; Platt and Finkel 2020; K. Dashper and Finkel 2021; Abson et al. 2024). In response to these calls and to advance our understanding of the dynamics of gender, inequalities, and service work, we have used the gendered organization framework (Acker 1992, 2012) to analyze the experiences of women working in the event industry across two countries. Specifically, our study aimed to investigate the ways in which women coped with discrimination in the industry, as this has been investigated in other fields (Block et al. 2019; Cohen et al. 2023; Cruz and Nagy 2024; Ibarra and Petriglieri 2016), but always with a focus on professions and settings in which women formed a minority group, which is not the case in events.

This article is based on data gathered from a Delphi study of 33 women working in leadership roles in the event industry in two countries, the United Kingdom and Australia. During our analysis, we identified the invisibility of sexism for the women themselves. Drawing on theories of coping and denial, our findings indicate that women in events often deny the existence of sexism as a coping strategy to explain their progression, or lack thereof. This study therefore adds to the growing body of research that examines gendered inequalities through the lens of work contexts that are inherently gendered. We propose a new model that shows the relationships between societal and industry-specific factors, which, in turn, create gendered inequality regimes that result in women using denial as a coping strategy to survive—or thrive—at work.

2 | The Business Context—Expectations and Norms in the Event Industry

The event industry is a useful context to explore career progression because of issues that establish it as distinct from other service industries. These relate to the fast-paced, episodic, and rapidly changeable nature of the industry and the delivery of event projects that are temporary but planned—they are unique, time-bound projects that are never repeated in their exact format (Bladen et al. 2023).

Event organizations provide a mix of low-skilled, entry-level jobs and high-skilled, relatively well-paid roles (K. L. Dashper 2013). This workforce is often contract-based and "pulsates" in response to the flow of work (Hanlon and Cuskelly 2002), which is frequently low-paid, insecure, and stressful and requires worker flexibility (K. Dashper et al. 2023). Hours are often rigid and dictated by the demands of the workplace, often on weekends or in the evenings. In addition, previous research has noted that given the circumstances in which event work takes place, there is notable potential for the exploitation of workers (McLeod et al. 2019). We propose that it is likely that these unique working structures and practices within events lead to a distinct pattern of gender inequalities and that these inequalities are creating the imbalance between the number of women in the workforce and the number of women in senior roles.

3 | Gendered Inequality Regimes in the Workplace

As the service sector is dominated by women in numerical terms, but not in senior positions, and as service work is deeply gendered (K. L. Dashper 2013; K. Dashper 2018), the gendered organizational perspective (Acker 1992) is a useful lens through which to study gender inequalities in these workplaces. From this perspective, gender is not an individual trait or characteristic but is a gendering process involving workplace tasks, processes, jobs, and organizations (Benschop and van den Brink 2019).

From an organizational perspective, when professional identities are socially constructed in gendered ways, they reinforce persistent issues of workplace inequality (Dick and Cassell 2004). The gendering of organizational structures occurs through various interconnected processes that produce and reproduce gendered substructures (see Table 1). Gendered substructures contribute to "inequality regimes"—"loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities in particular organizations" (Acker 2006, 443). In the service industries, many jobs are still perceived as feminine (Costa et al. 2017), and gender is a lens through which we can understand "how wider societal issues influence gender inequalities in organizations" (Calinaud et al. 2021) and thus can help to explain women's underrepresentation at senior levels.

The gendered organization perspective has influenced feminist scholars who have examined how systematic disparities impact women in a wide range of work (Benschop and van den Brink 2019). In research focusing on service industries, scholars have used this framework to argue that women are disadvantaged structurally and culturally and are consequently less likely to access or to thrive in leadership roles. Costa et al. (2017) focused on the tourism sector and demonstrated the notion of the ideal worker, a heterosexual man whose life is centered on his full-time job. Costa concluded that tourism work is implicitly gendered—men and women are positioned differently in relation to leadership and success. Carvalho et al. (2019) also identified the gender subtext of the "ideal" unencumbered worker in tourism. They identified hidden discrimination associated with assumptions about women's greater family orientation and the expectation that women are less competent than men. Remington and Kitterlin-Lynch (2018) identified key issues to women's leadership progression in the hospitality industry as work–life balance, support systems/mentors, systematic barriers, organizational commitment, and a lack of female role models.

TABLE 1 | Acker's (2012) concepts of the gendered organization.

Organizing processes	Inequalities are built into job design, wage determination, decision-making, physical design of the workplace, and rules for behavior at work
Organizational culture	Beliefs about gender differences and equality/inequality
Interactions on the job	Interactions between colleagues and between those at different levels of power produce and reproduce the gendered substructure
Gendered identities	Individual gendered identities that are constructed in the workplace and that individuals bring into the organization
Gendered subtexts	Less visible parts of organizational processes and structures, such as policies, schemes, and documentation

Although the theory of gendered organizations has become ubiquitous within management and organization studies, Bates (2022) argues that it is frequently used solely to legitimize the idea that organizations are gendered, rather than empirically testing this assertion, a criticism that can be leveled at these prior studies. Bates (2022) argues that researchers should use the theory more fully in empirical work, although noting this is challenging and runs the risk of "seeing what we have already seen," rather than making the most of what we see (p. 1047). This study bridges the gap between the theory and these critiques through an exploration of women's lived experiences, to analyze the impact gendering processes have on women's leadership progression and how women respond to this. Much has been written about gendered discrimination in the workplace, but there is less attention on how women cope with inequalities in the workplace—we explore the extant literature next.

4 | Coping With Gender Discrimination at Work

Acknowledging being a victim of discrimination can be a painful experience (F. Crosby 1982). Key challenges posed to women by gender discrimination at work stem from perceptions of being a victim of discrimination, issues involved in detecting discrimination, and the inevitable intertwining of this with social structures and social status (Kobrynowicz and Branscombe 1997).

Discrimination on the basis of gender is a type of social identity threat, where negative beliefs about an identity are mobilized to the benefit of a dominant group and to the detriment of another. Research has identified categorization threat as the assignment of stereotypical group characteristics to an individual against their will (Branscombe et al. 1999). Negative, self-relevant stereotypes can be self-fulfilling in organizations, as targets unintentionally fulfill the stereotype through an expectancy-confirmation process (Major and O'Brien 2005), reinforcing it further in a "dangerous cycle of self-perpetuation" (Ambady et al. 2004, 401).

Threats based on stereotypes tend to be greatest when a social identity is in the minority in the workplace (Block et al. 2011). Gender identity threat is likely to be made worse in male-dominated sectors, where men's achievements are celebrated and rewarded, making female identities more visible and salient. Previous studies have provided evidence of this in fields such as classical music, STEM settings, higher education, investment banking, and management consulting (Block et al. 2019; Cohen et al. 2023; Cruz and Nagy 2024; Ibarra and Petriglieri 2016). This study, by investigating a field where women are not in a minority position but where there appears to be evidence of discrimination against them in their career advancement, provides a novel perspective on the ways in which women cope with a social identity threat.

Responses to identity threats manifest as coping strategies at the individual and group levels. If an individual has a high level of identification with the ingroup, then it is likely that group-level strategies will be taken and the outgroup will be derogated, but where ingroup identification is low, more individualistic strategies will be employed, leading to personal benefits for those who succeed but potentially leading to a lack of collective action to eliminate the discriminatory threat (Branscombe and Ellemers 1998). Identity threat response theory (ITRT) suggests that individuals may respond to threats using strategies from one or both of two broad categories: identity-protection, where responses aim to maintain and strengthen a social identity but not to eliminate the threat; or identity-restructuring, where responses involve attaching oneself to an alternative identity, redefining the meaning of the identity, or changing the relative importance of the identity. For this second category, the responses have the impact of eliminating the threat (Petriglieri 2011). Responses to social identity threat can include aggressive defensiveness, conflict or resistance, self-criticism and self-humiliation, physical and/or psychological withdrawal, decreased commitment, and the development of ingroup solidarity (Holmes et al. 2016).

Such resistance to threats arises when individuals consider their categorization to be irrelevant or illegitimate and can be strongest when individuals would otherwise strongly identify with this social category. For example, previous research has shown this in the case of women in leadership positions denying the existence of gender-based discrimination or emphasizing how they are different from other women to explain why this does not apply to them. Although individuals may choose not to identify with a social category, this is not something that they can always control—especially when dealing with pervasive stereotyping. Where there is a high level of dissonance in this regard, that is where we could expect individuals to be the most resistant (Branscombe et al. 1999).

Despite systematic evidence for the persistence of discrimination across a range of fields, individuals often prefer not to recognize the existence of group discrimination and rather believe that unequal social outcomes are the consequence of individual merit and/or immutable and unavoidable differences between groups of people—such as believing that men and women have "hard-wired" differences in their ability to solve mathematical problems (Barreto and Ellemers 2015). This denial of discrimination is an attempt to minimize the perception of discrimination and prejudice—essentially avoiding a stressor by denying that the problem exists (Miller and Kaiser 2001). Denial of discrimination also minimizes the likelihood for an individual to have to engage in confrontation, which is a very typical social response, due to the often high interpersonal cost of doing so (Rasinski et al. 2013). In workplace settings, the interpersonal cost may also be accompanied by the potential for other costs, such as the possibility of advancement and reward. The avoidance of conflict can also play a role in women adopting "self-silencing" beliefs in regard to sexism, along with other social norms such as putting others' needs before one's own and accepting divergences between the private and the public self. Research suggests that to counter self-silencing, attempts should be made to counter women's internalized beliefs about how men and women should behave in interpersonal interactions, including the norm that women should seek to maintain relationships, even at the cost of personal development (Swim et al. 2010).

Individuals may believe that their social group is discriminated against, while simultaneously denying that this has affected them. This is the widely observed phenomenon of the personal/group discrimination discrepancy (Ruggiero and Taylor 1997), where individuals consistently rate the discrimination faced by their social groups as much higher than the discrimination that they have faced as individuals, even to the extent of denying that they have faced any discrimination at all as a consequence of being a member of their social group. Researchers have identified system-justifying beliefs, which appear to exonerate the system from bias and make things seem fair to victims (Bahamondes et al. 2019; Napier et al. 2020). System-justification theory suggests that people have a psychological need to justify existing social systems, even if they are unfair. Women can deny gendered inequalities or discrimination through system-justifying beliefs, which confer psychological benefits to those who are advantaged by the discrimination but also to those who are disadvantaged (Bahamondes et al. 2019). The underlying psychological benefits of doing this are generally explained in two ways: either to maintain a feeling of personal responsibility for their success or failure in social settings, including in the workplace, or the need for individuals to preserve their sense of self-worth.

The devaluation hypothesis suggests that to protect their own self-worth, individuals may devalue the domain of discrimination that they are facing—doing this removes its explanatory power for the individual—and then choose to selectively value elements of the domain that favor the individual or their group (Major and Schmader 1998). This leads to psychological disengagement from the domain, which can come with costs. Although it can free individuals from evaluating their self-worth based on the evaluations of dominant groups, it can cut individuals off from success in the domain, meaning that disengagement can perpetuate prejudicial attitudes. F. Crosby (1984) and F. J. Crosby (2017) focused on why women, despite objective measures to the contrary, denied their personal disadvantages while simultaneously recognizing—and being upset by—discrimination facing other women. Crosby found that women repeatedly denied being disadvantaged because of their gender and instead felt they were the "lucky exception to the generality of sex discrimination" (2017:93). This cognitive strategy enables women to reframe their experiences in a way that preserves their self-esteem and sense of identity—if they recognized the discrimination, it would reinforce that they are victimized or low-status, which is too disconcerting (Kobrynowicz and Branscombe 1997) and can even be traumatizing (Trimble O'Connor and Kmec 2020).

This may be particularly true in "neoliberal, postfeminist times, where gender inequality tends to be constructed as a relic of the past" (Benschop and van den Brink 2019, 1766). Younger generations of women may deny structural gendered inequalities because they believe in the neoliberal view of individual responsibility, and this does not match the idea that organizations might still have gendered structures, which create barriers for them. They may, therefore, seek to deny group discrimination because they prefer to believe that success is down to the individual (Seron et al. 2018). This can be linked to belief in the idea of meritocracy, that status in society is determined by merit (Liu 2011). In gender terms, this positions women's success as being based on their own skills, talent, abilities, and behaviors. For those who believe in meritocracy, gender does not hold someone back, nor is it an advantage. Assuming that workplaces are meritocratic ensures that discrimination remains hidden, even from those experiencing it (Seron et al. 2018), and studies have shown that where gender disadvantages are not acknowledged in the workplace, biases and stereotypes can be accentuated (Mun and Kodama 2022).

Older generations of women, however, may deny the continued existence of gendered inequalities because they believe they have "been there, done that" and solved the problem. Rhode (1991) calls this the "no problem problem," the lack of awareness and consensus on the extent of gender inequality and the resulting denial of any injustices. Irrespective of age, "... women hold beliefs that justify, legitimize and rationalize their low status to a much greater extent than members of other low status groups" (Napier et al. 2020, 1192).

There is further evidence that denial of gendered inequalities reinforces them in the workplace. It has been argued that women lack group consciousness (Napier et al. 2020) and that some women reap the benefits of unjust organizational practices by engaging in traditional working relationships with men. Supporting—or at least not challenging—patriarchy can be advantageous for individuals. Here, we see status quo bias; women who are benefiting from current systems will not want things to change and are, therefore, motivated to deny or minimize others' experiences of gender discrimination. Women's denial of gender discrimination is a "powerful legitimization of the status quo" (Derks, Ellemers, et al. 2011, 1244).

Women who behave in this way are sometimes described as queen bee, which refers to women who have been successful and who defend the status quo (Staines et al. 1973). When acting as queen bees, women in high-ranking roles may treat other women more critically than their male counterparts (Ellemers et al. 2010), emphasize how they themselves are different from other women (Derks, Ellemers, et al. 2011), or deny the existence of sexism (Stroebe et al. 2009). This may be because women feel pressure to become more like men to succeed at work, so they conform to gender stereotypes of masculine leadership behaviors, which are typically viewed as the "right" way to do leadership (Derks, Van Laar, et al. 2011). They may feel they need to prove themselves in a male-dominated environment (Ellemers et al. 2010) and go on to undermine other women to protect their own positions.

Ellemers et al. (2010) were the first to suggest that the queen bee syndrome is a response to a social identity threat. Queen bee women should be considered as products of gender discrimination in the workplace. Explanations as to why women behave in this way can, therefore, be found in the wider understanding of gender bias and social identity threat (Sobczak 2019) that create gender disparities in career outcomes (Derks, Ellemers, et al. 2011). In the next section, we explain the methods used to explore how women cope with gender discrimination when developing their careers in the event industry.

5 | Methods

Taking a gendered organization perspective, which sees gender as socially constructed (Acker 1992, 2012; Calinaud et al. 2021), this study adopted an interpretive, qualitative approach through a Delphi study, which allowed respondents to provide rich descriptions of their own experiences within their work context. Using qualitative methods also responds to calls from critical scholars of gender in the service industries, who argue that there is a need for research that focuses on marginalized or minority topics, such as gender, to address the fact that "qualitative and feminist methods, struggle[s] for legitimacy in a field that is dominated by (post) scientific paradigms and approaches" (Pritchard 2018, 145). The Delphi method is useful for sensitive, complex topics where there are few settled opinions (Avella 2016), and because it collects information in a way that allows respondents to engage anonymously and without interaction with the researcher, it can minimize the impacts of power dynamics that can be present in face-to-face situations (Habibi et al. 2014).

Qualitative Delphi studies recruit panels of experts on a topic to respond individually to iterative rounds of questions, posed in increasingly specific ways to investigate areas of expert consensus and disagreement (Kennell and Powell 2020). A first set of questions is asked by the researchers, and the responses to these questions are then analyzed, with this analysis summarized and reflected back to the panel, along with a set of follow-up questions. Multiple rounds of this process take place until consensus positions emerge or areas of significant disagreement are identified. Typically, this requires three to four rounds of questions (Brady 2015).

Two panels were established, one for the United Kingdom and one for Australia, and the data collected from each panel were combined in our analysis. These countries were chosen as they both host mature event sectors, where specific tertiary-level education in event management and professional development opportunities have supported the growth of well-established event businesses and the hosting of major events over several decades. Additionally, the countries share Anglophone business contexts with similar social and political environments, including for the regulation of the workplace.

Panel participants were selected purposively (Campbell et al. 2020) to align with the aims of the research. Participants were recruited who satisfied the following criteria: They self-defined as women; they currently occupied leadership or management roles within the industry so that they were able to reflect on their experiences of career development and progression; and they had at least 5 years of experience within the industry to ensure that they had expert knowledge of industry issues. Panelists were recruited via social media posts, and an attempt was made to create panels that could represent the diversity of business and event types across the industry. Table 2 gives an overview of the characteristics of each panel.

In this study, the first round of open questions was designed thematically using the gendered organization framework that has guided this research. All of the questions used in this study are available in Supporing Information S1. Questions were posed that asked women to reflect on their leadership development from the perspective of each element of the framework, as well as more general questions that created space for participants to add additional insights to the research. Google Forms were used to collect data from each participant, with data downloaded into spreadsheets and fully anonymized before analysis was carried out. Three rounds of data collection took place: the first in October 2022, with subsequent iterative rounds in December 2022 and January 2023.

After the first round, analysis was carried out following the stages of Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) thematic approach—familiarization with data; generating initial codes; searching for themes among codes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing a final analysis. The themes generated through this process were then used to design a second set of questions, with the same process followed for a third and final round.

In practical terms, this involved downloading all the text responses to a single spreadsheet, which was shared across the research team, after each round of questions. The team was made up of two teams of researchers, three each for the United Kingdom and Australia panels, respectively. Familiarization and the generation of initial codes were carried out simultaneously, with the teams then meeting online for reflective discussions, comparing these initial codes to agree on how to use a shared set of codes to begin the next stage of the analysis. Each team then independently developed initial themes, which were again compared as part of developing a shared approach. These initial themes were then refined and applied to the

TABLE 2 | Characteristics of Delphi study panels.

United Kingdom				Australia			
Panellist job role	**Primary event sector**	**Age**	**Industry tenure**	**Panellist role**	**Primary event sector**	**Age**	**Industry tenure**
Sales and marketing executive	Multiple sectors	25	5 years	Event manager	Business events	50	20 years
Senior events officer	Business and third-sector events	31	10 years	Client and event specialist	Business events	31	10 years
Consultant	Corporate events and sustainability	38	18 years	Head of events	Third-sector events	32	10 years
Head of events	Business events	42	20 years	Product development executive	Business/corporate events	47	25 years
Commercial event manager	Venue management	60	23 years	Director of event management	Business events and venue management	29	7 years
Head of marketing	Multiple sectors	37	15 years	Business owner	Multiple sectors	56	16 years
Academic manager/ event producer	Events education	44	22 years	Planning coordinator	Business and media events	35	10 years
Account manager	Business events	24	5 years	Strategic event manager	Business and cultural events	42	20 years
Head of events	Multiple sectors	43	20 years	Program coordinator	Business events	28	7 years
Head of sponsorship and events	Business events	41	> 20 years	Audiovisual sales manager	Business events	48	23 years
Global chief operating officer	Business and cultural events	48	> 20 years	Director	Business and third-sector events	42	18 years
Director	Business events	34	12 years	Events and partnerships manager	Multiple sectors	34	16 years
Freelance project manager	Business events	29	9 years	Managing director	Business events	45	17 years
Senior events officer	Third-sector and cultural events	34	8 years	Festivals officer	Cultural and third-sector events	42	21 years
Head of people and learning development	Business events	47	20 years	CEO	Business events	52	30 years
Chief executive officer	Business events	34	6 years	Community experience manager	Sports and private events	31	12 years
Senior project manager	Business events	48	18 years				

responses from each panel. This was an iterative process of developing themes, posing further questions on these themes, and then carrying out further analysis. This ensured that the key points raised by our participants were included in a final set of themes that had been identified across our study, which were then defined and named. The research team was made up of four women and one man to enhance the credibility of the thematic analysis process through the collaboration of multiple researchers (Nowell et al. 2017). All of the researchers have experience of prior research into career development in the event industry, and four of the team have experience of working in the industry, including progressing into leadership and management roles.

6 | Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis that we carried out led to the generation of multiple themes that helped us to understand the responses of the women involved in our study. The analysis highlighted numerous features of an inequality regime in the event industry. Using the gendering structures that Acker (2012) presents as

analytical lenses, we were able to see evidence of this across organizing processes, organization culture, job interactions, gendered identities, and gendered subtexts, which subsequently led to gender identity threats in the event industry, despite the fact that most event workplaces were predominantly made up of women, and previous research suggested that social identity threats would be greatest where a targeted group was in a minority position (Block et al. 2011).

What was surprising, however, was that this finding conflicted with the views of the women themselves, many of whom did not believe that the event industry had issues with gender. For example, we asked if the industry had a sexism problem, and although some of our respondents felt strongly that this was the case, the majority of participants felt that it did not:

> No I think these days it's a fair, respectful and even playing field.
>
> AUS15 R1

> I've not directly experienced this, I'm sure it has its problems, but I don't believe that it does overall.
>
> UK4 R2

Some panelists denied the existence of discrimination while, in the same response, giving examples of it:

> I can't say that I've seen this. However, the team that I work in is predominantly female and if anything the males in the team might feel a little outnumbered. However, I have been in meetings with clients, with a junior male colleague and the client has directed their conversation to the junior male colleague, which was quite interesting!
>
> UK7 R2

With most of the women giving us examples of gender discrimination to greater or lesser extents, we questioned why there was not a general agreement on the degree to which this was a feature of the event industry. It was not until round three of this study, when we had shared anonymized examples of discrimination from their own responses in our feedback to the panels, that some panelists reflected on their own experiences and began to understand them as gendered discrimination:

> I hadn't thought about it as sexism before. It's a real eye opener to see it on paper.
>
> AUS7 R3

> I haven't thought about it like that before.
>
> UK4 R3

Despite presenting us with frequent, multiple, and complex examples of gendered inequalities in the event workplace, many panelists denied that there was gender discrimination at all or that their gender was the cause of their stymied career progression. When we asked the direct question in round two, "Does the industry have a sexism problem generally?", more than two-thirds of our panelists said that it did not, with more also giving equivocal answers that avoided calling this out as a specific problem in events. We now turn to the literature on coping and social identity threat responses to provide an analysis of why this might be the case.

6.1 | Denial as an Identity Threat Response

From the perspective of ITRT, denial of the threat in this context presents some ambiguities for our analysis. If, at the stage of appraisal of a behavior that is salient to their progression in event workplaces, women do not feel that this relates to their social identity, then the approach of ITRT may not be relevant. However, one-third of the women in our study did identify such a threat, and previous studies have identified the negative impacts of gender-based discrimination in the event industry across multiple settings (K. Dashper et al. 2023; Platt and Finkel 2020). It is likely, then, that this denial is an identity-protection response (Petriglieri 2011), which is not capable of eliminating the threat but which maintains it by denying its existence. Petriglieri (2011) argues that identity-protection responses are most likely to occur where individuals feel greater social support for their threatened identity. In the case of the event industry, where women are mostly surrounded by other women, notwithstanding the fact that they are in a minority in leadership roles (IBTM 2022), this social context could explain the prevalence of this type of identity threat response.

However, despite the potential for group coping strategies to be adopted (Branscombe and Ellemers 1998) in this context, where one would assume ingroup identification would be high, this denial appeared to take the form of an individual coping strategy, with many panelists emphasizing how they were not negatively impacted by gender discrimination despite identifying numerous examples of it. This individualistic denial response has previously been shown to be an effective strategy for managing the negative impacts of stress, although not for removing the source of stress, by denying that the problem exists (Miller and Kaiser 2001). Confronting this problem directly would also involve conflict, which can come at a high interpersonal and career cost (Rasinski et al. 2013).

Our analysis did not provide significant examples of the personal/group discrimination discrepancy (Ruggiero and Taylor 1997), which has been a recurrent aspect of previous research in this field, where individuals identify discrimination affecting others but not themselves. The denial of industry-wide discrimination perhaps mitigated this tendency, with our panelists focusing more on their own individual experiences, supporting arguments that women may lack a group consciousness in some settings (Napier et al. 2020) that would support them in developing collective responses to discrimination. This suggests that women working in the event industry would not be able to draw on resources that come from the experience of marginalization, such as solidarity and entrepreneurialism. In other contexts, research has shown how marginalized identity groups can do this to effectively mobilize their identities to fight discrimination (Cha and Roberts 2019), but it may be that the experience of being simultaneously discriminated against and

experiencing a female-majority working environment does not provide the conditions for the development of these resources.

6.2 | Denial as the Devaluation of Threat

We did see evidence in our analysis that favored the devaluation hypothesis (Major and Schmader 1998) as an explanation of the prevalence of denial as a coping strategy for the women in our study. This perspective, in which individuals devalue the domain of discrimination that they are facing and selectively value aspects that favor the individual or their social group, was illuminating for many of the panelists' explanations of their experiences.

> It can be a boys club, but also there is a skew towards women in it due to our natural skill set.
>
> AUS3 R2

This devaluation can lead to psychological disengagement from the domain (Major and Schmader 1998), which we see in some responses, where women feel they had, or may have, no choice but to exit the event industry temporarily or permanently or to create their own business opportunities through entrepreneurship.

> I have noticed that a lot of women who are in the events industry and leave for maternity leave, do not tend to come back into the exact same role as previously. Or they come back much later on when the child is older and so have a long break from the industry.
>
> AUS7 R2

> I had to start my own business to get myself a leadership role. There are not enough leadership tracks for women in businesses and agencies - and more work needs to be done to support not just women but diversity in leadership roles across the industry.
>
> UK3 R3

Some women suggested that although things might have been bad in the past, gendered inequalities no longer exist. This aspect of the phenomenon relates to the work of Stroebe et al. (2009) but can also be part of the "no problem problem" that Rhode (1991) identified.

> This was certainly the case years ago however this is no longer what I see or experience.
>
> AUS13 R3

The motivation for individuals to seek individual reasons for their career advancement, or lack of it, can be explained by the need to preserve a sense of agency and self-worth in the face of pervasive discrimination. This psychological need may be another factor that explains the denial of discrimination seen in this study; acknowledging the realities of discrimination can be traumatizing (Kobrynowicz and Branscombe 1997; Trimble O'Connor and Kmec 2020), and identifying the source of this discrimination as a minority group in most events organizations could be especially challenging to individual self-worth, as well as positive evaluations of women's collective social identity at work.

Some women believed that when their leadership careers did not progress as quickly or successfully as men's, this was because of their own faults or their own choices rather than the structural inequalities they had experienced. Here, our findings align with F. CROSBY (1984), who found that women will often deny that their gender puts them at a disadvantage in the workplace, instead concluding that they are themselves to blame. Some women were using emotional factors to deny their experiences of gendered inequalities. From an emotional perspective, women can find it hard to accept that other people have animosity against them based on their gender and instead blame the wider group—suggesting that women feel themselves to blame (Rutte et al. 1994).

> I think we've come to expect it so we're a bit more hardy to it than we should be. When I've experienced sexism and sexist attitudes (more than a few times!) you tend to think it's just you and maybe don't see the bigger problems that these attitudes cause.
>
> UK9 R2

Throughout the data, we saw examples of women apportioning blame for their lack of leadership progression to decisions they had personally made. This demonstrates internalized bias, in which women do not blame gendered inequalities but instead internalize the blame to protect their sense of agency within an otherwise demoralizing context (Seron et al. 2018). A clear example of this comes from women talking about their desire to have a family, or the navigation of having children, as the reason their progression was paused, rather than the workplace itself:

> In my own experience though, I think that I have allowed my desire to have a family stop or pause my progression rather than the workplace.
>
> AUS10 R2

> I think the way I navigated motherhood has really stilted my career, but at 48 I am far from done and am determined to make everything I do work wise, from here on in, count.
>
> UK8 R3

And finally, we encountered women who internalized their bias by feeling that because of their choices outside of the workplace, they were somehow not worthy of support or leadership opportunities:

> In my current role, I wanted to expand the business into a different sector, but I then found out that I was pregnant with my second child. This business venture is now being put on hold and potentially passed to someone else. I just feel like I am not worthy of job progression or business development since I can have children.
>
> UK5 R2

There was also a sense that although individuals within the industry might be biased, this did not mean the industry itself had an issue:

> All I see is that there are sexist people mostly men but a few people that behave that way doesn't mean the industry is sexist and has a problem.
>
> UK6 R3

6.3 | Denial as Status Quo Bias

Some panelists explained that although they had experienced sexism during their careers, it had not stopped them from succeeding. Here, we may well be uncovering status quo bias—women's denial of gendered discrimination because they have benefited from the status quo (Derks, Ellemers, et al. 2011):

> It is possible many of us have survived and thrived within the industry and have encountered sexist behaviours along the way.
>
> AUS9 R3

We also saw evidence of the queen bee phenomenon (Staines et al. 1973). For example, we found examples of women dissociating themselves from the experience of other women because they had managed their challenges without issues. This aspect of our analysis supports Ellemers et al. (2010) in finding that denial of discrimination can lead to women treating other women more critically than their male counterparts. As one panelist suggested:

> I'm from a generation that did not have any support in the workplace as a working mother and you were expected to keep both very separate.
>
> AUS3 R2

We also saw some projection onto the wider group about individual issues, with women making statements such as:

> Women don't like to call these actions out.
>
> AUS11 R3

> I think women are their own worst enemy and don't support each other enough.
>
> AUS2 R2

6.4 | Denial as System-Justification

Another perspective that can explain the denial of gender discrimination in this study is the development of system-justification beliefs that women develop to "buffer" the impact of discrimination and to make the system feel fair (Bahamondes et al. 2019). Drawing on expectations and norms within their industry, many of the women on our panels expressed beliefs that operational processes are norms, which cannot be challenged. For the women in our study, this presented as an acceptance that the event sector was challenging for women, but that was just the way it was:

> There's many elements of working in the events sector which make it challenging - but it is part and parcel of the landscape, therefore expected and accepted. It's up to us as individuals to manage this balance for ourselves, and as important for us as leaders to empower our teams to do so.
>
> UK19 R2

Although the event industry's distinct characteristics of unsociable hours, changing working patterns, long working hours, and the need to travel lead to a distinct pattern of gender inequalities, women did not consider these processes to be discriminatory. Rather, they felt that it just could not work for women with any form of caregiving responsibilities.

> [The characteristics of the job can be challenging....] however that is the job so when you sign on for it, you know that is what to expect.
>
> AUS17 R2

Some women felt that interactions with co-workers were gendered but that this did not impact their leadership roles:

> I don't think sexist encounters and attitudes that hold women back are pervasive in the industry. I think sexist encounters and attitudes exist as they do across all of our experienced culture and society, but I think the 'denial' is probably more likely and it happens, but it's not missing opportunities as a result of it' and so it's more dismissible.
>
> UK11 R3

And finally, women felt that sexism and harassment were so deep-rooted that this had become the norm:

> Industry events in particular are rife with inappropriate behaviour and harassment due to encouraged excessive drinking and lack of consequences, and seemingly lack of understanding of what constitutes harassment! I think this is because leadership is of a certain generation where this behaviour was deemed normal and acceptable.
>
> UK13 R3

6.5 | Denial as a Coping Strategy for Women Working in a Gendered Industry

Our analysis has identified the prevalence of denial as a coping strategy for women working in a gendered industry, where despite women forming a majority of the workforce, their progression into leadership roles is stymied by systemic gender discrimination. Our findings suggest that in the event industry, women exonerate the system from bias to justify their own choices and to explain their impeded leadership progression. In

addition, they discuss factors such as children/care commitments as either an individual choice or part of the nature of being a woman; they have no expectations that industries with systems and processes that are inherently discriminatory should change for them. Finally, some of the women also sought to minimize the impact of any perceived discrimination by highlighting their own merit—they had succeeded because of what they did, their own skills, and talents.

To explain how this denial takes shape, we have drawn on four different theoretical perspectives, each one of which suggests reasons why the targets of discrimination may engage in denial: identity threat response theory, devaluation, status quo bias, and system justification. This is exploratory research using qualitative data, and it is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate which of these perspectives provides the strongest explanation of denial strategies in this context. However, taken together, these findings suggest an association between women's experiences of a gendered industry and how they cope with those discriminations through denial.

Figure 1 shows a summary model of the findings of this study. In the first section, selected societal and event industry issues identified in previous research that contribute to gendered inequality regimes have been highlighted, where they are of particular relevance to this study. These issues are appraised by women, who develop beliefs about the likely causes and consequences of these issues, which we have shown in the second section of the model and which we have identified from the perspectives of four different theories of denial as a coping strategy, which is then shown in the third section of the model. Women's denial of discrimination then reinforces the gendered inequality regime in the event industry, of which we have identified a number of key elements. This process then feeds back into the societal and industry conditions that women experience when developing their careers in events, in a feedback loop that perpetuates gendered discrimination in the industry.

7 | Conclusion

Gender inequalities are a persistent barrier to women's career development, and in businesses that are dominated by women, this creates a wicked problem—women make up most of the workforce, but this is not reflected in the number of women in senior roles. Our research, therefore, focused on how women in these industries cope with this and progress their leadership careers. Our findings demonstrated that the women working in events have experienced multiple discriminatory moments based on their gender, which have significantly impacted their career development and access to leadership opportunities.

The women in our study were aware of the practical constraints that made balancing work and domestic roles and

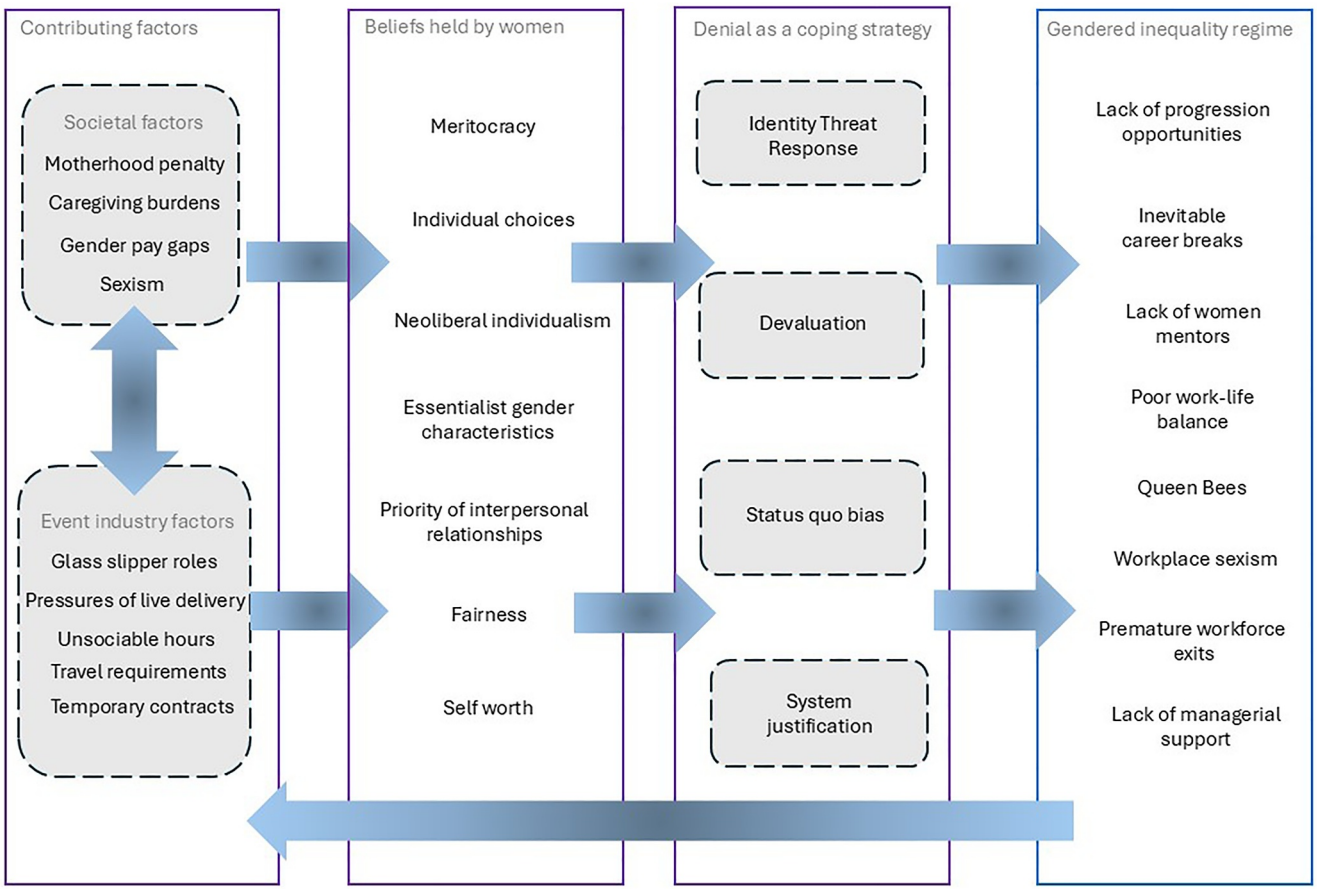

FIGURE 1 | The role of denial as a coping strategy in gendered inequality regimes.

responsibilities almost impossible but were using the denial of group-directed discrimination as a strategy to cope with this. The denial in which our participants engaged reflects and supports gendered substructures. They reproduce gendered inequalities within the event industry by devaluing women's work, supporting occupational ideas that exclude those with caring responsibilities, and framing women as unsuitable for leadership roles. In this way, they distance women from structured inequalities and help women to explain why their leadership careers had not—or were not—progressing, thus providing positive psychological benefits. Our analysis has shown that this is an example of an identity-protection response to a gender identity threat (Petriglieri 2011), which may be explained by the way in which it protects women from damage to their self-worth and sense of agency (Major and Schmader 1998) in the face of a threat that they are able to deny by drawing on beliefs about the inevitability of discrimination in the event industry, justifying the system as it stands, and preserving the status quo (Napier et al. 2020). The individual psychological benefits that arise from denial of discrimination do not help other members of the group—in fact, they can undermine group-based efforts to address inequalities (Mun and Kodama 2022).

A specific contribution of this study to this field is that it has a focus on how women cope with discrimination while working in an industry where women are in a majority in the workforce. The industry is gendered, but not in the way that the majority of prior analyses of gender identity threat would assume—it is not dominated by men. Men, however, do occupy the majority of leadership roles in the event industry, leading to specific identity threat dynamics. We identified that from the perspective of ITRT (Petriglieri 2011), the women in our sample were employing denial as an identity-protection response, despite not being in a minority position within their organizations. This reinforces findings from previous studies of women using denial to explain their leadership progression (Branscombe et al. 1999) in industries that were male-dominated, suggesting that further research into women's strategies for coping with identity threats in majority-female sectors could help to uncover new explanations for why this happens. We have also identified that in the absence of a minority context for the identity threat, women may not be able to draw on identity resources (Cha and Roberts 2019) that have been built up during collective struggles over time, further limiting the collective response to gender discrimination in female-dominated settings through identity mobilization strategies. Finally, we have provided evidence for the "queen bee" phenomenon (Ellemers et al. 2010) in the event industry, despite the fact that it is an industry where the majority of employees are women. Although we did not see many examples of this, it was apparent in the responses of some women who had been in the industry for a long time and who were now quite senior in the industry. Prior explanations for this phenomenon would suggest that women adopt behaviors and attitudes that mirror a dominant male social group during their careers over time, but in this context it may be that this emerges only once women have gained access to the male-dominated leadership group in the industry. This phenomenon requires further investigation in female-dominated settings.

Finally, we present a model of the findings that explains contributing factors and theoretical perspectives that can explain how women cope with gender discrimination in workplaces and professions where they are not a minority group. The model can be used for research into other industries by including alternative industry-specific factors, which may suggest the nature of other gendered inequality regimes. In workplaces, this model can be used in either direction, as a guide to identifying the factors that produce these regimes and their nature and the kinds of denial that women employees may express, or equally to work backward from understanding the role of denial in the lived experiences of women employees to diagnose the underlying causes of these coping strategies.

7.1 | Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Given this study's exploratory nature, the argument that denial is an identity-protection coping strategy needs to be empirically tested in a variety of contexts and situations to establish the link between this denial and its perceived psychological benefits. Further, the scope of this study meant other types of resistance to gender inequalities were not examined, and we recommend Smolović Jones et al. (2021) on resistance to gender equality initiatives to scholars wishing to explore this further.

In addition, although this study focused solely on gender, the situation can be worse for women facing intersectional discriminatory barriers. Our sample was recruited purposively, using the criteria outlined in the methodology section, but we did not develop strategies to ensure diversity within this group. As a result, our sample was unintentionally made up of exclusively white women, who self-nominated to join this study. Gender does not operate in isolation (Cohen et al. 2023); there are complex dynamics leading to discrimination, including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, class, and gender identity. The women in this study did not discuss many, if any, intersectional issues—women with such privileges may be less likely to acknowledge gender discrimination, as they do not face the same levels as women with intersectional issues. Scholars who wish to focus on denial or distancing strategies should widen their perspective beyond gender to paint a fuller picture of barriers to women's career progression.

Finally, there was an indication of subjective satisfaction with career progression from some women who reported happiness with their achievements *despite* the discrimination they had experienced. This indicates that the pursuit of subjective well-being might be an underlying driver in the denial of discrimination and/or the disregard of solidarity—there is not enough evidence of this within the study, and this merits further investigation. Likewise, it is likely that issues around social identity and memberships of in/outgroups at work may contribute to individual coping responses. Our sample was composed of women who had remained within the event industry and developed leadership careers despite the challenges that they faced, but further research could also be carried out with women who had not progressed in their careers or who had chosen to leave the industry, which might reveal additional

dynamics at play in the development of women's careers in event workplaces.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.