

Why leadership systems fail women and how to fix them

Actionable steps to move from intention to impact



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Executive summary

As we enter 2026, the global share of women in executive leadership has fallen below 31%, reversing decades of slow but steady progress – despite unprecedented investment in leadership development, diversity initiatives, and gender equity commitments. This is not a paradox. It is evidence of a system that no longer matches the realities of leadership in a changing economy. In short, this is not primarily a pipeline problem. It is a system design failure.

A confluence of interlocking factors – among them women exiting the workforce, misalignment between employers’ intentions and outcomes, and the worldwide pushback on DE&I – threatens to stall momentum further. We are at a crossroads, and organizations must determine the right path forward to develop, retain, and leverage their female talent.

Evidence shows that executive education can accelerate women’s leadership capabilities. Yet women leaders continue to face acute barriers – limited access to learning opportunities and insufficient systemic support within organizations. Leadership power is still allocated through outdated succession processes, feeder-role access, sponsorship practices, and promotion architectures that have not evolved to reflect how leadership is created, assessed, and rewarded in a modern world. Until these systems change, women will keep losing ground.

This report sets out a raft of recommendations for employers looking to leverage the clear and well-established benefits of greater gender diversity in leadership. Women increasingly possess exactly the capabilities organizations say they need: multidomain experience, adaptability, collaborative leadership, and human judgment in uncertain environments. Yet access to roles that convert these capabilities into power – P&L leadership, transformation assignments, market head roles, crisis leadership, and succession

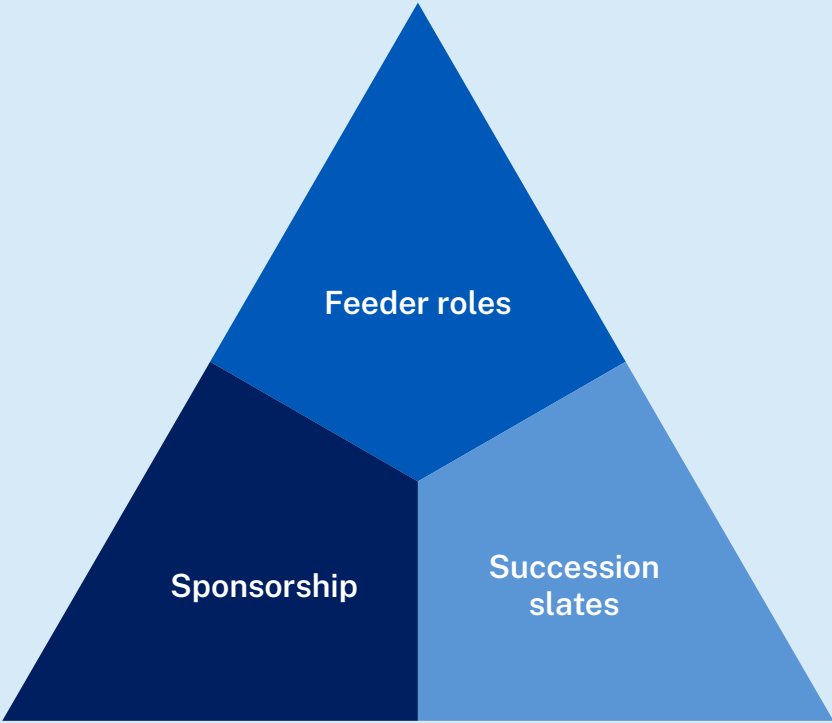
slates – remains structurally restricted. As artificial intelligence accelerates skill change and economic volatility increases, organizations that fail to redesign their leadership architectures face growing succession risk, leadership bench fragility, and loss of competitive advantage.

Our recommendations touch practical, high-impact actions to drive strategic sponsorship and enable women’s access to executive education, while also exploring the deeper structural work needed to convert female potential into power. We share concrete measures to audit system failures, to redefine leadership and career progression, and to celebrate what has historically been penalized by organizational culture.

Specifically, we propose three structural shifts that address the key cornerstones of existing leadership architectures – the “Power Triad” – and empower organizations to move from intention to impact:

- **Formalize and govern succession slates.** Every senior leadership role must maintain visible, accountable, gender-balanced succession slates, reviewed quarterly by executive committees and boards.
- **Design and track executive feeder roles.** Organizations must formally define the roles that statistically feed senior leadership and publish gender access rates to these roles annually, treating persistent imbalance as a governance risk.
- **Make sponsorship a leadership obligation.** Sponsorship must be measured, evaluated, and rewarded as part of executive performance to shift advancement from goodwill to accountable leadership behavior.

From intention to impact: Addressing the power triad



This report is enriched by the findings of a proprietary survey of HR and L&D leaders conducted by IMD, along with a case study that showcases executive education for female leaders supported by inclusive leadership progression structures within Heineken.

Are we backsliding on women in leadership?

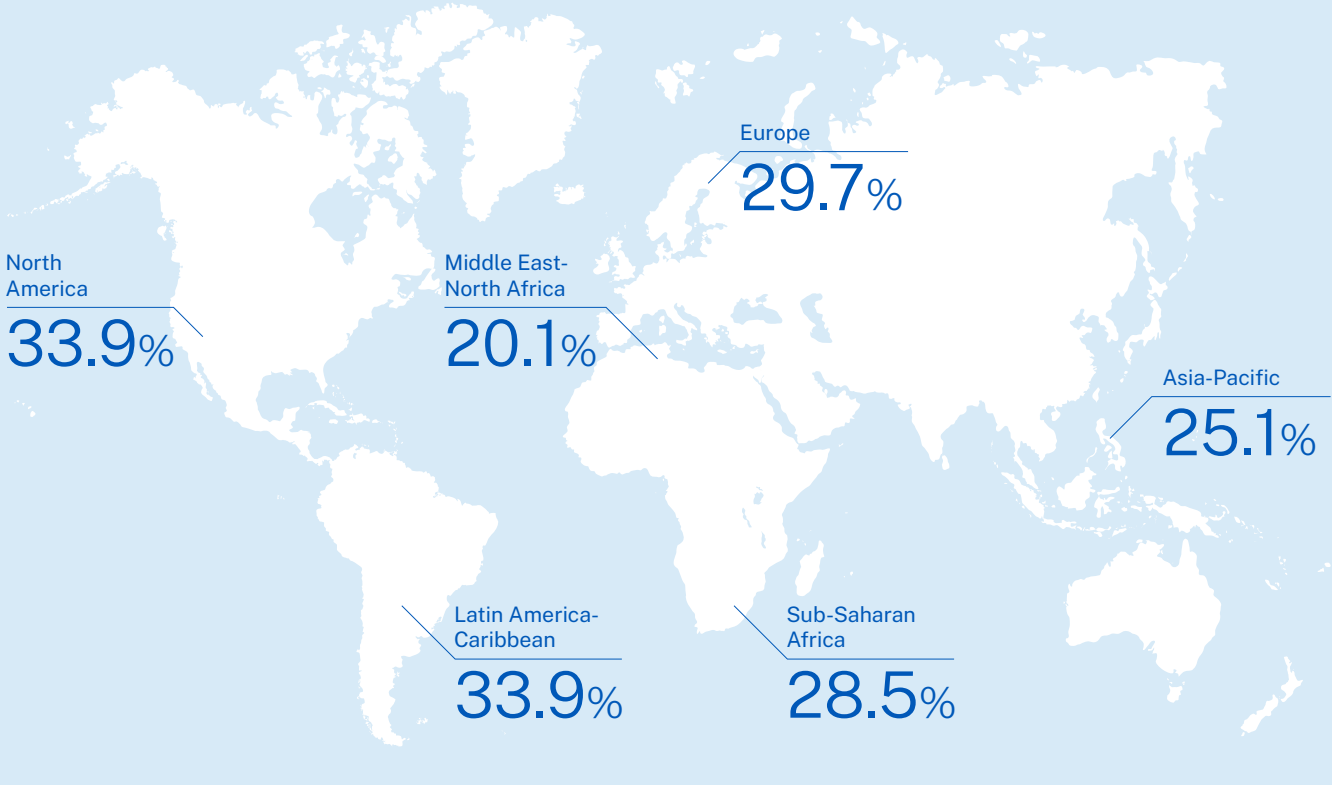
Progress in female leadership appears to have faltered globally. Several major data sets point to instability and even a decline in women’s representation in top management roles as we go into 2026.

Data from LinkedIn’s global user base spanning 76 countries shows that the share of women leaders – those at Vice President or C-suite level – was at 30.6% globally, only up 0.2 percentage points from 2022. By region, it ranges from 20.1% in the Middle East and North Africa to 33.9% in the Americas.¹

Between 2015 and 2022, the growth of women in leadership positions remained steady at around 0.4 percentage points year over year. That momentum has stalled.

The regional picture

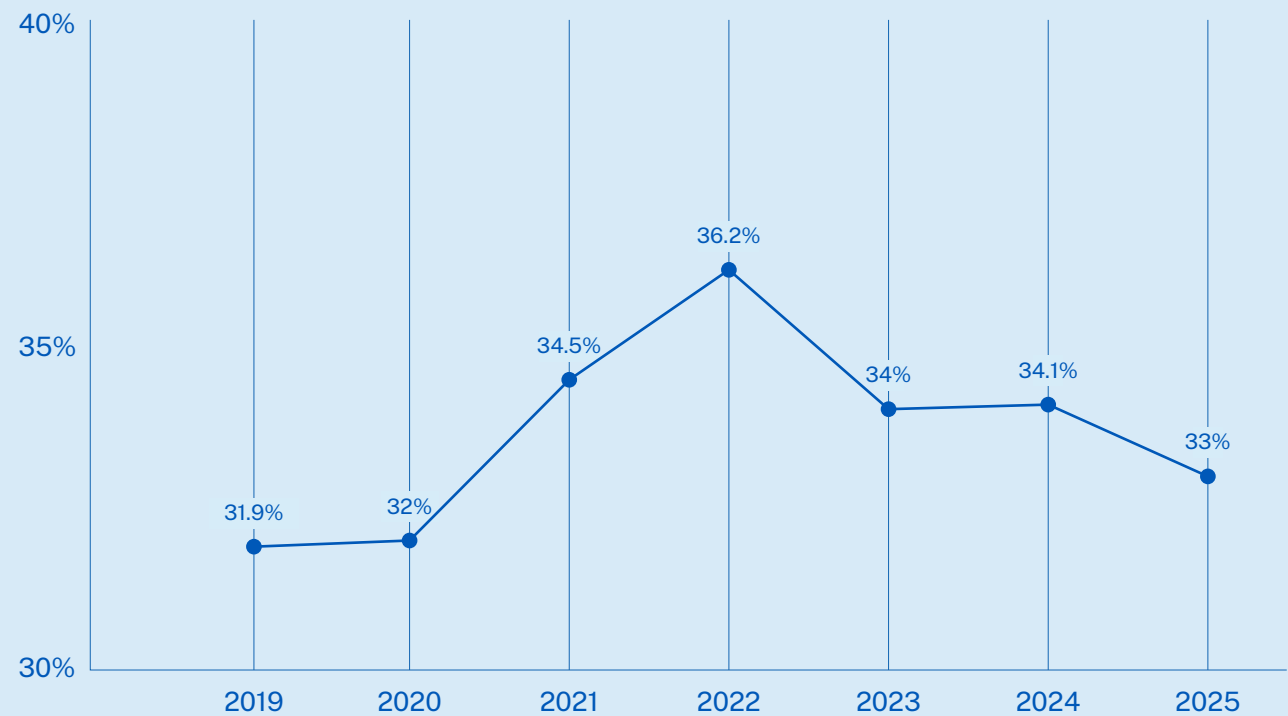
Percentage of senior management roles held by women in 2025, by geographical region



Looking at the share of women hired into leadership positions, this number peaked at 36% in 2022 before dropping to 33% in 2025, bucking a decade’s worth of slow but steady progress for women.²

Share of women hired in leadership positions (March of each year)

Proportion who are women (%)



Source: LinkedIn, 2025²

Reigniting progress will not be easy. Going into 2026, a myriad of interacting pressures is only set to exacerbate the challenges ahead.

Interacting pressures: Female attrition, the ‘broken rung,’ corporate misalignment, and a global backlash on DE&I

“It all starts with top management and their belief in the fact that DE&I is a business enabler rather than a mandated criterion for external reporting. Once there and cascaded down properly, true progress will follow.”

— Male HR Vice President in a global manufacturing company with more than 10,000 employees
Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

Female attrition

There is growing evidence around the world of women leaving the workplace at an accelerated rate, which threatens to shrink the talent pool. Evidence from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics points to significant attrition of female talent in the labor market in the United States. Since January 2025, just under half a million women have quit their jobs; many citing the challenge of juggling paid work with childcare and domestic responsibilities. A 2025 survey in the US finds that amid the confluence of factors affecting women, the cost of childcare is making paid work unaffordable for many. This follows post-COVID “back to the office” mandates issued by the US administration, which have revoked American workers’ flexibility on a massive scale.³

Globally, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate responsibility for family homecare. The International Labour Organization estimates that 748 million people were not participating in the global workforce due to care responsibilities. Of these, 708 million were women.⁴ In the EU, the European Gender Equality Index finds that almost one in three women outside the labor force who would like to work are unable to do so because of care responsibilities, compared with just one in 10 men.⁵

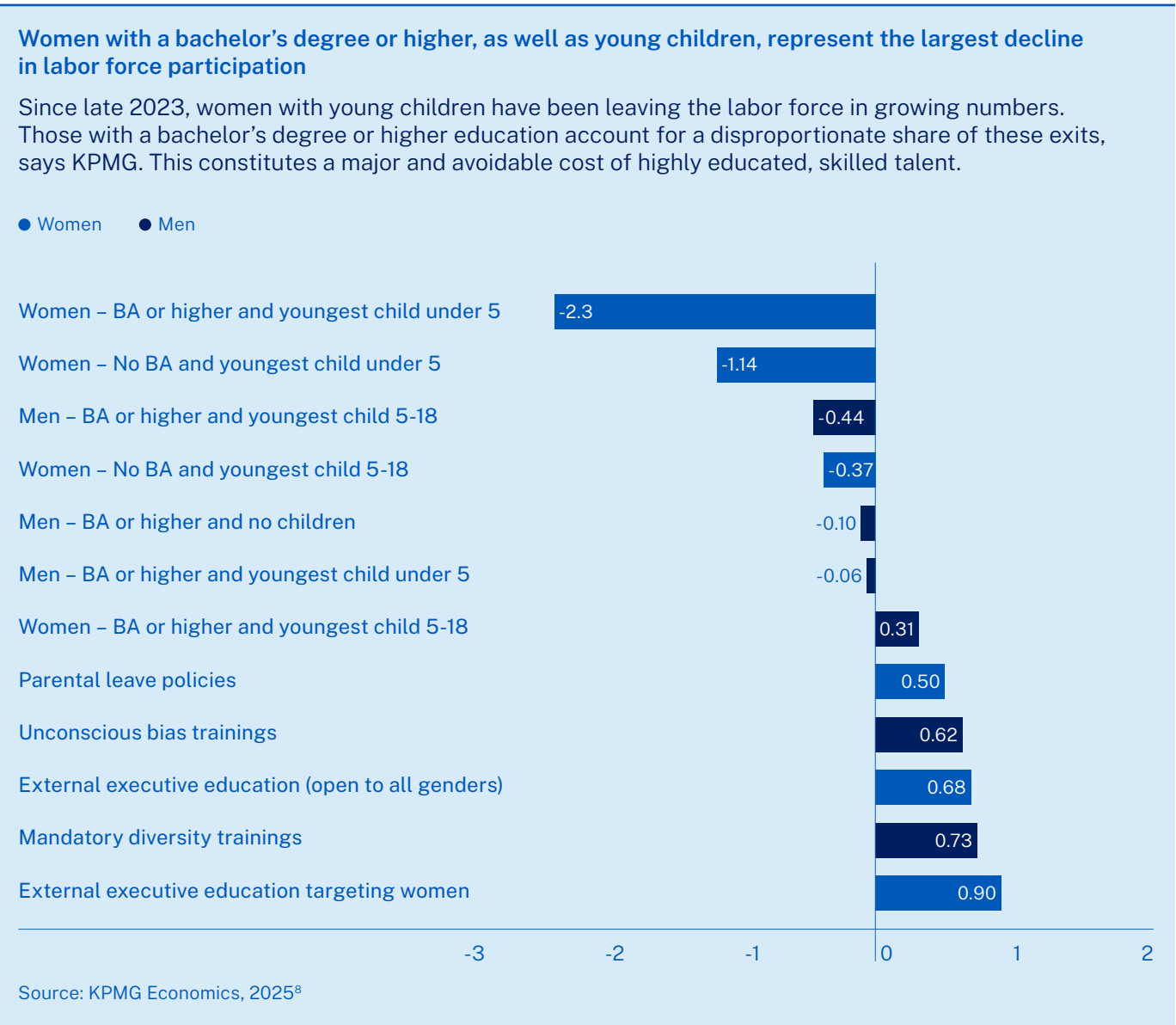
“A key issue is that women statistically already have a double burden and thinking load between work and home, and the last thing they need are any programs that eat away more of their precious hours to perform. Any initiative, therefore, also needs to target the male side of the equation.”

— Female CHRO, European manufacturing company with 1,000–5,000 employees
Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

“Women still take on the lion’s share of caregiving responsibilities, and they are more likely than men to be navigating how to meet those caregiving responsibilities while holding down a job. They are also more likely than men to feel that they have to leave the workforce when their balancing act becomes unmanageable.”

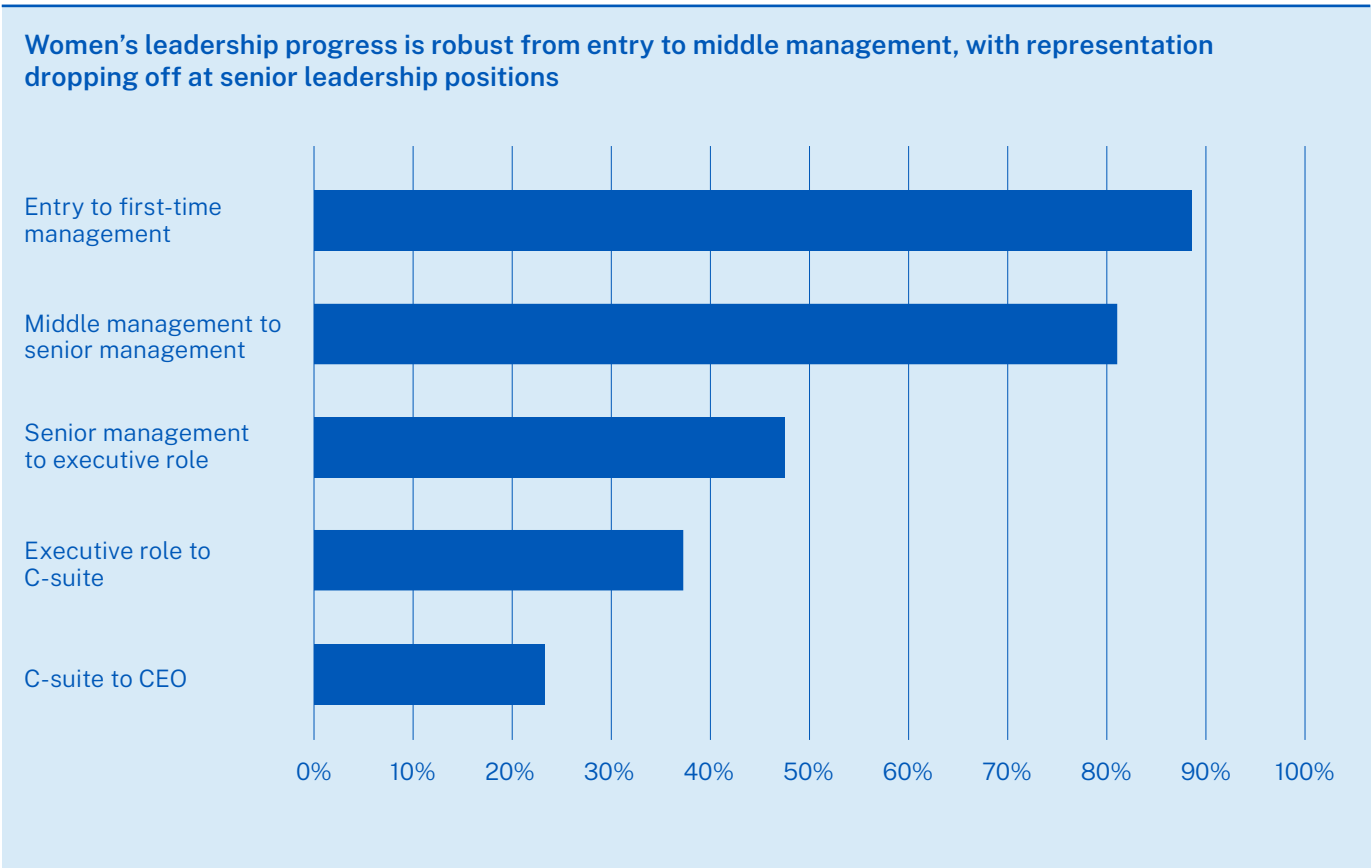
— Julie Vogtman, senior director of job quality for the National Women’s Law Center⁶

These findings are confirmed by the Deloitte Global 2025 Women @ Work survey of 7,500 women in workplaces in 15 countries.⁷ The latter also finds that just 5% of women plan to stay with their current employer for more than five years. Most cite lack of career development opportunities as the principal reason, while other motivating factors include the lack of flexible working hours, pay and benefit issues, and the challenge of achieving a work-life balance.



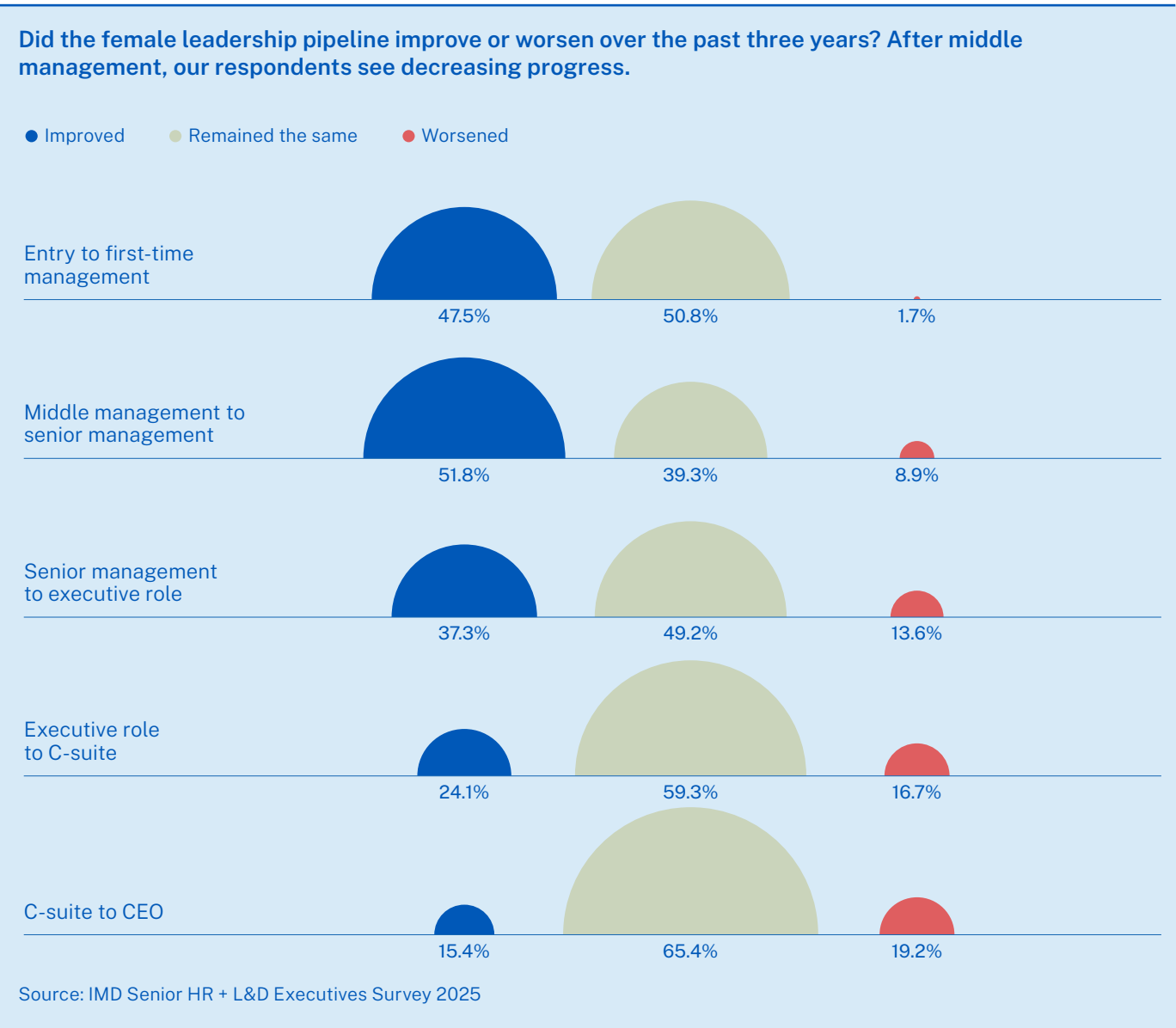
The ‘broken rung’

IMD data supports the well-documented “broken rung” phenomenon, where women progress through organizational hierarchies, but representation drops sharply at the top. Gains over recent years have been largely limited to entry and mid-managerial levels. The most pronounced attrition is from senior management to executive roles, where talented women are exiting the leadership pipeline altogether.



A wake-up call for decision-makers

When asked to assess progress over the past three years, most senior leaders surveyed by IMD report improvements in the pipeline only for the lower ranks of leadership. At the C-suite to CEO level, while over 60% see no change, leaders who see the situation today as “worse than three years ago” outnumber those who see progress.



“I never felt any blockers under C-1 level in any company I’ve been with. Getting to C-level is another story. I still feel there is a glass ceiling and a perception that men are doing better at that level. At least, they are still getting the jobs...”

— Female HR Senior Vice President, global chemical industry company with 5,000–10,000 employees

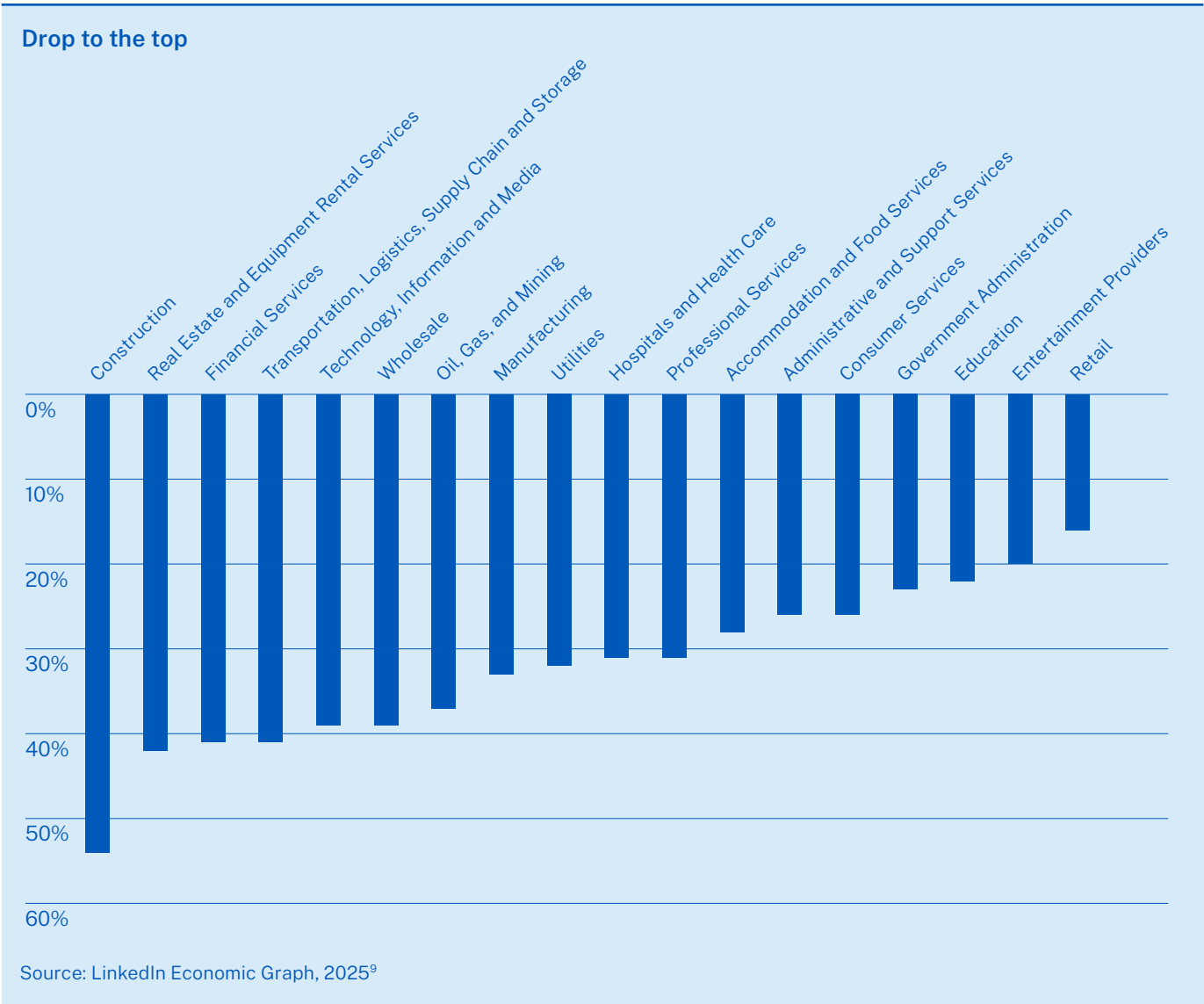
Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

Meanwhile, data from LinkedIn indicates that this drop at the top persists even in female-majority industries such as healthcare, education, and retail.⁹

“There is also a ‘female-majority industry trap.’ Healthcare illustrates this clearly, with 66% women overall but only 46% in leadership: a large negative drop. This suggests that fixing the pipeline within a sector is insufficient when senior roles are structurally coded around P&L ownership, operational command, deal-making, and crisis leadership. These roles become the real gateways to power regardless of who performs the core work.”

— Ginka Toegel, Professor of Organizational Behaviour and Leadership, IMD

Decision-makers therefore need to examine which roles and functions inside their organizations truly act as executive feeders and what the gender distribution in those roles looks like. Women are often concentrated in mission-critical but non-feeder roles such as expert, enabling, people, and support functions that rarely lead to succession.

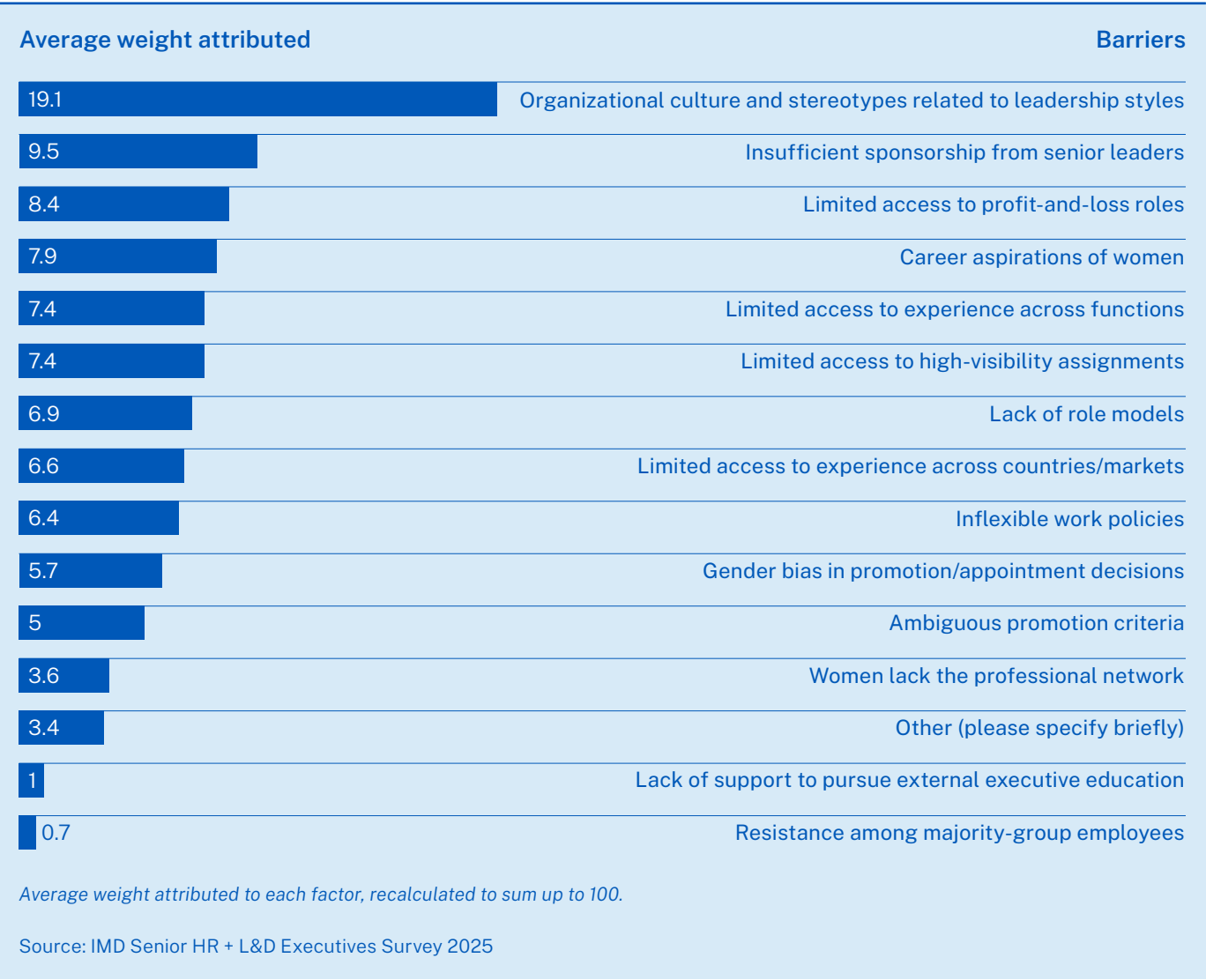


Organizations, of course, play a crucial role in empowering women to bridge the broken rung and reach top positions.

Our survey data pinpoints organizational culture and stereotypes related to leadership styles as the most persistent challenges women continue to face at work. As we outline in the second part of this white paper, these are challenges that require enterprise-wide solutions that are beyond the scope of individual learning programs aimed at individuals or cohorts – solutions that span cultural shifts, sponsorship from the most senior leadership, and access to cross-functional experience and to visible and high-responsibility profit and loss type roles.

There is some indication in our survey data that women’s career aspirations also play a role. Interestingly, women themselves cite their own ambitions as a barrier – and they do so slightly more than their male counterparts. To be very clear: this does not indicate a lack of ambition. Rather, it reflects what women learn is realistic, safe, and rewarded within existing systems. It raises critical questions around what women feel they can reasonably expect or aim for in terms of leadership advancement.

It’s also interesting to find that resistance or opposition to women’s progression from men is not seen as a major barrier.



“Much of female talent development comes down to leadership commitment and the organization’s culture. The perspective that our people are our greatest competitive advantage drives an approach to employee engagement that is a top priority for all leaders. Finance is also an industry that has few ‘natural’ barriers to entry, apart from educational level.”

— Female CHRO, in a global finance company with more than 10,000 employees

Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

“It is crucial to be part of high-visibility projects to network and build relationships. That and education, flexibility, and sponsors in the organization.”

— Female HR Vice President, European healthcare company, more than 10,000 employees

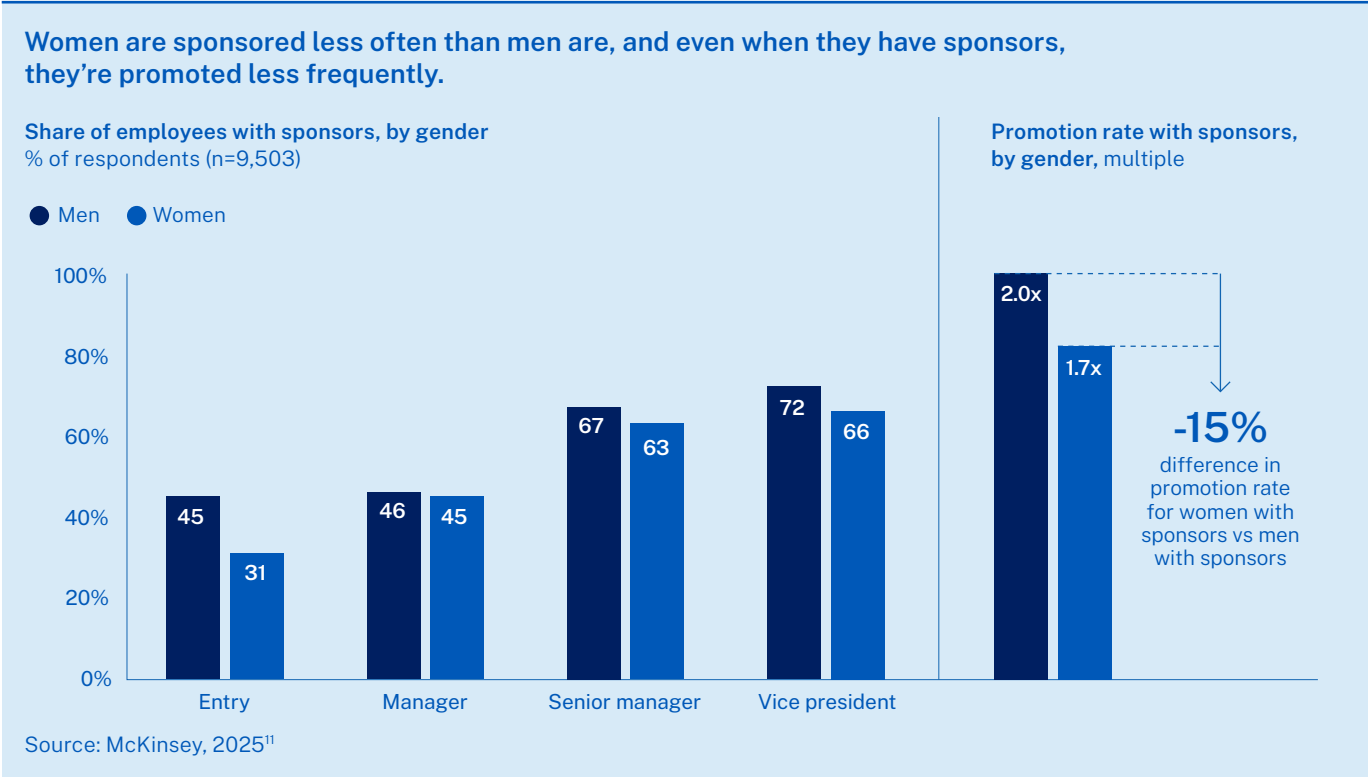
Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

The wrong lever issue

Mandatory diversity and unconscious bias training rarely bridges the broken rung and can sometimes backfire¹⁰. IMD experience working with organizations shows that broad bias training aimed at everyone is less effective in driving meaningful change than focused work targeting the small number of gatekeepers who control assignments, performance narratives, and succession slates.

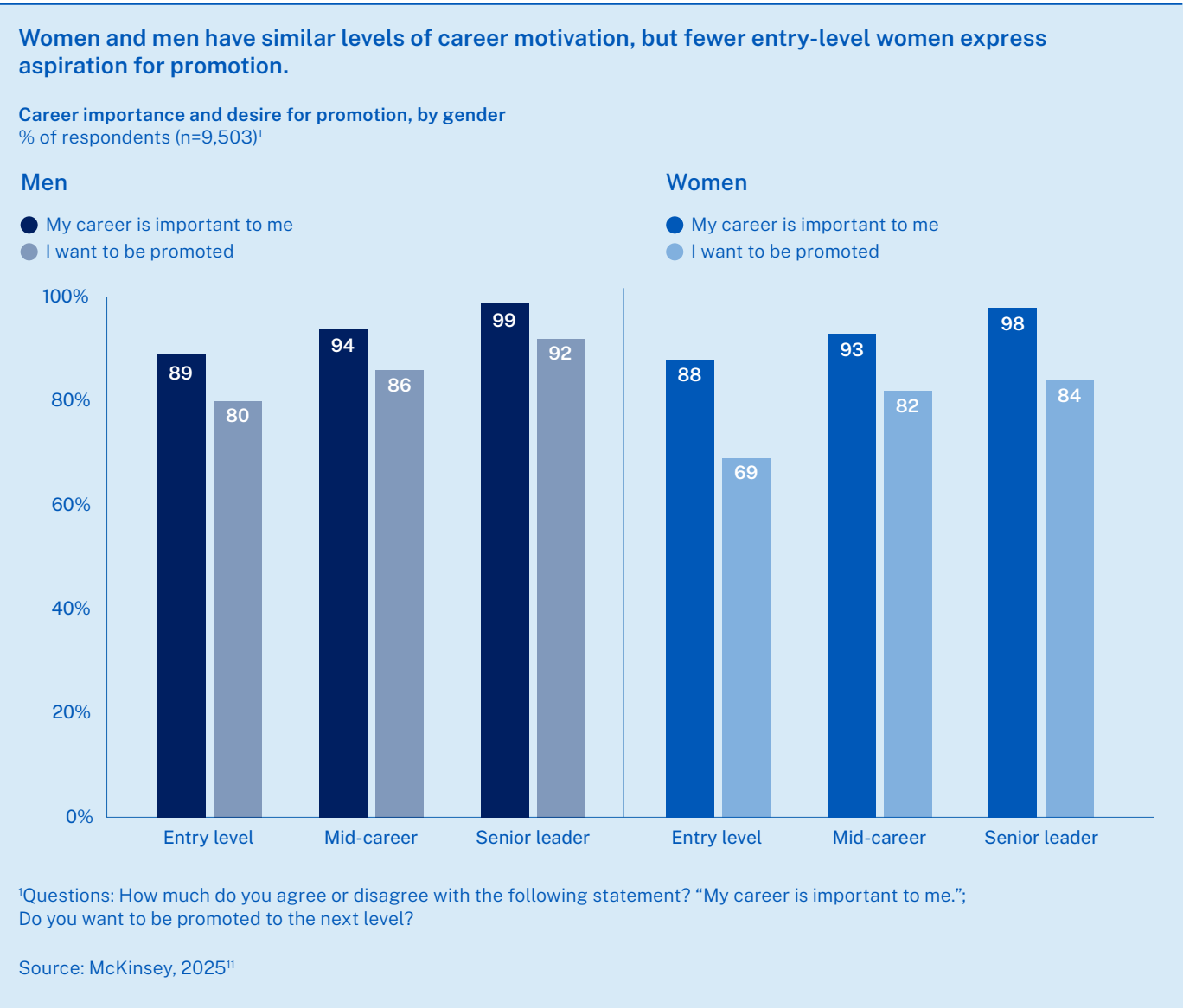
This raises an essential question. Who can fix the broken rung? Promotion panel members, P&L role allocators, and succession owners shape future leadership in rooms that are rarely audited. Decision-makers might want to consider the potential value of monitoring change in gatekeeper behavior – this could be through sponsorship actions taken, stretch roles awarded, slate quality, and joint evaluation practices.

Another key survey finding is that women receive less sponsorship than men, and those with active sponsors are still promoted less than their male counterparts. This points to another systemic inequity that organizations keen to tap into gender diverse talent will want to address – including hiring and promoting policies.



Part of the equation is that, despite women and men showing similar levels of career motivation, women voice their aspirations for promotion less frequently, as we see above.

This points to the duality of the problem: on the one hand, empowering women can be a solution to amplify their voices; on the other hand, the organizational culture and working environment must provide women with the support systems and psychological safety to express their aspirations.



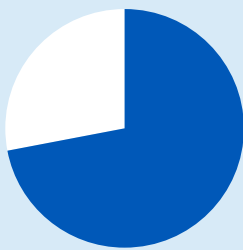
Corporate misalignment

The ‘doing enough’ delusion: strong intent, but weak outcomes

There is some evidence of a mismatch between organizational commitment and outcomes. Data from analysts Carrington Crisp points to a misalignment between employers’ perceptions around the efficacy of their gender parity measures and the day-to-day realities of women in the workplace. A recent survey finds that 69% of employers believe they are “doing enough” to support women’s career advancement, yet only 9% confirm their organizations have achieved 50% or more women in senior leadership.

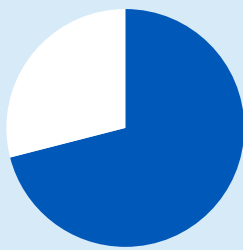
This reveals a gap between perception and outcome. Believing that we are already doing enough quietly becomes a ceiling for organizations: it softens urgency, weakens accountability, and reduces investment – precisely when leadership systems need tightening. Metrics such as program participation, satisfaction scores, and self-reported pipeline improvements can create false reassurance while senior representation continues to slip.

There is a disconnect between what employers think should be done and what they appear to be doing



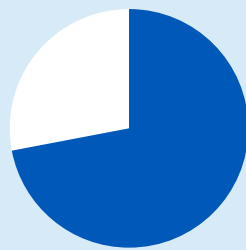
72%

More women should fill leadership roles in our industry/sector



71%

More women should fill leadership roles in our organization



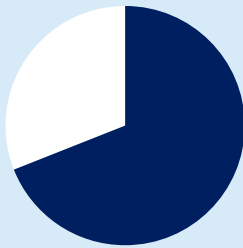
72%

More needs to be done to support career advancement for women in our organization



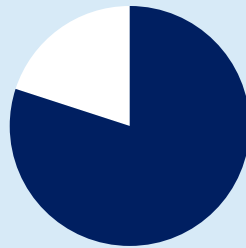
71%

Historically women have been discriminated against in employment



69%

Our organization already does enough to support women’s career advancement



80%

Our organizational culture actively supports gender equality in leadership

Source: Carrington Crisp, 2025¹²



“As businesses face growing polarization on diversity, equity, and inclusion, the path forward is clear – companies must embed inclusion into their core strategy, empower leaders to drive change, and ensure that the progress made so far is not quietly undone.”

— Heather Cairns-Lee, Affiliate Professor of Leadership and Communication, IMD

— Alexander Fleischmann, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Research Affiliate, IMD

And this corporate misalignment should be appraised against the backdrop of the global pushback against DE&I.

A global retreat on DE&I

In 2023, the US Supreme Court ruled that using gender or race as a basis for college admissions violates the Constitution, sparking a major cultural shift in the states that gained momentum with the inauguration of President Donald Trump – impacting not only corporate America but organizations around the globe. While some of the biggest US multinationals like Apple, Costco, and Levi’s are holding firm to their commitments¹³, others like Google, Meta, Pepsi, Goldman Sachs, Accenture, and Amazon are steadily rolling back their DE&I initiatives – including hiring and promoting policies¹⁴. As major organizations retreat from dedicated programs to support women, there is a potential knock-on effect on ambition.

Amidst the turbulence we face, it is time to look back at what has worked in the past and what needs to change to allow equitable opportunities for everyone in the workplace. As indeed, DE&I is not preferential treatment, it is structural risk mitigation and creating truly meritocratic workplaces.

What do organizations stand to lose if we backslide on women’s progress?

- While many studies identify correlations rather than direct causal effects, the consistency of findings across methods and contexts is notable.
- Firms with more women in the C-suite are more profitable¹⁵
 - Large-scale meta-analyses of more than a hundred studies find that women’s representation on boards is positively associated with firm financial performance, particularly in institutional contexts that support inclusive governance¹⁶
 - The more gender diversity is accepted in a country or industry, the more gender-diverse firms show positive market valuation and increased revenue¹⁷
 - Business teams with an equal number of women and men outperform male-dominated teams on sales and profits¹⁸
 - Even organizations committed to meritocracy continue to reproduce gender inequality unless promotion and pay decisions are accompanied by transparency and accountability mechanisms¹⁹
 - An OECD analysis shows that if firms with below-average female representation in leadership positions were to raise it to the sample average of 20%, this would aggregate productivity by around 0.6%²⁰
 - Longitudinal labor-market research shows that gender gaps at senior levels are driven less by preferences or ambition but rather by the structure and timing of work itself, particularly in roles that reward long hours and uninterrupted availability²¹

The case for gender diversity at all levels of leadership has been clearly made and is long-established. Organizations thrive when they integrate more women (and diverse leaders) into their rank and file of decision-making; they sustain more growth and outperform their competition. Most organizations understand these benefits; they understand that gender-diverse leadership is good for business. Yet progress remains slow because many organizations are structurally misaligned to act efficiently. The system itself works against change.

In part, this is because:

- The gains from gender parity are long-term and shared across the organization, while the costs (among them time, effort, perceived risk) are felt immediately by individual decision-makers.
- Leadership appointments still rely heavily on familiar profiles and informal sponsorship.
- Important work like developing people and leading change is undervalued. And senior roles are often designed around outdated expectations of constant availability.
- There can be a mismatch between what organizations believe they are achieving and actual outcomes.

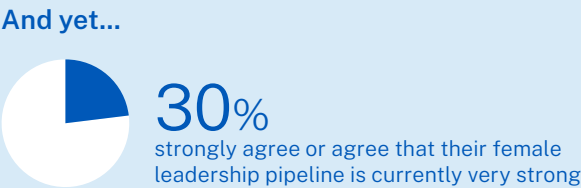
As a result, even those organizations with strong intentions around gender parity struggle to translate commitment into real progress, as our survey data underlines. Even though more than 70% of the companies in our sample have gender diversity goals, and a majority of respondents believe that their female leadership pipeline has improved over the past years, even more see strong leadership commitment and backing for women’s progress – less than a third agree that their current pipeline is very strong.

This should be a clear call to action. The good intentions of the past have not delivered their intended results.

More than 70% of companies have gender diversity goals



Respondents see improvement and leadership commitment – but less than a third deem their current pipeline to be very strong



Arresting the backslide on women’s progress should be a priority for decision-makers looking to future-proof their organizations, advance employees equitably, and reap the benefits of gender diversity.

Simply hiring more women – an “add diversity and stir” approach – does not automatically translate into immediate or long-term gains. As Robin J Ely and David A Thomas²² put it:

“Increasing diversity does not, by itself, increase effectiveness; what matters is how an organization harnesses diversity, and whether it’s willing to reshape its power structure.”

At the same time, recalibrating the distribution of power within organizations should be inclusive of those who currently hold that power. It is tempting to see the global pushback on DE&I as an indication of progress: without progress after all, it is unlikely there would be any pushback.²³ However, the rollback may also be a sign that men are alienated by DE&I efforts – particularly if they are targeted by a blame culture; one that casts them as antagonists and excludes them from the conversation.²⁴

The task ahead is to refocus on inclusion and plurality – while not losing sight of existing inequities that persist along various lines of diversity. The goal is to achieve true meritocracy by providing equitable opportunities for individuals from all walks of life. Not least because the challenges we face globally, along with the disruption of AI, call for a new model of leadership, as explained in the box below.

Ambidexterity as a new leadership profile in the age of AI

As the world is reshaped by AI and automation, there is evidence that firms will not only need leaders they can trust – those with technical wherewithal and those who inspire safety and familiarity. They will also need leaders with a particular skill set: leaders who bring flexibility and strategic breadth to their decision-making, along with more human soft skills that nurture trust while also fostering collaboration and creativity.

IMD research shows that sustained success in this uncertain environment depends on developing leaders with the skills and aptitudes to meet today’s performance requirements whilst simultaneously preparing for tomorrow’s challenges and opportunities. We call this leadership *ambidexterity*, the ability to perform and transform at the same time. Becoming an ambidextrous leader requires decision-makers to develop their range and adaptability, typically via non-linear career progression.

Evidence from the Harris Poll and other sources suggests that women may already be “ahead of the curve” on the flexible, non-linear, cross-functional leadership experience that organizations will demand of their leaders; they are 20% more likely than men to bring this multi-domain breadth to the C-suite than their male counterparts. Women typically report that they also possess the uniquely human skills like communication, collaboration, and creativity - that will be vital in the age of AI.

Women are arguably ahead in the capabilities the future demands, but clearly behind in access to the roles that convert capability into power.

Meanwhile, organizations that fail to progress female talent to the highest levels of decision-making may be holding back the very talent they need to secure a competitive edge, to sustain growth, and move forward in our digitally disrupted future.



How do we stop the ladder from crumbling from the top?

As the data we have reviewed so far clearly shows, slippage is no longer happening only at the first promotion step. It is occurring across senior levels as well. Representation at the top has fallen back to levels seen five years ago. The ladder is no longer simply broken at the entry points – it is now crumbling from the top.

This pattern signals a systemic failure across retention, promotion, and succession rather than a pipeline issue. The system is no longer slow. It has become regressive. Even a perfect entry-level gender balance is unlikely to repair it. Representation begins to fall precisely when leadership stops being mainly about technical competence and becomes more about influence, reputation, and trust. Women hold strong numbers in skill-based and performance-based roles, yet their representation drops sharply when leadership becomes political, crisis-oriented, and capital-allocating. Leadership becomes less about what you can do and more about who is trusted when the stakes are high.

Senior promotion is governed by reputation, trust, political sponsorship, crisis delegation, and perceptions around who is seen as a safe bet. These are belief-based systems rather than skill-based systems, and they form the real gating mechanism. Training women's skills cannot fix who receives visible forgiveness for failure, who is given profit and loss or crisis roles, or who is named in the room when they are not present.

This leads to a critical conclusion. The bottleneck is not readiness. It shows up in the ways that trust is granted. At the very top, people are promoted not only for what they can do, but also for how safe and familiar they appear to those who are making decisions. This is why many well-intended efforts to build women's skills fall short: not because the skills are missing, but because the system that decides who is trusted has not yet changed.

Women's under-representation should therefore be understood as an indicator of organizational health risk. Because slippage is happening, and sometimes despite massive investment. Declining female representation is no longer simply a diversity issue. It is a signal of leadership system decay. A system that cannot consistently advance its most capable half of talent is likely misallocating succession risk, weakening innovation resilience, and amplifying turnover in critical pipelines.

The crumbling ladder predicts future performance failure because the leadership pipeline predicts the performance pipeline. With women's progress stalled and the DE&I backlash gaining more momentum, we are at a crossroads.

“Efforts to broaden opportunity shouldn't be framed as threats to those who've historically held power. Inclusive leaders don't just advocate for underrepresented voices – they engage those who feel unsettled by change and bring them into the process.”²⁵

— David Bach, President of IMD

The data is clear: women are not losing ground because they lack talent, motivation, or readiness. They are losing ground because the systems that allocate leadership power, such as succession processes, feeder-role access, sponsorship practices, and promotion architectures, have not evolved to reflect the realities of the modern economy or the leadership capabilities organizations now need. In other words, this is not primarily a pipeline problem. It is a system design failure.

As organizations enter an era defined by artificial intelligence, economic volatility, and accelerating skill change, leadership itself is being redefined. The future demands leaders who can operate across domains, adapt quickly, collaborate deeply, and exercise judgment under uncertainty. Paradoxically, women seem to bring a disproportionate share of these capabilities, yet remain structurally excluded from the very roles that convert capability into power.

This white paper examines the invisible architecture of leadership advancement: where it breaks, why it fails, and how organizations can redesign it. Drawing on IMD and LinkedIn data, executive surveys, and longitudinal research, we show that progress will not be achieved by “fixing women,” or relying on voluntary initiatives alone. Sustainable progress requires redesigning the machinery of leadership itself, making pathways to power transparent, accountable, and fit for the future economy.

The LinkedIn view: A leadership gap driven by systems failure

The leadership gap is often framed as a pipeline issue. LinkedIn’s data shows it is somewhat more structured. Globally, women with tertiary degrees account for 40.2% of the workforce, yet only 29.5% reach top leadership. And the higher the education level, the wider the gap becomes:

- Among high school graduates, the drop from women’s workforce representation to their presence in leadership is 31%.
- For bachelor’s degree holders, the gap widens to 39%.
- For women with master’s degrees: 41%.
- For those with doctorates: 44%.

Across both bachelor’s and master’s degree holders, women’s leadership representation stalls at roughly 30%. In other words, the more educated women are, the further behind they fall. This is not a failure of talent. It is a failure of systems designed to recognize and reward that talent.

Age compounds these disparities. While women are underrepresented in leadership across every generation, the gap grows wider with age. Only one in five Baby Boomer leaders are women, compared to just over one in three among Gen Z. In sectors like STEM, the picture is even more stark: only 12% of CEOs are women. These numbers show that women are systematically filtered out of leadership long before they reach the most senior roles.

What’s at stake for organizations and economies

Left unaddressed, the leadership gap is likely to widen at the exact moment when organizations most need diverse leadership to navigate economic headwinds – from AI transformation to aging demographics to trade uncertainty. Companies, industries, and entire economies will lose ground as qualified women are excluded from the roles that determine economic growth and competitiveness in a changing world.

This is not an abstract risk. It is a concrete economic one. The organizations that recognize and reward diverse leadership pathways, especially the multidomain experience and human skills where women excel, will be better positioned to innovate, adapt, and thrive. Those who don’t will fall behind.

A path forward: Systemic solutions for a changing economy

Reversing the decline in women’s leadership requires bold, targeted action focused on the systems that shape advancement. Three priorities stand out:

1. Make leadership pathways visible and accessible.

Workers need clear, transparent insight into the skills and experiences that open doors to leadership. Disaggregated data across industries, functions, and seniority levels can show where opportunities are concentrated and where systemic barriers persist.

2. Invest in AI literacy for mid- and senior-career women.

Confidence in using and leading with AI will be a foundational leadership skill. Accessible, targeted learning programs can ensure women are equipped to adopt emerging technologies and lead teams effectively.

3. Hire and promote for what leadership is becoming, not what it used to be.

LinkedIn’s research shows that shifting to a skills-first approach could expand the talent pool for women 6.3 times globally. This is not only about technical skills. Human skills like communication, collaboration, adaptability, and the multidomain leadership experiences women already possess are becoming core leadership differentiators. Organizations should systematically reward these attributes in hiring, promotion, and succession planning.

Education as a solution: access and isolation

Executive education programs are a proven accelerant of leadership capabilities and readiness. Evidence²⁶ suggests that when organizations partner with trusted learning partners, the impact can significantly expedite leadership progression and effectiveness, enhance cross-functional collaboration, break silos, and drive innovation and resilience.

For high-potential women, the right learning interventions can translate into concrete career wins. Data from IMD impact surveys reveal that:

- Gender pay gaps shrink following our Executive MBA program, with female participants going on to earn a higher mean salary.
- Women are twice as likely as men to be promoted after completing an IMD General Management program.
- 54% of female and non-binary executive education program participants report that the intervention helped them overcome a barrier to progression.
- Women consistently report stronger team leadership capabilities and gains in specific skills like financial analysis.

Source: IMD Impact Surveys

Done well and effectively, executive education can be a stabilizing mechanism that helps organizations move *through* resistance rather than retreat from it to allow for building the leadership pipeline needed today to address the challenges of the future.

Organizations overwhelmingly understand these benefits, so why are we still backsliding on women's leadership? The answer lies in two interrelated issues: unequal access and interventions implemented in isolation. Both are compounded by misconceptions about women's development needs and inadequate support in converting learning into real-world career progression.



The access paradox: A self-fulfilling cycle of underinvestment

Offering women the opportunity to take a leadership program is important. But ensuring that they have the resources to pursue that opportunity is critical.

For most women, money and time are very real and often insurmountable barriers to executive education. Programs often come with high fees and require commitment spanning days, weeks, or even months – significant investments that are particularly heavy for women who already carry an unequal share of caregiving responsibilities. Access, therefore, is not merely a question of availability; it is complicated by costs, often hidden, that employers should recognize and aim to remediate before assuming that women simply choose family or domestic responsibilities over learning and development. Failure to do so can create a self-fulfilling prophecy in which women’s inability to pursue executive programs is misconstrued as a choice instead of structural barriers, leading to their exclusion from developmental processes and stalled progression in the workplace. Awareness and supported access to opportunities can break this vicious cycle.

The Access Paradox: Education works, but can unintentionally widen gaps if time and care burdens are not redesigned

Executive education is widely viewed as a solution. 80% of employers believe it can accelerate women’s leadership readiness, and 81% of women welcome it.²⁷

Even so, women cite cost, lack of employer support, time pressure, family load, and inflexible formats as the main barriers to participation. In practice, development has been designed for people with fewer life constraints. Access itself has become a new form of inequality. When women decline programs, employers frequently attribute this to family responsibilities, which turns a structural design problem into a personal choice narrative. Over time, this becomes a self-fulfilling cycle of underinvestment.

If participation requires extra hours and personal trade-offs, it selects for women with fewer caregiving responsibilities and widens inequity within women themselves, including between parents and non-parents, single parents, and sandwich caregivers.

Decision-makers need to treat learning as an organizational design challenge rather than as a benefit. When women decline programs, leaders should ask what support was not offered, including study leave, workload relief, childcare support, and protected time. Respondents consistently rate coaching, peer learning circles, and co-ed formats as especially effective, which points to the importance of embedding learning socially back into the workplace.

Education in isolation: One-off interventions can’t fix a broken system

Education builds capability. Systems determine whether capability converts into power and influence.

Isolated interventions – one-off programs or training experiences – cannot wholly address the systemic issues women face in the workplace. These include cultural, structural, or procedural biases, the absence of visible role models, unequal access to opportunities to develop new skills and competencies, pay inequities, and the managerial support that women need to progress.

Survey data from IMD’s Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey pinpoint the most persistent challenges within the workplace that women continue to face at work. As mentioned, these are challenges that require enterprise-oriented solutions that are beyond the scope of individual learning programs aimed at individuals or cohorts. Designing and implementing these solutions requires direct intervention and sponsorship by the most senior leadership to ensure scalable and sustained impact – as we explore in section four.

For learning interventions to yield meaningful impact, women first need secure access. They also need concerted and committed organizational support to overcome obstacles – before, during, and after executive development.

Systemic change should target the entirety of the organization to reshape mindsets, systems, and leadership practices. This calls for a fundamental rethink in the way that organizations:

- Identify and mitigate bias and stereotypes in succession, progression, and promotion processes.
- Embrace the duality of meritocracy and DE&I to provide equitable opportunities for people from all walks of life.
- Advance talent equitably in ways that build breadth, range, and leadership ambidexterity.

- Design systems and processes that actively promote and leverage diversity and inclusion in work design and the workforce.
- Build mentorship and sponsorship programs that explicitly involve the support of male decision-makers.
- Set, track, and deliver clear diversity targets across hiring, promotion, and leadership progression parameters.
- Enable gender equality through flexible work practices and equitable parental leave programs that normalize shared caregiving.

Debunking the myths around female leadership

Making education an effective accelerant of women’s potential also means unpacking and discarding myths that continue to surround gender differences in leadership.

These myths touch a range of things, from confidence to potential to performance.

- Although new research does not support consistent gender differences in self-reported self-confidence (the “women lack confidence” myth), women are more likely than men to think that others have lower confidence in their abilities. Much too often, it is not women’s abilities that fall short, but others’ perceptions of those abilities.
- Whereas men are promoted on the strength of perceived leadership potential, women tend to be promoted based on performance.
- There is a fine line between framing issues and pathologizing moderate levels of anxiety and self-doubt in women executives.

Corporate life has a convenient story it likes to tell. Women are not reaching senior roles because they hold themselves back. They don’t speak up enough. They lack confidence. They need to “lean in.” It is a tidy explanation. But it’s wrong, and research evidence does not support it. The problem is not women’s confidence. The problem is the architecture of the modern workplace.

For years, we have been treating the symptoms and ignoring the systems. This is the uncomfortable truth leaders need to confront. Women do not need to be trained out of their personalities to fit an outdated template of leadership. Organizations need to examine the template itself.

Ginka Toegel, Professor of Organizational Behaviour and Leadership IMD

“Leaders are the stewards of an organization’s culture; their behaviors and mindsets reverberate throughout the organization. Hence, to dismantle systems of discrimination and subordination, leaders must undergo the same shifts of heart, mind, and behavior that they want for the organization as a whole and then translate those personal shifts into real, lasting change in their companies. To that end, a first step for leaders is to learn about how systems of privilege and oppression – racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, classism, heterosexism – operate in the wider culture.”

— Robin Ely and David Thomas, “Getting serious about diversity,” 2020²⁸

When workplaces shift from fixing women to fixing themselves, they remove the ceiling not just for women but for everyone who works there.²⁹

Fixing the system

Organizations that are serious about leveraging the proven and significant advantages of gender diversity at the most senior levels of decision-making must be cognizant of the current regression on gender equity. Today, leadership power is still often allocated through informal, trust-based, opaque systems that systematically disadvantage women.

This implies that organizations must remain alert to the gap between good intentions and disappointing outcomes: between the perception that they are doing enough to advance female potential in the workplace, and the reality that many women still lack the systems needed to progress and step over the broken rung between middle management and executive leadership.

What measures can forward-looking organizations take to redress the balance? Encouragingly, there are several practical, high-impact actions that employers can take to better support women, unlock the promise of interventions like executive education, and scale impact across the organization.

Sustaining that impact, however, requires the deeper work of deliberate systemic and cultural change.

“Progress for women will remain fragile until organizations stop fixing women and start fixing the systems around them.”

— Heather Cairns-Lee, Affiliate Professor of Leadership and Communication, IMD

Practical, high-impact actions

1. Strategic sponsorship

Formal sponsorship programs that match senior executives to upcoming female leaders constitute a fast, cost-effective strategy that provides four critical benefits:

- a. **Expert guidance:** Sponsors can advise on how to progress within a specific organizational context and developmental gaps to prioritize and address.
- b. **Networking:** Sponsors can connect women to people with influence within the organization, helping them build strategic networks.
- c. **Support:** Sponsors can advocate for talented women when job openings or stretch opportunities arise.
- d. **Visibility:** Sponsors can help build the brand of high-potential women to position them strategically for succession.

However, only 57% of organizations commit to strategically sponsoring high-potential women.³⁰

“Overall, there is too much mentoring and not enough sponsoring. Sponsoring happens naturally for men, without men considering it as sponsoring. Sponsoring for women feels unnatural.”

— Male Chief Learning Officer in a global manufacturing company with more than 10,000 employees

Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

“Crucial is preparing women for the challenges ahead of time via intentional sponsorship of senior leaders who have been through similar experiences.”

— Male HR Vice President in a global manufacturing company with more than 10,000 employees

Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

One senior executive once commented to me, “I have been coached to death, but I have never been sponsored.” This is backed up by research, which found that 62% of men had a sponsor or mentor at the CEO or senior executive level compared to 52% of women³¹.

A good sponsor will ideally be a senior executive within the organization who shares their knowledge, experience, and network to help the mentee navigate their career and clarify their goals. They will also provide sponsorship by opening doors and recommending their mentee for certain assignments that will increase their visibility within the organization. A coach, on the other hand, will focus on the individual’s skills and competencies. By giving women more access to coaching instead of sponsoring, an organization may be inadvertently harming their chances of success: having a sponsor or mentor who is a senior executive increases a person’s chance of promotion and securing a bigger pay bump.

Ginka Toegel, Professor of Organizational Behaviour and Leadership, IMD

2. Partnering with trusted executive education suppliers is a proven accelerator of leadership capabilities, but access remains an obstacle for many women.

To provide the support that creates impact, organizations can:

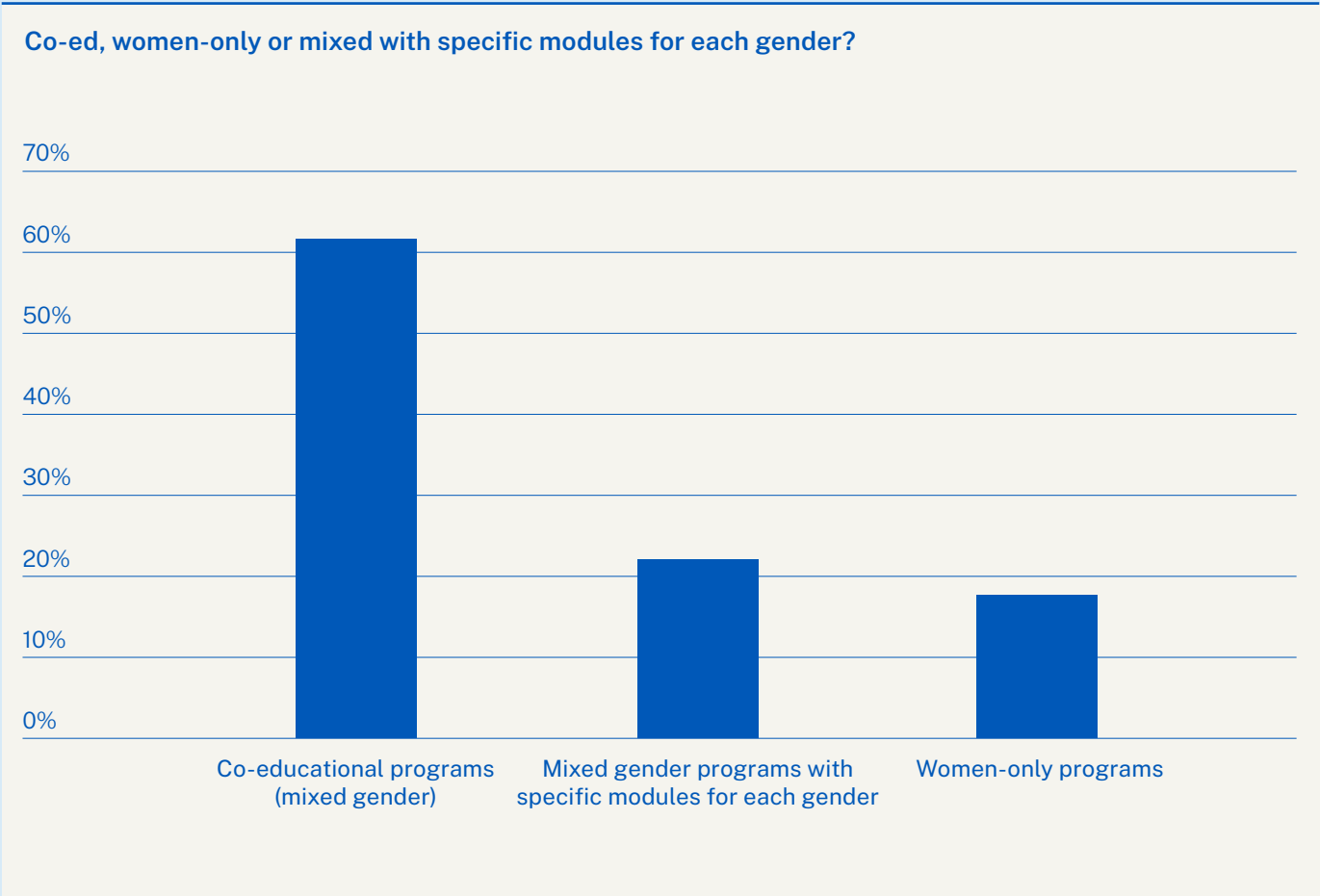
- a. Create cost-accessible pathways to executive programs through organizational scholarships and/or partnerships with business schools to reduce costs.
- b. Design inclusive selection procedures for executive education that do not disproportionately favor women who are already advantaged. Ensure that learning opportunities are available at different inflection points in the pipeline: offered too late in leadership development, they will struggle to compensate for missed profit and loss roles or sponsorship.
- c. Institute clarity and transparency around who within the organization “owns” access decisions; who funds learning opportunities; and who is accountable for outcomes.
- d. Champion flexible work schedules and study leave for women taking executive programs. Organizations can trial remote working solutions that give women greater leeway to pursue training and dedicated time off from work to commit to the learning.
- e. Collaborate with learning partners to ensure that the design, delivery, and faculty optimize impact. Data³² suggests that women thrive in inclusive co-educational learning environments, with blended in-person and online models that provide flexibility, and when faculty are more diverse, female professors are also role models for aspiring women leaders. Organizations should aim to partner with suppliers that have the right credentials: a solid impact track record, faculty diversity, built-in sponsorship, and strong post-program analytics.
- f. Enable specific networking opportunities both within the program – peer-to-peer and faculty – and alumni networks back in the workplace to power collaboration and ongoing support.



How do senior HR and L&D executives rate executive education formats?

Co-ed programs are seen as most effective to support women’s advancement into leadership roles

The preference of our survey respondents for co-educational programs is clear at first sight. Looking at the reasons for their choices, the picture becomes more nuanced.



Their explanations reveal an important distinction: the high preference for **co-educational approaches** does not reflect a rejection of gender-specific needs, but a conviction that sustainable progress requires system-level engagement. Many emphasize that male leaders must be part of the learning process to enable cultural change, legitimacy, and organizational buy-in. Also, the fact that women should not be developed in isolation from the system they are embedded in is mentioned, as building diverse networks is key. At the same time, the remark “women-only-programs are not well supported by male leaders” by one participant points to structural barriers that still exist in developing female talent. Against the backdrop of the current DE&I backlash, the crucial task is how targeted programs are framed and legitimized: executive education must be carefully designed to avoid reinforcing opposition.

Hybrid formats that combine mixed-gender learning with targeted modules rank at number two, slightly more preferred than women-only programs. They are seen as an approach that combines “the best of both worlds,” as a powerful combination of shared learning and targeted reflection. In addition, hybrid designs are characterized by avoiding the false dichotomy between inclusion and specificity.

Women-only programs, on the other hand, are valued for creating psychological safety and addressing gender-specific experiences, particularly at certain career stages. They provide a psychologically safe environment for women to address sensitive issues, allow for open reflections and confidence-building in a safe space, also because there is the risk of men dominating the discussion in mixed-gender educational settings, as one respondent remarks.

When it comes to **learning formats**, our survey respondents rate most formats as effective, with a high preference for coaching and peer learning circles.

Coaching and peer learning circles	3.83
Customized in-house programs	3.38
Customized programs at business schools	3.32
Short-term skills-based courses	3.11
Open-enrollment programs at business schools	3.00

Average rating of effectiveness, with 1 being the least effective and 5 being the most effective
Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025



“Any program that robs female hours in their workday vs. male has the risk of dropping out many female employees that have no capacity left. Hence the preference for mixed programs.”

— Female CHRO, 1,000–5,000 employees, manufacturing company in Europe

Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

“There are different stages in every woman’s journey, depending on how confident they are. Women-only programs can be very effective, while it’s important they can grow in a mixed gender environment.”

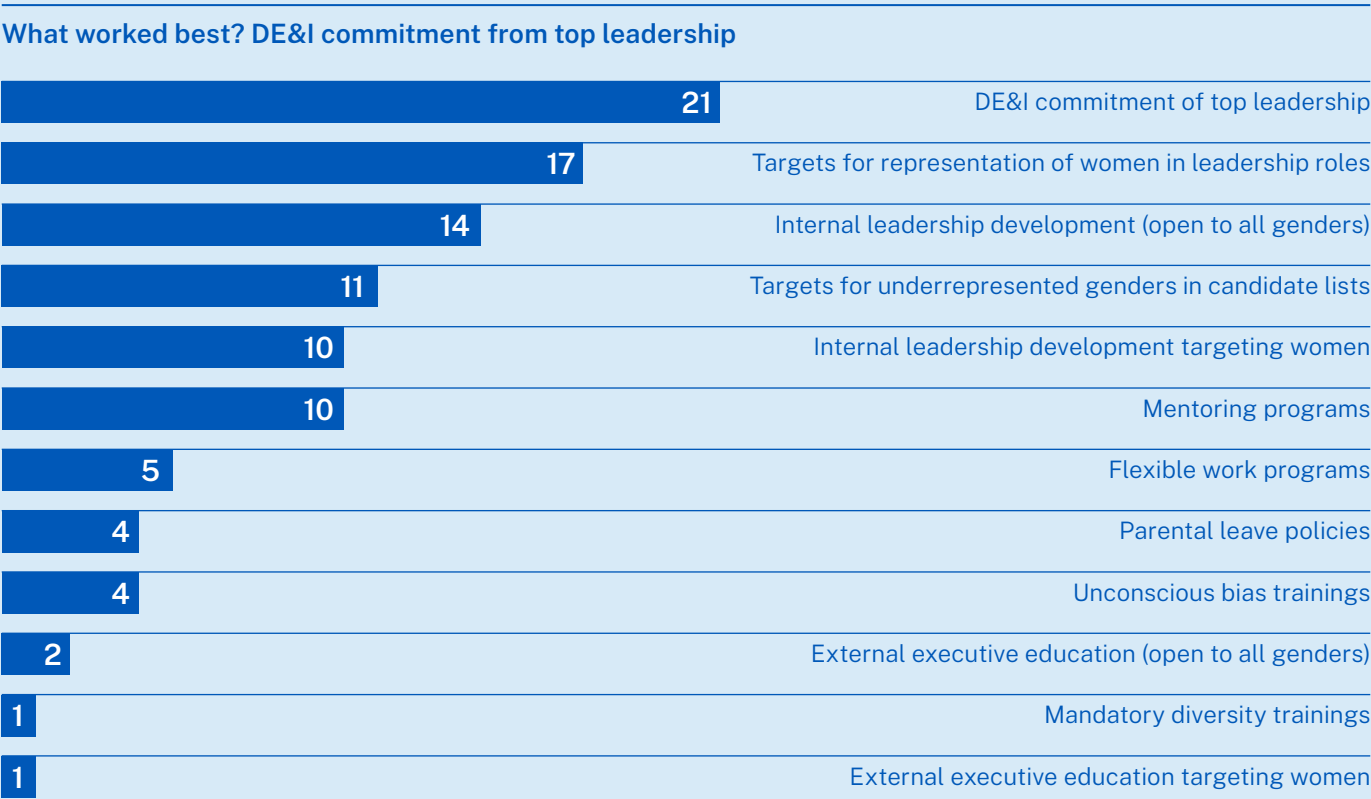
— Female Senior HR Manager, 100 to 500 employees, legal company in Europe

Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

What works? What doesn't? What's needed? And why?

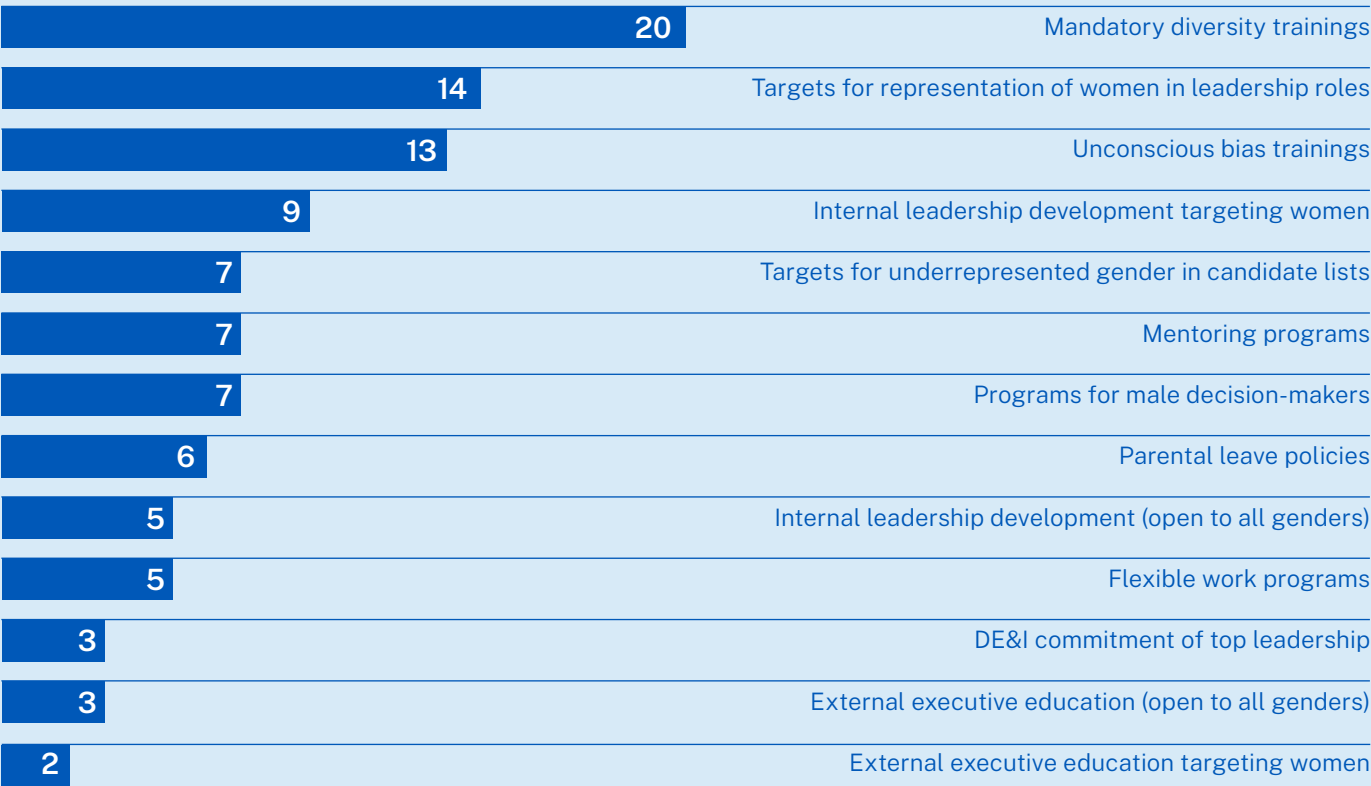
We asked senior HR and L&D executives to distinguish between interventions that can be effective when implemented well (“what works”), those that have often failed in practice (“what didn’t work”), and those they believe are currently missing or underutilized (“what is needed”).

The executives we consulted were clear about the first: visible commitment from top leadership works best to improve the female leadership pipeline, while internal leadership development is also deemed impactful.



Interestingly, diversity targets come in at number two both in the “what works” and the “what didn’t work” rankings, with as many supporters as skeptics. In our work with senior executives, we see that diversity targets work only when backed by accountability and leadership ownership. When implemented in isolation, they are box-ticking exercises at best. At worst, they provoke organizational resistance.

What didn’t work? Mandatory diversity and unconscious bias trainings – but also targets are seen as ‘critical’ by some respondents



Digging into IMD survey data, a clear picture emerges looking at the top answers in the category “what didn’t work”: mandatory diversity trainings and unconscious bias trainings – findings that correspond to existing research³³.

What would be important, but hasn’t been implemented yet? Programs for male decision-makers, external executive education, and leadership development targeting women



What respondents consistently see as “missing” are programs aimed at male decision-makers, who continue to hold a disproportionate share of formal power over promotion and progression. Gender targets in candidate lists rank at number two – and are also in the top four of “what worked best” – as an intervention to improve the female leadership pipeline. Executive education targeting women is ranked in the top three here.

What can we learn from this?

Respondents distinguish between symbolic measures (training) and power-shifting interventions (top leadership commitment, male decision-maker programs, and targets). The high need for “programs for male decision-makers” must be seen as a call for system leverage, not special treatment: respondents consistently point to the need for interventions that engage those who control promotion, pay, and succession decisions, most of whom remain men. Moreover, the fact that the same interventions appear in the top ranks in more than one bucket can be interpreted as frustration with inconsistent execution rather than rejection of the tool itself. The different rankings suggest that respondents may view commitment as necessary but insufficient, or rhetorical without execution.

From our work with corporations, we know that many measures do not fail because they are the wrong intervention, but because they are underfunded, poorly integrated, or not enforced. Meanwhile, leadership commitment matters only when tied to accountability. Targets work if they are owned by leadership, but fail when they are merely symbolic. Similarly, training fails when it is generic or mandatory, but works when targeted at powerholders. This points to the deeper work that organizations need to undergo to achieve the impact that is truly needed.

“All mentioned options are implemented, and they do have some momentum, but I believe it’s missing one piece, which is women’s career expectations.”

— Female HR senior manager, manufacturing company with more than 10,000 employees
Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

Fixing the system: Heineken and IMD

Women Interactive Network (WIN) program: A systemic learning solution that empowers talented women

Heineken is one of the world’s leading brewing companies.

With annual revenue of around €30bn (\$34.8), production facilities in more than 70 countries, and a workforce that encompasses 89,000+ direct employees, Heineken is a market-leading developer and marketer of premium and non-alcoholic beer and cider brands. In 2021, the group launched its Brew a Better World strategy, geared towards social and environmental sustainability, and a net-zero, healthier, and fairer world.



Even as Heineken has pledged to raise the bar on sustainability and social equity, it faces certain headwinds. Recent years have seen the global beer market undergo consolidation. Consumer preferences have become more fragmented, with craft beers and low-alcohol options growing in popularity. Meanwhile, macroeconomic and geopolitical tensions, high rates of input, and energy cost inflation have seen revenue and profitability become more volatile. Amid these challenges, Heineken has nonetheless pinpointed opportunities to drive growth while upholding and cleaving to its core values.

EverGreen is a new business strategy that seeks to fuel the company’s growth through innovation, enhanced productivity, balanced growth, and ongoing investment in sustainability to deliver long-term value.

A key function of this investment is the development of Heineken’s organizational capabilities – its people.

Heineken’s EverGreen strategy: Five core concepts

1. **Customer-centricity:** Shape the future of beer and beyond
2. **Digital:** Become the best-connected brewer
3. **Productivity:** Fund the growth, fuel the profit
4. **Sustainability:** Raise the bar on sustainability and responsibility
5. **People:** Unlock the full potential of Heineken’s workforce

Geared towards future-proofing the company, EverGreen reinforces Heineken’s ties to customers and consumers, and reassures stakeholders that their interests are in safe and responsible hands. It is also a vehicle for Heineken to strengthen company culture and renew commitments to social sustainability – and to inclusion, diversity, and greater gender parity.

“Heineken’s 2030 commitments raise the company’s social sustainability ambitions, including a continued focus on inclusion and diversity. While today, the percentage of women represented in senior management at Heineken has doubled from a decade ago, much opportunity remains. In 2021, Heineken established an external ambition to increase the representation of women in senior management to 30% by 2025 and 40% by 2030 on the path to gender balance.”

Heineken launches 2030 Brew a Better World ambitions

Heineken has articulated a clear goal. The company has pledged to significantly increase the representation of women within the ranks of its senior leadership between now and 2030. Heineken has set out its stall as an inclusive culture and is investing in women as a powerful vector to release new energy, insight, perspective, and innovation across its worldwide operations.

Collaborating to empower women: The Heineken Women Interactive Network

Empowering talented women entails investing in their leadership development – creating the space, the psychological safety, the mechanisms and pedagogical interventions, the continuous support systems, and the opportunities for female leaders to accede to positions of influence and deliver value. It also takes time.

Traditional, one-off training programs inevitably fail to scratch the surface of what are long-standing social, behavioral, and organizational issues that require the right amount of context and personalized focus. All too often, leadership programs are oriented to “fixing women,” rather than fixing the systems, obstacles, and dynamics that stand in their way as leaders.

Heineken has sought the expert support of IMD as a trusted learning partner to address these challenges and accelerate its EverGreen goals of developing and sustaining a female leadership pipeline.

In 2022, Heineken and IMD, led by Ginka Toegel, developed the Women Interactive Network (WIN) program. A 10-month leadership development journey that integrates face-to-face and online learning, WIN focuses on action-oriented learning to accelerate the development and impact of its female talent.

The program is predicated on three strategic pillars.

Continual learning

- Select high-potential, emerging female leaders who are top talent, ready to embrace their next role in six to 18 months, with participation confirmed through regional/functional-level people reviews.
- Develop an understanding of how to leverage networking and mentoring among the emerging women leaders at Heineken and within the program’s alumni network.
- Enable proactive, engaging, courageous conversations on career progression at multiple levels.

Experience

- Bring inclusion to life through dedicated and targeted opportunities for female talent.
- Champion a culture of belonging and inclusion.

Experimentation

- Empower talented women to make courageous moves.
- Explore and operationalize new models in the future of work.
- Learn/share/reapply for sustained impact.

It’s not about ‘fixing’ or ‘changing’ women

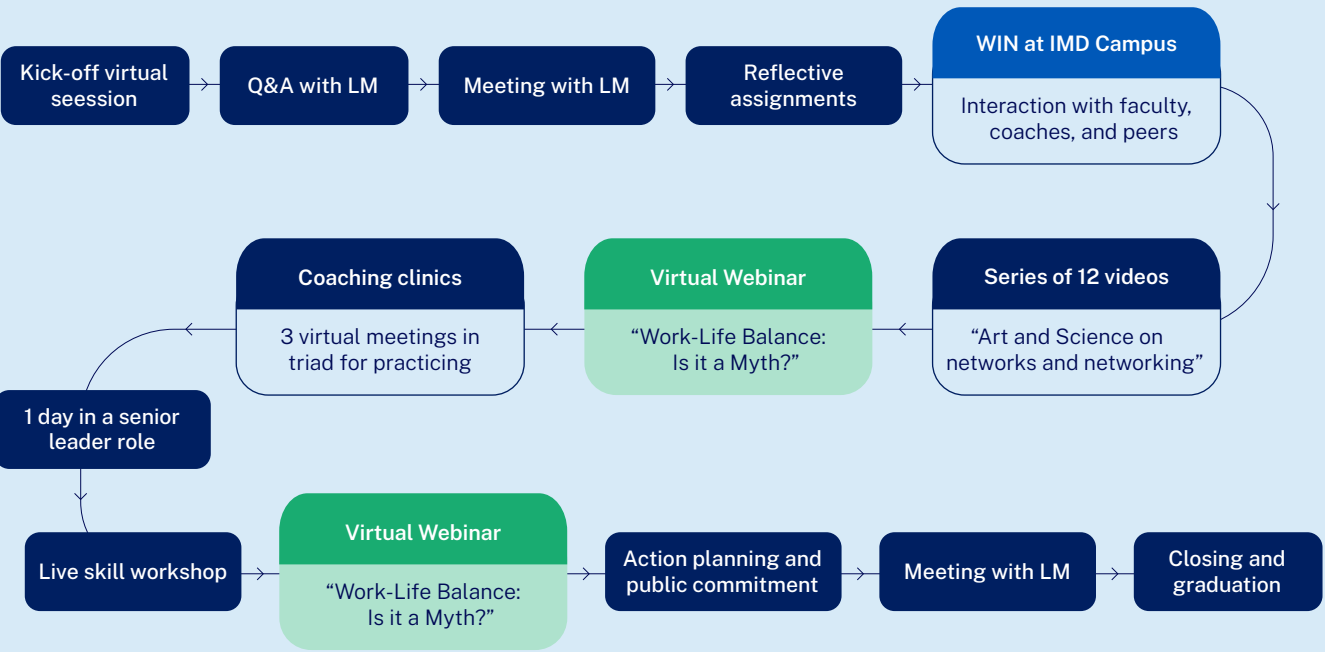
A key differentiator of WIN is its core orientation. The program does not set out to “change” participants or to adapt behaviors to conform to the existing system. Instead, WIN seeks to understand the challenges that hold women back – why and how inequity surfaces within the system.

The program looks at this through a dual lens. Learning focuses on the “inner game” of self-awareness – the critical leadership capacity to assess one’s own situation, style, practice, and connection with authenticity and vulnerability. At the same time, there is a focus on the “outer game” – the myths and realities that surround women in leadership, courageous moves, and influencing capabilities as perceived and experienced by talented female leaders.

A key part of the program design is the capacity to scale. WIN introduces a “multiplier effect” by integrating participants’ sponsors, line managers, and male “buddies” within the organization.

WIN is a ten-month learning journey, delivered by IMD faculty and executive coaches. During this period, participants are supported by a dedicated learning manager (LM), and they are encouraged to interact and exchange with peers, building a tight-knit network of support that pervades the organization. Learning happens in class, in groups, and individually – whether on campus, in situ, or online – creating a seamless continuum of reflection, experimentation, and growth within a context of psychological safety and a spirit of open inquiry.

WIN journey in detail



Fixing the system

WIN fundamentally understands that breaking the glass ceiling must go beyond fixing women. A cornerstone of the program is the recognition of how uneven the playing field is for female talent: the lack of access to leadership development networks, the dearth of support by way of female mentors or role models, and the barriers facing women in accessing and building relationships with key stakeholders.

Surfacing this kind of intelligence through interactive discussion has empowered Heineken as an organization to proactively adapt some of its systems and processes, rethink opportunities, and recalibrate career pathways around female managers’ real-life goals and needs. All while equipping these talented women with the insights, communication and influencing capabilities, practical skills, and executive coaching to forge ahead and blaze new paths for themselves, for their teams, for other women, and for Heineken as a truly inclusive organization.

WIN – success criteria

- **Line manager involvement:** Prior to the face-to-face module at IMD, participants meet with the program sponsors, program director, learning manager (LM), and support to kick off the learning journey. The IMD LM also meets with participants’ line managers and other senior managers to explore the journey.
- **Shadowing:** Walking a day in a peer’s or a more senior manager’s shoes was key to the participants’ sponsorship.
- **Executive coaching:** The program’s team of executive coaches facilitated completing one’s online personality inventory, crafting a personal and professional identity narrative, and documenting a personal leadership challenge.
- **EverGreen Leadership 360° Survey:** Self-assessment and discussion involving one’s line manager to identify every participant’s personal learning objectives.

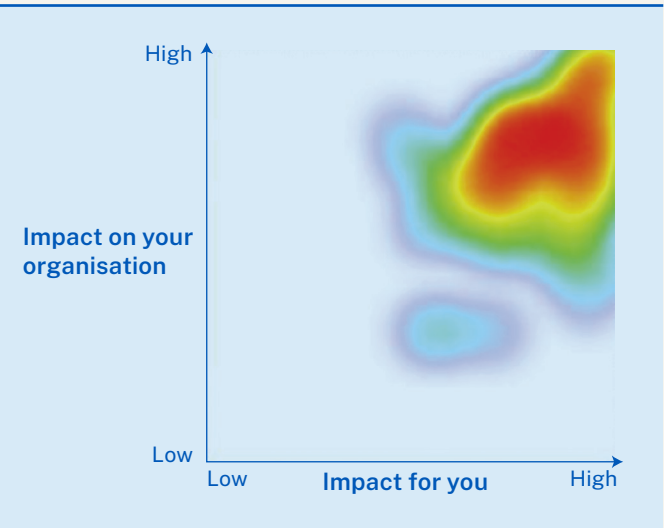
Building the foundation for an inclusive culture

Heineken remains ambitious in its gender parity goals. Achieving 40% female representation by 2030 in senior management is the company’s North Star. And the signs are positive. To date, 300 talented women have completed the WIN experience: trailblazers and role models for others across the organization.

Women who graduate from WIN are leaders who do not fit the mold. They are leaders who understand the challenges within the broader system and who have acquired the skills, understanding, and confidence to adapt their leadership styles and practices in response to headwinds. They are leaders who are highly adept at navigating difficulties and complexities in pursuit of impact and influence – despite the odds and the exigencies of today’s turbulent business environment. And they are growing in strength and in number.

With 43% already promoted into more senior positions, an overwhelming majority of WIN participants enthusiastically attest to the impact the program has had on their professional development and growth.

In pulses, 90% and more agreed that they gained fresh knowledge, practical tools, and ideas; they enhanced their professional network and are committed to taking concrete actions in their careers. Meanwhile, a Net Promoter Score of 90.1 speaks for itself. Asked to project and map the impact that the program will have for them and the organization over the next six to 12 months, this is the pattern shown in the participant feedback heatmap.



Heineken’s efforts to build a more inclusive and equitable workplace were recognized in 2023 by the LinkedIn Talent Awards, the World Economic Forum named the company’s Women in Sales initiative a DEI Lighthouse, and it was included in the 2023 Bloomberg Gender-Equality Index. In 2024, the WIN program won the Brandon Hall Human Capital Management Award.

“WIN gave me valuable insights about myself and my leadership style. It helped me realize that I often self-sabotage by not giving myself the space and the credit I deserve. It has propelled me onto a journey where I am not afraid to share my insights and directly shape the agenda that is in front of me.”

— WIN participant

“It was a very good opportunity to talk about male anxiety – but also about how it reflects on us: Are we taking it into account in honing our leadership styles? How to use the understanding in the way we go about improving the workplace environment and empowering our colleagues, male and female? Amid our company transformation, this is a very important topic.”

— WIN participant



Deeper work: Fixing the system

Education works. But again, a simple “add education and stir” approach is unlikely to guarantee long-term success. To have impact, education needs to undergo deep-rooted cultural change. Over the past decades, focusing on women has been a predominant strategy. While there have been some successes, there is scant evidence of a clear breakthrough or sustained impact. One-off training and development programs fail to yield meaningful impact unless they are supported by the right organizational culture, before, during and after learning happens – organizational culture that is forged on fair and equitable opportunities for everyone, an organizational culture that reframes the meritocratic advancement of women as well as men, in ways that are essentially inclusive, collaborative and of benefit to all.

Driving this kind of systemic change requires deeper work and committed support from incumbent – and overwhelmingly male – decision-makers, leaders, and influencers.

Organizational redesign: Fixing the pipeline

1. **Build awareness.** The first step towards fixing the system is to acknowledge that the system needs to be fixed, and this acknowledgement must come from the top. Organizations that are serious about redressing gender balance should begin with their most senior majority-group decision-makers – those who lead the business, model its values, shape its culture, and act as formal and informal gatekeepers to appointments and promotions.

Effective awareness building should include:

- **Fact-finding.** Establish a clear data-driven view of how women are represented at each level of the organization and identify the specific hurdles they report in progressing their careers.

- **KPI creation.** Translate these insights into a focused set of KPIs that address the most critical issues surfaced by the data, rather than generic diversity metrics. Data points can include, for example, the number of women nominated and funded for executive education and study leave; promotion rates within the next 12–18 months; pay progression relative to matched peers; sponsor match rates, and alumni network activity among them.
- **C-suite and senior management accountability.** Embed ownership of these KPIs at the top, linking them to leader objectives, funding decisions, and the composition of promotion and succession panels.
- **Everyday inclusive behavior.** Define and reinforce expectations for inclusive leadership in daily practice, supported by reflective routines that prompt leaders to examine how they model inclusive approaches, attitudes, and practices. This is core to the deeper cultural work required to shift entrenched leadership norms and practices.

Working with majority-group members will help frame inclusion as a collective gain, rather than a zero-sum struggle.

“To fix the pipeline, we also have to create training programs for men to ensure that they support women’s careers.”

— **Female Chief Learning Officer, European manufacturing company with more than 10,000 employees**

Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

Bias and meta conceptions

Addressing bias cannot be done in 90-minute workshops. This requires deep work. Even the most well-intentioned individuals may sometimes fall prey to “benevolent sexism.” Simply put, this refers to attitudes or behaviors that seem positive but merely serve to reinforce established gender norms. Here, it’s important to pay attention to language. For example, telling a woman to “ask so-and-so to help you” may send the message that the woman lacks the capabilities or competencies to complete a certain task by herself. Leaders must be held accountable and encouraged to periodically stop and ask themselves if there are discrepancies in how they lead and communicate with men and women. They must develop self-awareness to identify and address bias and stereotyped thinking and acting.

There are some remedies women themselves can also adopt to try to balance out the misconceptions resulting from pervasive stereotypes. One approach to get around the perceived lack of confidence is to use techniques to signal attention and interest. For example, when people come to work together on a project for the first time, status is ascribed to the various team members. By failing to speak up early on, women are more likely to be ascribed zero status. One way to signal interest and thus rack up some status points can be by asking a good question. Another way is daring to disagree with someone, because by doing so, others in the group will ascribe confidence to you. This can sometimes be challenging for women who are often conditioned from an early age to crave the approval of parents and educators.

American psychologist Carol Dweck has suggested this is because girls tend to have longer attention spans and more advanced verbal and social skills than boys in the early school years, making them more likely to receive praise. Boys, on the other hand, often get more mixed feedback. Since failing and trying harder next time are essential to confidence building, Dweck suggests that this makes boys more immune to negative feedback by the time they reach adulthood and less worried about the consequences of getting things wrong. To counter this, society needs to make sure that we praise girls for the energy they invest in certain activities, rather than rewarding them for perfect scores on their homework, so that they lessen the fear of making mistakes

Ginka Toegel, Professor of Organizational Behaviour and Leadership, IMD

2. **Re-visit hiring and promoting policies and systems.** Research shows that men are promoted for leadership potential while women are promoted for performance. This is because managers tend to consistently underestimate women’s leadership potential³⁴. To reduce implicit or unconscious gender bias in hiring and promotion decisions, it is better to evaluate the merits of the two applicants at the same time, rather than assessing them one by one³⁵. When a hiring manager carries out a joint evaluation, they are more likely to compare the two candidates based on performance rather than on an implicit gender basis. And when performance is used as the basis for a promotion decision, women are more likely to come out on top.

Avoid stereotyped occupational segregation

“Firms with lower-than-typical occupational segregation tend to have stronger female leadership representation. Among these firms, 66.5% have leadership teams where women are in the minority, compared to 72.3% of firms with higher-than-average segregation. That means companies with less gender segregation are 5.8 percentage points more likely to have gender-balanced or female-led leadership teams. Against an overall average of 69.4%, this is a meaningful difference. Even after controlling for industry and other firm characteristics, this relationship between less occupational segregation and better representation of women in leadership persists.”

Source: WiW Gender Equity Measure Report in collaboration with LinkedIn³⁶

- 3. **Conduct internal audits on pay:** Establishing baseline facts helps dispel persistent assumptions and myths, among them the notion that women are systematically less effective than men at negotiating pay. As regulatory and societal pressure for pay transparency and equal pay grows, a number of non-profit organizations now offer independent certification processes. Organizations such as the Equal Salary Foundation enable companies to verify and credibly communicate that men and women are paid equally for the same work or for the same value.
- 4. **Make the path visible:** Women need a clear view of the skills and experiences that lead to leadership within the organization – and how to build them. Transparent, disaggregated data can help make advancement more inclusive and achievable. So too can high-profile and business-critical assignments give women a chance to develop new capabilities to stretch beyond their current roles, develop new capabilities, and demonstrate readiness to succeed in more demanding leadership roles. Providing both the opportunities and the support for women to challenge themselves and aspire to greater responsibility is essential. It is equally important to celebrate women’s successes. Behind-the-scenes support matters, but organizations also need to champion high-potential women publicly and consistently.
- 5. **Re-define leadership:** Organizations must be intentional about how they define, articulate, and celebrate success. Empowering women – and harnessing the benefits of gender diversity – means broadening the prevailing definitions of leadership and embracing more diverse models of authority and influence. This means moving away from outdated gendered stereotypes and narrow, traditionally “masculine” leadership norms and behaviors that value constant presence or availability, disadvantage women, and perpetuate exclusion.



Organizations that succeed are those that can hold multiple models of success, authority, and influence simultaneously. They question inherited assumptions and traditional thinking about power, control, and narrow technical skills; and they deliberately value and advocate for broader, more diverse leadership capabilities that will help the business navigate today’s challenges and tomorrow’s uncertainty. Redefining leadership is not just about moving away from gendered stereotypes; it is about identifying and valuing the qualities that both women and men can develop and that women in some contexts may already demonstrate in abundance. These include empathy, inclusive thinking, collaboration, complex problem-solving, and a broadened range.

If senior HR and L&D leaders could recommend one action that organizations should take to secure the female leadership pipeline

When asked to identify a single action, responses reveal a clear pattern. Despite different wording, the recommendations cluster around a small number of recurring themes:

Key topics	Suggested interventions
Leadership accountability and targets – lip service is insufficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clear targets or quotas at senior and board levels• Formal accountability mechanisms• Mandated actions from top leadership
Succession planning and systematic talent management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Early pipeline cultivation• Balanced succession pipelines (e.g., 50/50 nominations)• High-quality development plans for female successors
Sponsorship, mentoring, and role modeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sponsorship by senior leaders• Mentoring programs• Strong role models at senior levels
Fair and inclusive systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transparent career steps• Objective promotion and evaluation criteria• Evaluating performance based on outcomes, not visibility or hours worked
Flexibility and support for care work and life transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flexible working models• Structured maternity and return-to-work programs• Support during key life transitions
Culture, mindsets, and long-term change	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reframing gender equity as a business enabler• Challenging traditional male role expectations• Early pipeline development through education

Across responses, HR and L&D senior executives are largely aligned that the issue is not a lack of female talent, but a lack of organizational structures that enable women stay, develop, and progress. In their view, isolated initiatives fall short. The greatest impact is expected from systemic interventions – especially stronger leadership accountability (not lip service), fair and transparent career steps and promotion criteria, flexible work arrangements, support for care work, and, last but not least, initiating a broader cultural change.

“Sadly, I have concluded that a quota requirement brings in the short term the quickest change, which in the current political environment is not easy.”

— Female CHRO, European manufacturing company with 1,000–5,000 employees
Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

Source: IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

Why this matters now: Leadership for the Age of AI

In today’s digitally disrupted, hyper-volatile, and ever-changing landscape, organizations are increasingly looking for leaders who bring flexibility, adaptability, and strategic range to their decision-making. IMD research shows that sustained success in this uncertain environment depends on developing leaders with the skills and aptitudes to meet today’s performance requirements whilst simultaneously preparing for tomorrow’s challenges and opportunities.

In the Age of AI, organizations need leaders who can both drive core business performance while also identifying and creating new sources of value, business opportunities, and revenue streams. We call this leadership ambidexterity, the ability to perform and transform at the same time. It is built through sustained cross-functional and non-linear development that expands a leader’s range and flexibility.

LinkedIn data shows that leaders with experience across industries, functions, and companies more than doubled between 2019 and 2024. The same data suggests that women are also up to 20% more likely than men to bring this diverse, multi-domain experience to the C-suite³⁷.

Women also tend to evince measured tendencies for uniquely human skills like communication, collaboration, and empathy that are increasingly critical in the age of AI³⁸.

Moreover, in light of the global turbulence we face, advancing the female leadership talent also has a societal impact – as a recent survey led by Egon Zehnder reveals, female CEOs are more likely to say that business leaders have a responsibility to help shape global prosperity and stability. An impact that will be of key importance for the upcoming years.³⁹

Women’s leadership in the Age of AI

LinkedIn predicts that the typical skills required for jobs globally will change by 68% from what they are now by 2030.

According to LinkedIn data, the soft, interpersonal characteristics of those skills, like leadership and collaboration, are more associated with women. On LinkedIn, women report a 28% higher share of soft skills than men.

While it’s a positive outlook on AI’s ability to impact gender dynamics, women will need to be on guard from its negative effects. It’s worth noting that research points to a gender gap in roles that use emerging technologies⁴⁰. This is principally down to structural barriers that persistently keep women out of lucrative tech jobs – a challenge to organizations looking to leverage the leadership potential of all employees across all functions. Sue Duke, LinkedIn’s VP of global public policy & economic graph, points out that men make up the majority of AI talent.

“Opportunities for women to make progress in their careers will disappear unless employers consider gender when upskilling to ensure that the workplace is transformed in a fair and equitable way.”

Source: LinkedIn Economic Graph 2024⁴¹

Women leaders: 20% more likely to bring multidomain experience to the C-suite

Women are 20% more likely than men to pursue multihyphenate careers, shaped by life changes and shifting opportunities. According to data from the US Harris Poll, this multidomain experience spans industries, functions, and companies, meaning that women bring a greater range and ambidexterity, along with a redefined sense of ambition that prioritizes flexibility, autonomy, and impact.

- The same data finds that:
- Nearly three-quarters (72%) aren't afraid of straying from the "perfect" career track. They're rejecting the rules that never served them and rewriting the playbook that wasn't written for them.
 - Senior women leaders are more ambitious today than five years ago (86%). Most (71%) have even recently navigated career transitions by choice.

"This momentum isn't by chance; it's by choice. Today's women leaders are redefining ambition on their own terms. They're expanding what success looks like for them, trading old markers like title and salary for autonomy, flexibility, and real impact."

— Sabrina Caluori, CMO at Chief, and Libby Rodney, Harris CSO
Source: Harris poll, 2025⁴²

"Here's the surprising truth: the messy, non-linear career paths many women experience are not liabilities to apologize for – they are training grounds for resilience. While a straightforward climb might seem ideal, those who have had to pivot, restart, transfer skills across contexts, or rebuild after interruptions have developed an adaptability that can't be taught in leadership programs. The career disadvantages women face may paradoxically prepare them better for navigating uncertainty than any traditional success trajectory could."

— Ginka Toegel, Professor of Organizational Behaviour and Leadership, IMD

Rewarding what has historically been penalized

What can organizations do to support women in the development of range and ambidexterity that they will need to sustain performance today and leverage opportunities tomorrow? A good start is to recognize, promote, and reward what has historically been penalized – the typical and often involuntarily non-linear nature of women's career trajectories.

How can organizations reframe non-linearity as an asset and capitalize on the broader range and strategic ambidexterity that it can build? There are several impactful measures⁴³ that decision-makers can consider:

1. **Build the process:** Functional or geographic mobility and role rotation create opportunities for rising female talent to build broadened experience and expanded knowledge as they progress. Women also develop a bigger-picture, joined-up sense of the entirety of the organization across its functions and markets. Whether it's structured rotation – appointments that take upcoming talent from sales to marketing to HR to finance – or opportunities that mirror the gig economy within the business, purposeful exposure accelerates leadership range and ambidexterity. Building the process for women also means:

2. **Enable re-entry pathways:** Women are more likely than men to experience career interruptions for maternity or other caregiving responsibilities. Welcoming women back into the workforce to resume progress requires organizations to reframe pauses and interruptions as opportunities for new (stretch) challenges in different roles or domains – and investments in broadened leadership development.
3. **Create the culture:** Clearly promoting the opportunities for mobility within the organization signals to talented women that diversity of experience is valued and supported. Organizations may want to devise ways to recognize career transitions so that the workforce sees and understands this value. Similarly:
4. **Communicate the benefits:** Talented and ambitious women may want to advance within the organization, and they may wish to do so fast. Communicating the longer-term payoffs of non-linear progression is key here, and so too is making clear the commitment that the organization is willing to make to the future success of its female pipeline.
5. **Celebrate the role models:** Building visibility within the company is a critical way to show the workforce that there are different ways to progress beyond the linear, functional pathways. And creating opportunities for non-linear female leaders to share their experience and learning can empower other women coming up the pipeline to explore and request similar routes.

The data suggests that aspiring women leaders may already be ahead of the curve in terms of leadership range and ambidexterity to lead dual transformation: they may be more adept at sustaining the core today while developing new business models and revenue streams for tomorrow.

Organizations that fail to prioritize the advancement of women today are in danger of holding back the very talent they will need to move forward tomorrow.

Investment in education is a proven solution, but not in isolation. Education builds capability, but systems determine whether capability converts into power. The deeper work to correct systemic obstacles cannot be avoided, while embracing and enabling non-linear progression for women should become a priority for forward-looking organizations.

"Just as AI is reshaping the workplace and demanding more adaptable, collaborative leadership, we're seeing women's progress into senior roles stall for the third year running."

"(We know that) women are 20% more likely to have that multi-domain experience, working across different industries and functions, which creates exactly the kind of flexible, agile leaders that businesses need for AI transformation. Yet we're locking them out of leadership precisely when we need those skills most."

"This isn't just about fairness; it's about making sure (we have) the right leadership to thrive in an AI-driven economy."

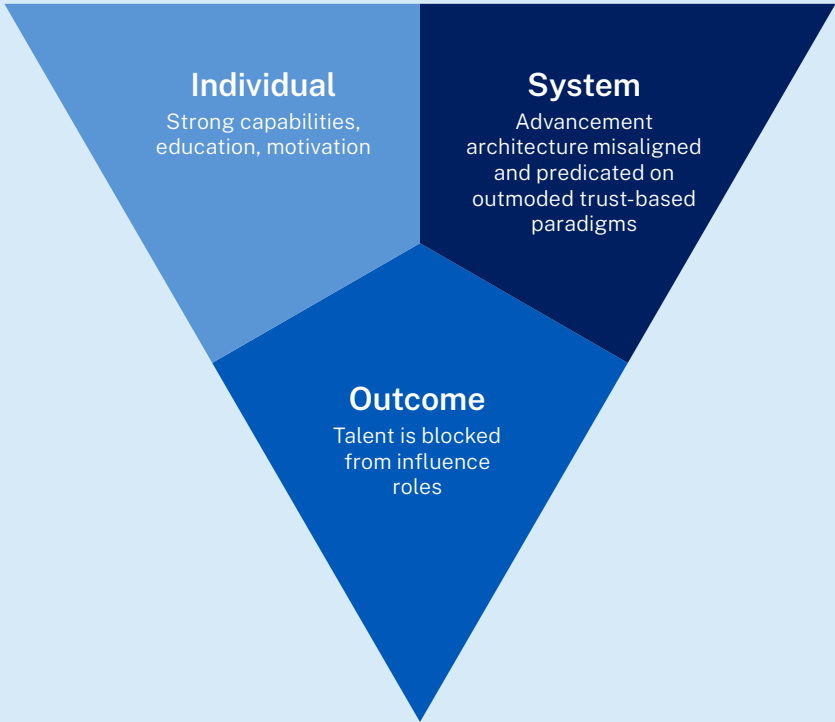
— Janine Chamberlin, Head of LinkedIn UK⁴⁴

Redesigning the machinery of leadership

In the end, deep work means a complete redesign of the machinery of leadership. It starts with acknowledging that women’s declining representation in senior leadership is not primarily a pipeline problem. It is a system design failure. Despite decades of investment, leadership pathways are not consistently recognizing, rewarding, and sustaining women’s leadership over time. Hence, the machinery of leadership itself must be redesigned.

This means addressing three issues: The individual level of capabilities, education and motivation – an area in which women today already demonstrate strong readiness for leadership. But the current advancement architecture is misaligned, opaque and predicated on outmoded trust-based paradigms. The outcome of this: women are blocked from the very roles that convert capability into power.

Fixing the system so it no longer blocks talent from power

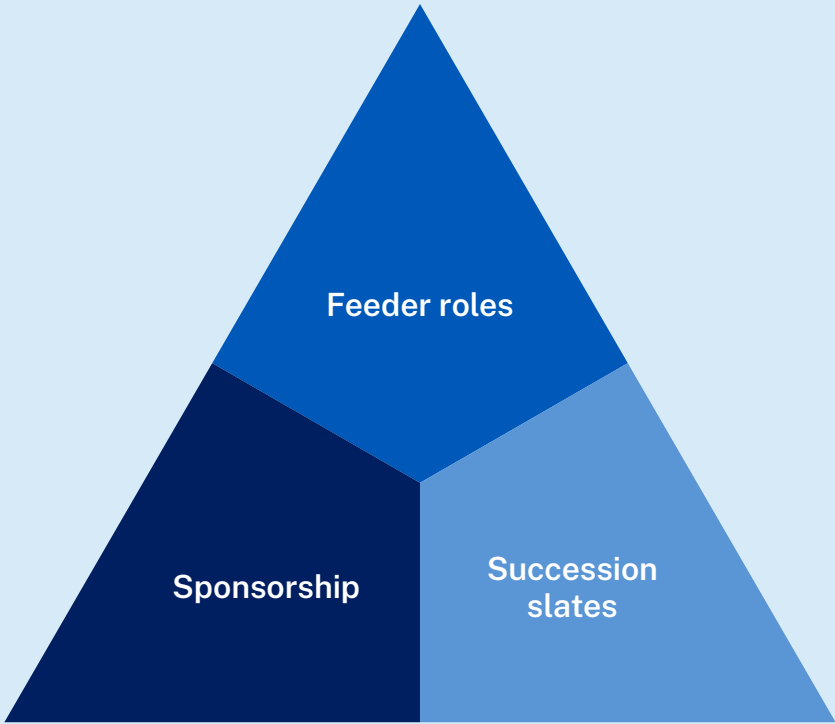


Organizations need to commit to rebuilding leadership pathways for women through three structural shifts. We think of these as The Power Triad.

The Power Triad

- 1. Succession slates must become formal, visible, and accountable.** Every Vice President-level role and above should maintain a gender-balanced succession slate of between 40% and 60% of ‘ready now’ and ‘ready soon’ candidates. These slates should be reviewed quarterly by the Executive Committee. Roles without balanced slates should be classified as succession at risk and require corrective action plans.
- 2. All roles that statistically feed executive promotion must be formally designated as executive feeder roles** – this includes P&L heads, transformation leads, market heads, crisis roles, M&A integration, and turnaround assignments. Organizations should publish annual gender access rates to these roles. No business unit should fall below the defined minimum access thresholds. Persistent imbalance should trigger leadership intervention reviews. This practice breaks invisible gatekeeping by governing the doorway rather than the exit.
- 3. Sponsorship must become a leadership obligation rather than a goodwill gesture.** Each executive should be evaluated annually on the number of women actively sponsored, stretch roles allocated, promotion outcomes achieved, visibility actions taken, and succession slate nominations made. These measures should become part of performance review and bonus decisions. This shifts power from programs to behavioral accountability, where advancement actually happens.

From intention to impact: Addressing the power triad



Reflection questions for decision-makers

Commitment without Confidence

What leaders say:
“Leadership is committed.
Progress is happening.”



What the data shows:
Few believe the pipeline
is actually strong.



Commitment weakens where
ownership, incentives, and
trade-offs begin.

System Blame, Individual Fault

What leaders say:
“Culture and stereotypes
block progress.”



But they also say:
Women’s “aspirations”
are a major barrier.



Aspirations may be an outcome
of the system, not a cause.

Targets That Work ... and Don’t

What leaders report:
“Targets are effective.”



What they also report:
Targets don’t work.



Targets don’t fail on principle.
They fail when accountability
is optional.

Developing Women, Not Influence

What organizations invest in:
Education for women.



What’s missing:
Programs for male
decision-makers.



We’re developing women
faster than we’re changing
how power works.

Pick up one paradox that feels most uncomfortable in
your organization.

Each paradox shows where intent collides with reality.
Look at it as an architecture problem, for example:
decision timing, promotion criteria, role design, risk
tolerance, sponsorship gaps, etc.

- Where does commitment stop translating into
action in your organization?
- When leaders talk about “women’s aspirations,”
what are they reacting to?
- Which leadership behaviors are implicitly rewarded
at the top?
- Identify one system design flaw (not a person, not
a policy).

Take one intervention used in your organization
(e.g., targets, leadership programs,
mentoring, executive education):

- Who owns it (is ownership diffused)?
- What happens when commitments are missed (are
consequences weak)?
- Who pays the cost for change?
- Who benefits if it works?
- What does your organization expect education
alone to compensate for?
- Who controls promotions/nominations for stretch
roles/ funding for development?
- What gets ignored?
- What is one leadership decision, rule, or habit
you personally influence that could change the
pipeline?
- Where do HR-led initiatives lose traction once they
reach the business?
- What authority does HR not have that would
change outcomes?

- Which metric would you change tomorrow if you
had full backing?
- Which of these issues would disappear if
accountability changed?
- If you discuss as a group, agree on one concrete
shift, framed as:
 - We will stop...
 - We will start...
 - We will redesign...

Examples: succession panels must include a sponsor
statement, promotion criteria rewritten to value range,
funding executive education tied to role access, etc.

Goals to aim for in the next 90 days

- Publishing feeder-role access rates
- Formalizing succession slates
- Assigning sponsorship accountability
- Establishing quarterly ExCo outcomes review

Organizations do not lack talented women. They lack leadership systems that consistently recognize, reward, and retain them. The evidence presented in this paper points to a clear conclusion: women’s declining representation in senior leadership is not the result of insufficient ambition, readiness, or development. It is the predictable outcome of advancement architectures that continue to privilege familiarity, informal sponsorship, opaque succession processes, and outdated role design. This is not merely a fairness issue. It is a strategic risk.

As artificial intelligence reshapes work, as industries confront demographic shifts and economic volatility, and as the skills required for leadership evolve rapidly, organizations that fail to modernize how leadership power is allocated will find themselves constrained by a narrow and increasingly fragile leadership bench. Redesigning leadership pathways is therefore not an act of social responsibility; it is an act of institutional resilience.

Organizations that formalize succession slates, govern access to executive feeder roles, and make sponsorship a leadership obligation will not only reverse the backslide on women’s progress. They will build deeper benches, expand their leadership market, and strengthen their capacity to adapt and grow.

You cannot fix a broken ladder by coaching the climbers. You fix it by rebuilding the ladder. The choice now facing leaders is not whether to act, but whether to redesign early or fall behind later.

“Talent advances through networks; parity is achieved when those networks become inclusive by design.”

— Heather Cairns-Lee, Affiliate Professor of Leadership and Communication, IMD



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IMD’s suite of programs empowers organizations and upcoming female leaders to accelerate the capabilities, knowledge, and networking opportunities to enact meaningful change and harness the potential of diversity in organizational leadership.

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Methodology
IMD Senior HR + L&D Executives Survey 2025

In November and December 2025, we reached out to senior human resources and learning and development executives in our network. 95 individuals participated in the overall survey. As answering questions was not mandatory, some questions were only answered by 50 individuals.

Of the 85 individuals who provided their gender identification, 79% chose female, and 21% chose male. Regarding their roles, 34% of respondents were Chief Human Resource Officers, 19% Senior HR Managers, 14% HR (Senior) Vice Presidents, 7% Learning & Development Senior Managers, 5% HR Managers, 4% Chief Learning Officers, 4% L&D Managers, and 13% had other roles. With multiple choices possible, 74% were responsible for Europe, 46% for Asia, 32% for North America, 27% for South America, 25% for the Middle East & North Africa, and 20% for Sub-Saharan Africa in their roles.

In terms of their employers, 36% of respondents said they worked in companies with 10,000 or more employees, 21% with 1,001–5,000, 16% with 101–500, 11% with 5,001–10,000, 8% to less than 100, and 7% with 501–1,000. The top five industries were with 32% manufacturing, 9% healthcare, and 8% technology. In 92% of the companies our survey respondents work for, the CEO is male, with only 8% having a female CEO.

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