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Social Equity in Municipally Owned Corporations: Do Women in the Boardroom Make a Difference to the Gender Pay Gap?

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ABSTRACT

Representative bureaucracy theory posits that the presence of less-advantaged social groups in public leadership positions is an important driver of social equity among the recipients of public services and the public servants who provide them. To evaluate whether active representation can lead to improvements in social equity within arms-length public service organizations, this article presents an analysis of the relationship between women in the boardroom and the gender pay gap in 102 large municipally owned corporations (MOCs) in England for a 6-year period (2017–2022). The findings suggest that MOCs led by female chief executive officers (CEOs) have a lower pay gap between male and female employees. The presence of more women directors on MOC boards is also negatively related to the pay gap, especially in MOCs led by male CEOs. The findings highlight the importance of board gender representation to address social equity in arms-length public service organizations.

1 | Introduction

Researchers and policy-makers increasingly emphasize the critical role that public managers and organizations play in addressing social equity (McDonald and McCandless 2022; OECD 2024; Young, Wiley, and Cepiku 2023). Within this context, the representation of disadvantaged groups in positions in which they can exercise meaningful discretion is regarded as an important mechanism through which inequalities can be tackled (Dolan 2000; Sowa and Coleman Selden 2003). Such representational discretion may be especially significant for female leaders, since women make up the majority of the workforce in large parts of the public sector, but remain badly under-represented in leadership roles (OECD 2016). However, despite growing scholarly interest in gender responsiveness within public organizations (Alberti, Diaz-Rioseco, and Visconti 2022; Rubin and Bartle 2023), surprisingly little research addresses female leaders and gender equality in the arms-length organizations, such as municipally owned corporations (MOCs), that increasingly provide public services.

Representative bureaucracy theory suggests that female leaders of public service organizations have the opportunity and motivation to actively represent other women by facilitating improvements in their working conditions and careers (Hooker and Guy 2022; Johnston 2019). Female public leaders can act as "femocrats," advocating for and mentoring other women, and enacting personnel management practices that advance gender equality (Chappell 2002; Eisenstein 1996). One area in which such active representation may be especially impactful is gender pay equality (Bishu and Alkadry 2017). However, little systematic research has addressed women's representation in public leadership positions and the gender pay gap, especially within MOCs, which may be more riven with inequalities because their personnel management practices differ from those of the public bodies that sponsor them (Papenfuß and Schmidt 2021) and they are subject to "looser pay regulations" (Keppeler and Papenfuß 2022). To better understand the dynamics of social equity in arms-length public service organizations, in this paper, the presence of women in the boardroom of 102 large MOCs in England and the gap between the mean and median hourly pay of men and women within those MOCs is investigated using panel regression techniques.

In response to economic and political pressures, local governments across the globe are exploring alternative approaches for the management and delivery of public services (Bel and Elston 2024; Ferry, Ahrens, and Khalifa 2019). In particular, local governments are increasingly transferring responsibility for the provision of many public services to MOCs (Andrews et al. 2020; Van Genugten et al. 2023). This movement has spurred a corporatization of the democratic state, with local public services often managed by professional managers at arms-length from the politicians elected to represent citizens' views and priorities (Grossi and Reichard 2008). Conceptually speaking, MOCs are legally-separate, majority-owned, type 3 arms-length bodies—"private law-based organizations established by or on behalf of local government(s)" (Van Genugten, van Thiel, and Voorn 2020, 6), which can be operated on either a profit-making or nonprofit basis. They are typically governed by boards of directors initially appointed by the parent government, with either a single tier board structure in which the chairman and chief executive officer (CEO) are supported by appointed executive and nonexecutive directors, as in the UK and Scandinavia, or a two-tier structure incorporating a nonexecutive supervisory board that sits above the executive board, as in most continental European countries.

As the use of MOCs has become more widespread, so too have questions about accountability gaps associated with the removal of services from the direct control of politicians (Klausen and Winsvold 2021). Because arms-length management insulates MOCs from direct democratic pressures, corporatization can be detrimental to efforts to address wicked issues, such as social equity, especially in relation to the pay and working conditions of employees providing public services (Keppeler and Papenfuß 2022; Van Genugten, van Thiel, and Voorn 2020). In particular, concerns about the implications of divergent employment practices for gender equality have arisen because many MOCs operate under private company law, which means they are not bound by the same regulatory constraints as the public bodies to whom they are accountable (Andrews, Clifton, and Ferry 2022). To address these challenges some governments have mandated corporate governance codes for MOCs, while others have required them to meet the gender pay reporting requirements that apply to private companies (Papenfuß et al. 2018). Nevertheless, while evidence on the representation of women on the boards of MOCs is now slowly emerging (see Van Genugten et al. 2023), systematic research has yet to investigate the potential for the female directors on those boards to actively represent other women.

Representative bureaucracy theorists argue that the representation of women in leadership positions within government is likely to result in improved outcomes for other women within the public sector (Dolan 2000). Although there is growing evidence on the nature of gender representation and social equity within "pure" public organizations (Hooker and Guy 2022), almost no attention has been paid to gender equality issues within the arms-length organizations increasingly responsible for providing public services. In particular, whether women in the boardroom of MOCs can help to improve social equity by reducing the gender pay gap has yet to be investigated or whether the presence of more female directors influences the decision-making of male MOC leaders in relation to pay inequality. This is surprising because gender equality is one of the seventeen United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and MOCs are regarded as important vehicles for the achievement of those goals (Ahrend 2023). Evidence on the relationship between women in the boardroom of MOCs and the gap between the pay of men and women in those organizations can therefore tell us much about the potential for active representation to result in improved social equity within arms-length public service organizations.

Can female CEOs help to improve social equity by reducing gender pay inequality in MOCs? Does greater female representation on MOC boards reduce the divergence between men and women's pay? In what ways might female representation matter in MOCs led by men? In this paper, representative bureaucracy theory and research on women's leadership and social equity is utilized to develop hypotheses about the gender pay gap within MOCs. The hypotheses are tested by analyzing the mean and median gender pay gap in 102 MOCs in England for the period 2017–2022. English MOCs now play a pivotal role in providing many different local public services (Ferry et al. 2018). They are not covered by public sector pay structures, but are subject to UK equality and diversity legislation relating to public service organizations. Furthermore, large MOCs are also bound by the statutory gender pay reporting regulations that apply to both public and private organizations, making them an interesting case for examining whether women in the boardroom influence the gender pay gap.

In the next part of the paper, the management and governance of MOCs will be discussed. Thereafter, the literatures on representative bureaucracy, social equity, and corporate governance will be utilized to develop hypotheses relating to women's presence in the boardroom and gender pay equality within MOCs. Following that, the data and methods are introduced, before the results of the statistical analysis of the relationship between women in the boardroom and the gender pay gap in English MOCs are presented and interpreted. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

2 | The Management and Governance of Municipally Owned Corporations

One of the principal rationales for the use of MOCs is that they "replace politics by professionalism" (Bourdeaux 2008) by insulating local public managers from politicians who have an electoral incentive for interfering in their decisions (Klausen and Winsvold 2021). By enhancing managerial discretion, corporatized public service organizations, such as MOCs, are also often seen as a means for commercializing public services making them financially independent and competitive, with more flexible labour relations (World Bank 2016). To achieve these goals, the process of creating a MOC, known as "corporatization," legally separates public bodies from the MOCs that they set up. However, splitting the public ownership and managerial control of MOCs in this way can potentially create a democratic deficit that threatens the achievement of wider socio-political goals, such as social equity and gender equality.

For critics of the use of MOCs, it can "reduce accountability of public officials", because "decisions are taken out of public view and are made to appear technical" (Rubin 1988, 543). MOCs are managed at arms-length by their public parents and are rooted in a series of complex accountability relations between citizens, elected politicians, and the public managers responsible for policy implementation (Tavares and Camões 2007). To uphold public accountability, the parents of MOCs are required to design governance structures that prevent MOC managers from promoting their personal interests over those of the wider citizenry (Olsen, Solstad, and Torsteinsen 2017). Since most MOCs are subject to private company law, this is typically achieved through the appointment of boards of directors.

Corporate governance scholars highlight that boards of directors represent the apex of a company's internal governance and that the way in which they are constituted has important implications for their accountability and performance (Hart 1995; Simpson 2014). Because MOCs are hybrid organizations blending a commercial attitude towards financial viability with the goal of creating public value for multiple stakeholders (Thomasson 2009), the boards of directors play a critical role in ensuring that MOCs can resolve these competing goals by setting strategic priorities, developing organizational policies, and monitoring and advising on managerial decisions (Olsen, Solstad, and Torsteinsen 2017). In particular, MOC boards are especially active in decisions relating to resource allocation within the organization (Maine, Uman, and Florin-Samuelsson 2023). Moreover, MOC directors are also personally liable for the ongoing viability of the organization, motivating them to take their role seriously (Harrison 2019). As a result, the composition of MOC boards is an important determinant of the ways in which they seek to create public value and achieve socially beneficial outcomes, as well as commercial value and financial sustainability (Papenfuß and Schmidt 2021). Since MOC boards are involved in monitoring pay negotiations and have a range of opportunities to affect how people are managed, mentored and supported, it is likely that they will be influential in shaping the dynamics of representative bureaucracy and social equity.

3 | Gender Representation and Pay Inequality in Municipally Owned Corporations

The pursuit of social equity within the workplace is a major concern of public policy-makers in many countries (e.g., Department of Labor 2024; Employment and Social Development Canada 2022; Workplace Equity Commission 2024). In particular, governments across the world are increasingly concerned about organizational practices that can address gender pay inequality (OECD 2022). Within this context, management researchers are now investigating the ways in which women themselves can tackle inequality, especially through their representation on boards of directors (e.g., Kirsch 2018; Terjesen, Sealy, and Singh 2009). Several studies have found that the gender pay gap within private sector organizations is lower when there are more women on boards of directors, particularly when they are in senior board positions with greater authority (e.g., Abendroth et al. 2017; Ahamed, Wen, and Gupta 2019). However, to date, evidence on the effects of representation in the leadership of public service organizations and the gender pay gap is emerging only slowly.

Based on representative bureaucracy theory, public administration researchers argue that female public service leaders will actively represent other women within the organizations that they manage due to their dedication to advancing women's welfare when given the discretion to do so (Dolan 2000; Wilkins and Keiser 2006). In doing so, such "femocrats" can be regarded as being in the vanguard of feminist activism for social change (Eisenstein 1996) Nevertheless, the small number of studies of female leaders of public service organizations and the gender pay gap provide equivocal support for these arguments. Funk and Molina's (2022) study of Brazilian municipalities highlights that female mayors are associated with a smaller gender pay gap among municipal workers, as is a larger proportion of female councilors within the local government. Andrews' (2023) analysis of social housing organizations in Wales suggests that female CEOs are able to reduce the pay gap between male and female employees, but that a higher percentage of women among the top earners in those organizations does not make any difference. By contrast, Rabovsky and Lee (2018) find that in US public universities female presidents and a higher proportion of senior female academics and managers are all unrelated to the gender pay gap.

There are two potentially important barriers to achieving gender equality outcomes that may be responsible for these mixed findings on representative bureaucracy and social equity. First, public leaders sometimes have limited authority to make remuneration decisions because pay determination in the public sector is often guided by national pay bargaining structures and trade union activity that privileges male interests (Elliott, Lucifora, and Meurs 1999). In such circumstances, women leaders may require particularly substantial discretion in order to enact changes that benefit other women in their organization (Sowa and Coleman Selden 2003). Second, the movement from passive to active representation may be hampered by practices of tokenism, whereby a modest increase in the representation of women in senior positions to meet feminist demands for equality is insufficient to overcome systemic biases towards male preferment (Kanter 1977). To address this latter issue, scholars and policy-makers suggest that an ever larger proportion of women in leadership roles is needed to ensure that gender equality issues receive the attention that they deserve (Miller and McTavish 2014; OECD 2016).

The potential for MOC directors to exercise meaningful discretion may be greater than for leaders of other types of public service organization due to the legal autonomy that MOCs have from their parent organizations. As a result, CEOs of MOCs have more freedom to hire, fire, promote, and support employees than is the case in "pure" public organizations, because they are less constrained by trade unions and the tighter pay structures associated with the public sector (Van Genugten et al. 2023). At the same time, female leaders of MOCs may be more dedicated to advancing the rights of female employees than leaders in purely private firms (Riccucci 2018). Like their counterparts in "pure" public organizations, public managers working in arms-length organizations tend to be more committed to social equity than private sector managers (Heres and Lasthuizen 2012). Moreover, MOC leaders are also likely to face more gender equality regulations and scrutiny than business leaders. For instance, in the UK, organizations undertaking public functions, including arms-length service organizations, must heed the public sector equality duty requiring them to ensure that "policies and services are appropriate and accessible to all," including their personnel management policies (Government Equalities Office 2011). Since discretion and motivation are salient for women's representational behavior (Nielsen 2015) and there are institutional pressures towards social equity surrounding the leaders of public service organizations more generally, female leaders in MOCs are more likely to pay attention to the gender pay gap. Hence, the following is proposed:

Hypothesis 1. *The presence of a female CEO is negatively related to the gender pay gap in MOCs.*

The fundamental premise of representative bureaucracy theory is that an increase in the proportion of bureaucrats drawn from the same social grouping (i.e., passive representation) results in the implementation of initiatives that advance the interests of that social group (i.e., active representation) (Wang 2024). Due to the common identity and experiences that representing bureaucrats share with the groups they represent, they better understand their needs and are motivated to achieve social changes through their public service (Miller and McTavish 2014; Pedersen and Nielsen 2020; Riccucci and Van Ryzin 2017). When there are more women in the boardroom of MOCs, it is likely that decisions pertaining to gender equality outcomes will become progressively more influenced by feminist principles and gender solidarity (Ely 1994; Tarkovska, Gabaldon, and Ratiu 2023). In addition to the increased number of women participating in key board decisions, as the female presence within the boardroom grows stronger, it will become more difficult for the leadership of an organization to maintain a status quo in which women's interests are subordinated to those of men. In particular, a larger proportion of female directors means that women have more voting rights and that there are stronger normative pressures to make decisions and outcomes more inclusive (Kirsch 2022). All of the above forces seem likely to result in policies and practices that will enhance gender equality throughout an organization, leading to:

Hypothesis 2. *The presence of more female directors is negatively related to the gender pay gap in MOCs.*

The potential for active representation to occur as the number of female directors on MOC boards grows may be especially important in MOCs led by male CEOs. As women's voting rights become a more significant determinant of boardroom decisions and the normative pressures associated with the presence of more women grow stronger, so male CEOs may feel increasingly influenced by gender equality considerations (Kirsch 2022). According to the representative bureaucracy literature, higher levels of contact between under and over-represented groups in more diverse work-groups can generate "contagion effects," whereby bureaucrats from dominant groups embrace the values of less-advantaged groups (Meier and McCrea 2024). This process may be accelerated in an environment in which performance on social equity is increasingly valued (Johnson and Svara 2011). Hence, male CEOs may take greater care to respond effectively to normative and societal pressures towards consensus on feminist issues, such as pay differentials, within more gender diverse boards (Ely 1994). Thus, given the potential interactive effects of female board representation and male leadership on gender equality outcomes, this study proposes:

Hypothesis 3. *The presence of more female directors will negatively moderate the positive relationship between having a male CEO and the gender pay gap in MOCs.*

4 | Data and Measures

The units of analysis for this study are the full population of 102 MOCs in England that submitted gender pay data to the UK government during the study period, 2017–2022. MOCs are operated by the main types of local government in the country: (i) London boroughs; (ii) metropolitan boroughs; (iii) unitary authorities; (iv) county councils; and, (v) district councils. Types (i)–(iii) are all single-tier governments operating mostly in urban areas, while county councils are the upper tier in the two-tier system present in rural areas, with district councils being the lower tier. These governments are elected bodies, which operate a Westminster-style cabinet system wherein senior members of the ruling political party are advised on policy implementation by professional local government managers led by a CEO.

Single tier governments are responsible for: education, social care, environmental services, highways, economic development, social housing, public health, and leisure and culture services. In the two-tier system, county councils provide all these services, except for waste collection, social housing, public health, and leisure services, which district councils provide. The total annual expenditure on these services amounts to around £100–120 bn, representing about a quarter of public sector expenditure on services in England (circa £400–500bn) (HM Treasury 2020). This expenditure is largely financed by grants and transfer payments from central government.

MOCs operated by the different types of local governments in England were identified by inspecting local governments' audited annual statements of account to find corporate entities in which governments register an interest. Through this process, 884 corporations were found that met the definition of municipal ownership proposed in the corporatization literature (Van Genugten et al. 2023). Most English MOCs are small to medium enterprises employing fewer than 250 people and are not required by law to submit gender pay data to the UK government (see next). However, 102 of the largest MOCs submitted pay gap information, thereby permitting detailed investigation of the determinants of pay inequalities within those MOCs responsible for employing the largest numbers of people and serving the largest number of citizens.

4.1 | Dependent Variables

Two dependent variables are used for the statistical analysis: the mean and the median gap in men and women's average earnings for each MOC using figures for the period 2017/2018 to 2022/2023. The UK government requires all organizations with 250 or more employees to report gender pay data annually. The names of all the majority-owned MOCs identified above were searched in the UK gender pay reporting service (https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/viewing/download), with pay gap information found for 102 MOCs between 2017 and 2022. To create a MOC-level dataset for the analysis, the registered company number for the reporting MOCs was searched in the UK Companies House database and inputted into Bureau Van Dijk's FAME database to obtain MOC-level independent and control variables for the analysis.

4.2 | Independent Variables

In England, MOC boards of directors are one-tier boards, with directors initially appointed by a local government committee on the basis of their skills and expertise. Thereafter, director appointments are managed by the MOC board itself independently of the local government. As such, MOC boards of directors operate at arms-length from democratic institutions and are not elected by the local population.

The representation of women in the boardroom of MOCs is measured in two ways. First, whether a MOC has a female CEO is measured using a dichotomous variable coded one for MOCs with a *female CEO* and zero for MOCs led by a *male CEO*. This is a commonly used measure in pay gap studies (Rabovsky and Lee 2018). Second, following prior research, the percentage of female directors on each MOC board of directors is used to gauge whether higher levels of board gender representation per se is associated with a smaller gender pay gap. It is anticipated that both these women leaders' variables will be negatively related to the gender pay gap. To test the third hypothesis on the moderating effects of female representation on the discretion of male organizational leaders, a *male CEO* dichotomous variable is created that is coded one for MOCs with a male CEO and zero for those with a female CEO.

Self-reported information in the FAME database was checked to identify female directors. This was supplemented with an internet-based search of MOC, local government, and media reports to identify relevant pronouns used in association with directors with missing gender information or gender-ambiguous names (e.g., Jean, Lesley).

4.3 | Control Variables

Six further variables are added to the statistical models to adjust for other relevant determinants of the gender pay gap. First, *organizational size* measured as the log of the assets each MOC holds. Large organizations have greater capacity to address inequalities in the workplace (Walsh 2007), but can confront more injustices requiring redress, meaning that initiatives to promote pay equality have less impact. Second, *organizational age* calculated as the years elapsed since the year in which the MOC was set up. Older organizations tend to resist change (Le Mens, Hannan, and Pólos 2015) and may exhibit more gender pay inequality than newer ones.

Third, the *profit orientation* of each MOC was captured by incorporating a dummy variable coded 1 if the legal form of the MOC permitted share equity to be distributed (i.e., companies limited by shares and limited liability partnerships) and 0 if not (typically companies limited by guarantee). Profit-making MOCs may be able to generate additional resources to reduce pay gaps (Meng 2004). Fourth, *local government partners* are measured as the number of local governments that are partners in each MOC. It may be particularly challenging for female leaders to shape the personnel management practices in MOCs with multiple partners due to competing or conflicting logics and values among the parent organizations (Johnston 2017).

Fifth, the potential impact of *occupational structure* on the gender pay gap is proxied by including four variables capturing the percentage of women in each salary quartile within each MOC. The presence of more women in lower paid work may be positively related to pay inequality, while the presence of more women in higher paid work may be negatively related to such inequality. Finally, three dummy variables were created to capture whether a MOC provides administrative, human, or technical services. To do so, MOCs were initially categorized according to the local public service budget lines used by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government: administrative support; cultural services; economic development; educational support; environmental services; leisure services; social care; social housing; and transportation. Thereafter, MOCs were grouped together as either administrative, human, or technical types of service, with the reference group being administrative services. Human service providers tend to employ more female staff (Guy 2017), which may mean that historical pay inequalities are harder to overcome or that feminist mobilization for pay rises is more impactful.

The descriptive statistics for all the variables are shown in Table 1. The table indicates that the mean pay gap in English MOCs between 2017 and 2022 was 6.23% and the median pay gap was 4.89%, highlighting that men were paid, on average, around 5%–6% more per hour than women, slightly less than the average gap of 7%–9% in the UK economy as a whole (Office for National Statistics 2023), but similar to the pay gap with the local governments that own the sample MOCs (own calculations). A female CEO was present in about 30% of MOCs at some point during the study period, with boards being comprised, on average, of 35.6% women (nearly 4 out of the average number of about 10 directors per MOC board). Gender representation on this sample of MOC boards is therefore similar to that for large publicly-listed FTSE companies operating in the UK private sector (FTSE Women Leaders 2023).

The MOCs in the sample are medium-sized organizations holding around £24 million of assets and are, on average, 12 years old, with most therefore having been created during a time in which researchers observed a dramatic increase in MOC use among English local governments (Ferry et al. 2018).

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	Min	Max	St. Dev.
Mean pay gap	6.23	−35.70	50.50	10.88
Median pay gap	4.90	−39.70	44.70	10.92
% female directors	35.64	0	100.00	19.68
Female CEO	0.30	0	1	0.46
Assets (£000s)	24083.88	0.001	640404.00	63712.91
Age	12.00	2	37	7.48
Profit-making	0.58	0	1	0.49
Number of local government partners	1.31	1	7	0.99
% women in lower salary quartile	59.71	0	99.80	25.933
% women in lower middle salary quartile	58.16	0	99.30	26.37
% women in upper middle salary quartile	53.50	0	100.00	28.36
% women in upper salary quartile	49.43	0.80	99.10	25.11
Human services	0.57	0	1	0.496
Technical services	0.26	0	1	0.438
Administrative services	0.18	0	1	0.381

Note: Number of cases: 102; observations: 420.

The majority of the MOCs (58%) are profit-making entities and are owned by only one local government. The occupational structure figures highlight that women comprise the majority of the workforce in the first three salary quartiles but are marginally in the minority within the top pay quartile. Most of the MOCs (57%) provide human services, such as social housing, with around a quarter of MOCs providing technical services, like transportation and nearly 20% providing administrative services (e.g., IT, HRM).

Correlations between the variables used for the statistical analysis are displayed in Table 2. A logged version of the organizational size variable was used for the correlation and regression analysis to normalize its distribution. There is a positive correlation between the two measures of the gender pay gap, though this correlation is nowhere near perfect, highlighting that mean and median pay gap figures capture slightly different aspects of gender-based pay differentials within MOCs. Nevertheless, there are negative correlations between both these measures and the presence of a female chief executive and the % of female directors. There are numerous other correlations between the study variables of interest. In particular, positive correlations between the pay gap measures and a higher percentage of women in the two lowest salary quartiles, negative correlations between those measures and MOCs providing human services and positive correlations between the pay gap indicators and MOCs providing administrative services.

5 | Statistical Results

Table 3 presents two sets of Hausman–Taylor (HT) estimates. The HT estimator accommodates time-invariant independent variables (e.g., legal form of MOC) and permits correlations between time-varying variables and the individual effect. Hence, potentially endogenous time-varying variables can be instrumented using deviations from their own means, which, here, addresses endogeneity concerns relating to the female CEO-gender pay gap relationship. The second column of Table 3 shows the model for the mean gender pay gap in English MOCs, with the third column showing the results for the median gender pay gap. Multicollinearity is unproblematic as the average variance inflation factor (VIF) score is 2.95. Dichotomous year dummies control for the impact of specific events, such as national elections or the covid-19 pandemic. Hausman tests reject the null hypothesis of no misspecification when comparing random and fixed effects estimations of the statistical model, but affirm the null hypothesis when comparing fixed and HT estimations, confirming that the HT estimator is robust for the analysis.

Turning first to the control variables, the results suggest that large MOCs have a bigger gender pay gap: in both models the coefficient for organizational size is positive and statistically significant. This implies that efforts to address gender pay inequality are more challenging in larger organizations. By contrast, older MOCs appear to have a smaller median gender pay gap, indicating that the culture change relating to gender equality (Engeli and Mazur 2022) is more difficult for newly corporatized organizations. Profit-making MOCs and those owned by more local government partners seem to be no more or less likely to have a large or small gender pay gap. Unsurprisingly, the gender pay gap appears to be narrower when the top two salary quartiles comprise more women, while it is wider when the bottom two salary quartiles are predominantly women. MOCs providing human services seem to have greater pay equality than those providing either technical or administrative services.

TABLE 2 | Correlations.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Mean gender pay gap														
2. Median pay gap	0.681***													
3. % Female directors	−0.172***	−0.087*												
4. Female CEO	−0.236***	−0.114**	0.459***											
5. Assets (£000s) (log)	0.032	0.208***	−0.067	0.078										
6. Age	−0.081*	0.025	−0.017	−0.070	0.434***									
7. Profit-making	0.089*	0.013	−0.441***	−0.224***	−0.119**	−0.094*								
8. *N* of local government partners	−0.051	0.028	−0.162***	−0.040	0.170***	0.028	0.167***							
9. % women in lower salary quartile	0.509***	0.314***	0.084*	−0.026	−0.360***	−0.386***	−0.025	−0.112**						
10. % women in lower middle salary quartile	0.407***	0.116**	0.124**	−0.034	−0.326***	−0.378***	−0.069	−0.108**	0.815***					
11. % women in upper middle salary quartile	0.267***	−0.052	0.157***	0.048	−0.328***	−0.466***	−0.032	−0.107**	0.745***	0.837***				
12. % women in upper salary quartile	0.137***	−0.126***	0.154***	0.068	−0.367***	−0.474***	0.028	−0.069	0.743***	0.804***	0.895***			
13. Human services	−0.202***	−0.179***	0.519***	0.287***	−0.013	−0.128***	−0.597***	−0.143***	0.130***	0.200***	0.220***	0.256***		
14. Technical services	−0.090*	0.024	−0.354***	−0.248***	0.189***	0.365***	0.334***	0.249***	−0.415***	−0.487***	−0.506***	−0.492***	−0.673***	
15. Administrative services	0.366***	0.205***	−0.268***	−0.089*	−0.200***	−0.253***	0.393***	−0.100**	0.307***	0.298***	0.295***	0.232***	−0.529***	−0.272***

Note: Number of observations: 420.
*$p \leq 0.10$.
**$p \leq 0.05$.
***$p \leq 0.01$.

TABLE 3 | Women in the boardroom and the gender pay gap in English MOCs (2017–2022).

Variable	Mean pay gap	Median pay gap
Female CEO	−3.434** (1.530)	−2.289** (1.059)
% female directors	−0.068* (0.042)	−0.024 (0.030)
Assets (£000s) (log)	0.799* (0.438)	2.310*** (0.472)
Organizational age	−0.079 (0.110)	−0.294*** (0.108)
Profit-making	−0.158 (1.540)	−0.408 (1.678)
Number of local government partners	−0.431 (0.521)	−0.118 (0.613)
% women in lower salary quartile	0.191*** (0.044)	0.250*** (0.056)
% women in lower middle salary quartile	0.153*** (0.044)	0.150*** (0.056)
% women in upper middle salary quartile	0.031 (0.029)	−0.136*** (0.034)
% women in upper salary quartile	−0.266*** (0.050)	−0.273*** (0.053)
Human services	−6.070** (2.623)	−5.101* (2.665)
Technical services	−5.264* (3.201)	−4.630 (3.384)
Constant	−1.723 (6.178)	−9.417 (7.206)
Wald chi^2	210.93***	239.04***

Note: Number of observations = 420. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Year effects not reported.
*$p \leq 0.10$.
**$p \leq 0.05$.
***$p \leq 0.01$.

The results presented in Table 3 offer strong confirmation of the first hypothesis that female CEOs can actively represent female employees and improve social equity. The results for the presence of a female CEO within a MOC are consistent across both pay gap measures. Female-led MOCs have a smaller mean and median gender pay gap than those led by men—in both regression models the female CEO coefficient is statistically significant and negative. Substantive interpretation of the coefficient indicates that between 2017 and 2022 female CEOs were associated with a 2.3%–3.4% lower gender pay gap, which is a sizeable improvement in the equity of compensation experienced by female employees.

The presence of more female directors on the board has a negative and statistically significant relationship with gender pay inequality for only one of the two pay gap measures—the mean gender pay gap. Furthermore, this relationship is weakly significant, so there is only modest support for the second hypothesis regarding the potential benefits of the presence of more women in the boardroom. To explore the possibility that female representation on MOC boards per se must reach a critical mass before active representation occurs two further tests were undertaken. First, a squared version of the % female directors variable was included in the models. However, inclusion of this measure did not increase the explanatory power of the models and neither the base nor squared female director coefficients were statistically significant. Second, following the corporate governance literature (e.g., Torchia, Calabrò, and Huse 2011), a dichotomous variable coded one for organizations with more than three female directors was then substituted for the % female directors measure, but the coefficient for this variable was not statistically significant either (results available on request). These supplementary tests suggest that critical mass arguments did not apply for the gender pay gap in English MOCs during this study period.

Evidence for Hypothesis 3 regarding the "contagion effect" of female board representation in male-led MOCs is provided by the coefficient for the interaction between % female directors and male CEO in Table 4. This coefficient is statistically significant and negative for both gender pay gap measures, suggesting that the presence of more women directors in the boardroom may help to reduce pay inequalities in MOCs that are led by male CEOs. To investigate this relationship further, Figure 1 depicts the slopes around the intercept value for the pay gap for MOCs with male and female CEOs when women's board representation is one standard deviation below and above the mean level.

Figure 1 shows that the mean gender pay gap for MOCs with male CEOs may be much larger than that for MOCs with female CEOs when there are low levels of female representation on the board, but that at high levels of female board representation the gender pay gap between MOCs with male and female CEOs is considerably reduced. When female representation on the board of an MOC is one standard deviation above the mean percentage it is, on average, associated with a gender pay gap that is almost 5% lower in MOCs with male CEOs. The graph depicting the interactive effect of gender representation and male/female CEO on the median pay gap plotted in Figure 2 points toward a similar divergence between the gender pay gap in MOCs with male CEOs that have high female representation on the board and those that do not. Substantively speaking there appears to be a smaller reduction in the median than the mean pay gap of around 2%, but the findings for both models taken together provide strong support for Hypothesis 3.

6 | Conclusion

Gender pay equality is one of the biggest social equity issues confronting the public sector in the 21st century. However, to date, little is known about the gender pay gap in the arms-length public service organizations in which female public sector professionals increasingly work, or whether women in the boardroom of such organizations might narrow that pay gap. Based on ideas from representative bureaucracy research, this analysis suggests that MOCs led by women may have a smaller gender pay gap, confirming arguments about the discretion female leaders need to actively represent women. In addition, it seems that representation in the boardroom has a positive impact on gender pay equality in male-led MOCs, which implies that women are able to enlist (or constrain) men to become allies in pursuit of improved social equity. The theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed next.

TABLE 4 | Male CEO × % female directors and the gender pay gap.

Variable	Mean pay gap	Median pay gap
Male CEO	8.666*** (2.042)	5.391*** (2.114)
% female directors	0.015 (0.042)	0.026 (0.036)
Male CEO × % female directors	−0.124*** (0.048)	−0.074* (0.041)
Constant	−9.135 (6.670)	−14.097 (7.278)
Wald chi^2	238.46***	241.01***

Note: Number of observations = 420. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Both models include all control variables. Year effects not reported.
*$p \leq 0.10$.
**$p \leq 0.05$.
***$p \leq 0.01$.

The study contributes to the burgeoning literatures on social equity and representative bureaucracy by drawing attention to the neglected issue of their dynamics within arms-length public service organizations that are not subject to direct political control. In doing so, the analysis affirms that active representation is one important way in which the equity concerns associated with such organizations can be addressed (Keppeler and Papenfuß 2022). In particular, female CEOs can promote social equity by enactin reducing gender pay equality in MOCs. At the same time, the analysis highlights the potentially positive impact of female board representation on the values of male CEOs in MOCs. When women are in the majority in boards of directors, male CEOs appear to become more committed to reducing pay inequality, corroborating theoretical claims about the contagion of values in more diverse work teams (Meier and McCrea 2024). Detailed qualitative research in MOCs led by male CEOs with high and low representation of women in the boardroom would cast valuable light on the relationships between male CEOs and female directors and the strategies of influence that those directors might employ.

The results of the study suggest that the recruitment of more women to the boardroom of arms-length public service organizations, especially as CEOs, can improve social equity within those organizations. Policies to increase the representation of women in the boardrooms of MOCs, such as board gender quotas, codes of corporate governance, and "comply or explain" provisions may therefore bolster the impact of female representation on gender pay inequality within arms-length public service organizations (Dahlerup 2021). In addition, the findings presented here indicate that initiatives aimed at improving understanding of how to manage CEO-board relations could be extremely important in determining social equity. For example, investments in "gender-sensitive" management education and training could be increased (European Institute for Gender Equality 2016; Thompson 1995), along with efforts to identify directors with "gender expertise" who could be brought on to the boards of MOCs and other arms-length organizations to address gender equality outcomes (Hoard 2015). More generally, knowledge about what works in improving pay equality in MOCs could be shared with relevant professional networks within the public sector, including through bodies such as the Government Equalities Office in the UK, as well as through professional networks for female directors working in public, private, or nonprofit organizations, such as the Women on Boards organization.

Although the study furnishes important insights into the difference that women in the boardroom can make to social equity, it also has limitations that could be addressed in subsequent research. First, although the statistical results provide useful information on the salience of discretion and representation per se, we need to know more about the specific mechanisms through which female directors actively represent women within the boardrooms of MOCs. In what ways, do female CEOs deliberately advance women's interests in pay, promotions, appointments and other work-related

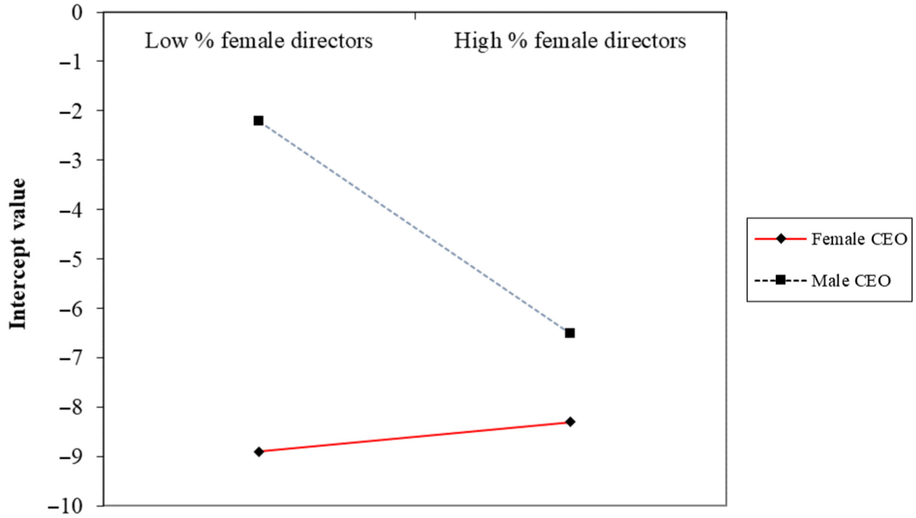

FIGURE 1 | Male CEO × % female directors and the mean gender pay gap.

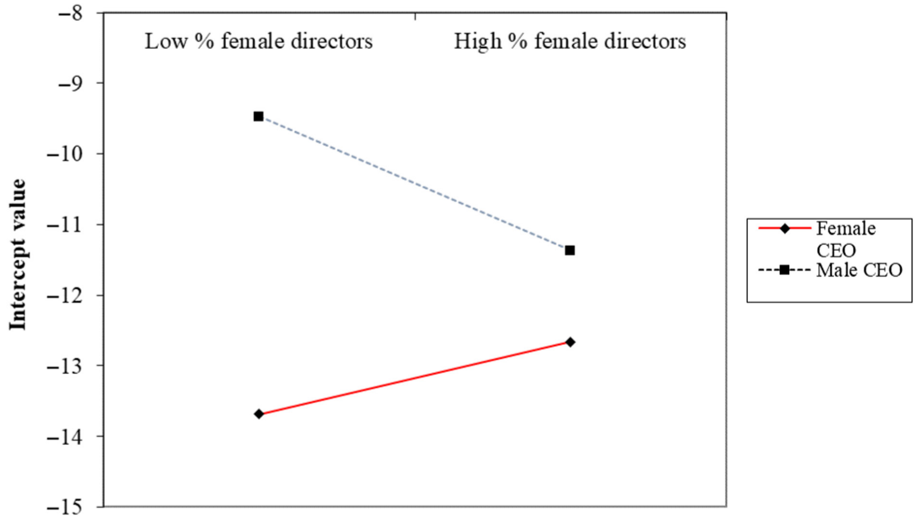

FIGURE 2 | Male CEO × % female directors and the median gender pay gap.

decisions? Are discussions and actions relating to gender equality issues better-informed when there are more female directors on the board? Quantitative and qualitative research investigating board management practices relating to gender equality within MOCs could illuminate the strategies that female (and male) directors adopt in pursuit of social equity. Furthermore, as additional years of gender pay gap data become available, it may be possible to implement experimental designs comparing outcomes before and after the appointment of new female CEOs.

Second, while the research highlights the potential for active representation to occur beyond traditional bureaucratic structures in the public sector, to what extent are the findings from large English MOCs likely to be generalizable to smaller MOCs? Most MOCs employ fewer people than those that are included in this study sample, so it is conceivable that the results presented above are particular to the organizations analyzed. The institutional and societal pressures to address pay inequity are greater in large MOCs because they are subject to pay transparency regulations, which may have empowered female leaders to be more proactive in representing women's interests than would be the case in small MOCs. Research focused on the potential for active representation to occur in small MOCs might therefore need to examine other aspects of gender equality than the gender pay gap.

Third, it would be essential to understand if the results of this study are applicable to MOCs in other countries and to other types of arms-length public service organizations. The public sector equality duty within the UK may have encouraged female leaders to represent women's interests in ways that might not be possible for female public managers in other countries without such impactful equality duties. Comparative analysis of the role that women in the boardroom play in shaping the gender pay gap across several countries with varying approaches to the management and governance of MOCs would therefore prove invaluable. Likewise, research investigating the impact of female leaders in other public service organizations steered by boards of directors would be informative. For example, the findings presented here would be of great relevance to state-owned enterprises operating at the regional and national levels (Kemp, Mathias, and Raji 2019), corporatized healthcare organizations (Turner and Wright 2022), and to the governance boards that oversee central government departments and agencies in many countries (Lafuente and Nguyne 2011).

Fourth, it would be useful to examine the extent to which women in the boardroom of MOCs actively represent the women who are recipients of the services provided by those organizations, particularly given the increasingly important role that MOCs and other arms-length organizations now play within public service delivery systems. Datasets facilitating analysis of the performance of MOCs in gendered policy areas would open up new ways to deepen our understanding of the discretion available to female public leaders to advance social equity by representing women's interests in organizations operating outside direct political control.

Finally, it has not been possible to address the plural identities and attitudes found within feminist, intersectional, and LGBTQ+groups (Breslin, Pandey, and Riccucci 2017), on this occasion. Moreover, the role that representation can play in promoting social mobility among women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds would benefit from greater attention (Vinopal 2020). In the future, scholars should seek to investigate the full range of pay gaps within organizations and the influence that discretion and representation in the boardroom may exert over these.

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Ethics Statement

The author has nothing to report.

Consent

The author has nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the author.

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