

SHAPE TALENT®

Accelerating gender equality

# The Three Barriers® to Women's Progression

## What organisations can do about them

3rd Edition

A research paper by Sharon Peake,
Dr Priscila Pereira and Helena Wacko

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# Preface

The pursuit of gender equity in leadership has been a defining challenge of the 21st century. While progress has been made, the journey remains fraught with systemic barriers, societal resistance, and unforeseen global crises that have disproportionately impacted women's advancement. This research paper explores the enduring barriers women face in career progression to leadership roles, drawing on historical milestones, contemporary setbacks, and the pressing need for structural change.

The progress of gender equity efforts reflects both triumph and regression. The establishment of UN Women in 2010 strengthened institutional advocacy, while the Sustainable Development Goals (2015) reinforced gender equality as a global priority. Movements such as #MeToo (2017) shifted workplace cultures, bringing issues of harassment and discrimination into mainstream discourse.

Yet, recent events, from the Covid-19 pandemic to geopolitical conflicts and policy regressions, have intensified gender disparities, eroding hard-fought progress. Furthermore, economic instability, political shifts, and digital transformation have further complicated the landscape, leaving women once again at risk of exclusion from emerging opportunities. To quantify this, in 2016, the World Economic Forum estimated it would take 83 years to achieve gender parity globally. This estimate was revised back up to 134 years in its 2024 Global Gender Gap report, and 123 years in its 2025 report.

This paradox of progress is evident in many ways. Across regions and intersectional identities, disparities are even harsher, revealing that broad statistical gains often obscure the lived realities of marginalised groups. This research paper acknowledges these complexities and emphasises the need for nuanced, context-specific strategies to drive meaningful change. Furthermore, one of the most troubling patterns in gender equity is the backlash that emerges during crises. Patriarchal structures often exploit instability to reinforce traditional gender roles, stalling or reversing progress. Crisis management strategies frequently marginalise gender issues, relegating them to secondary concerns in economic and political agendas. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial to formulating resilient and sustainable gender equity interventions.



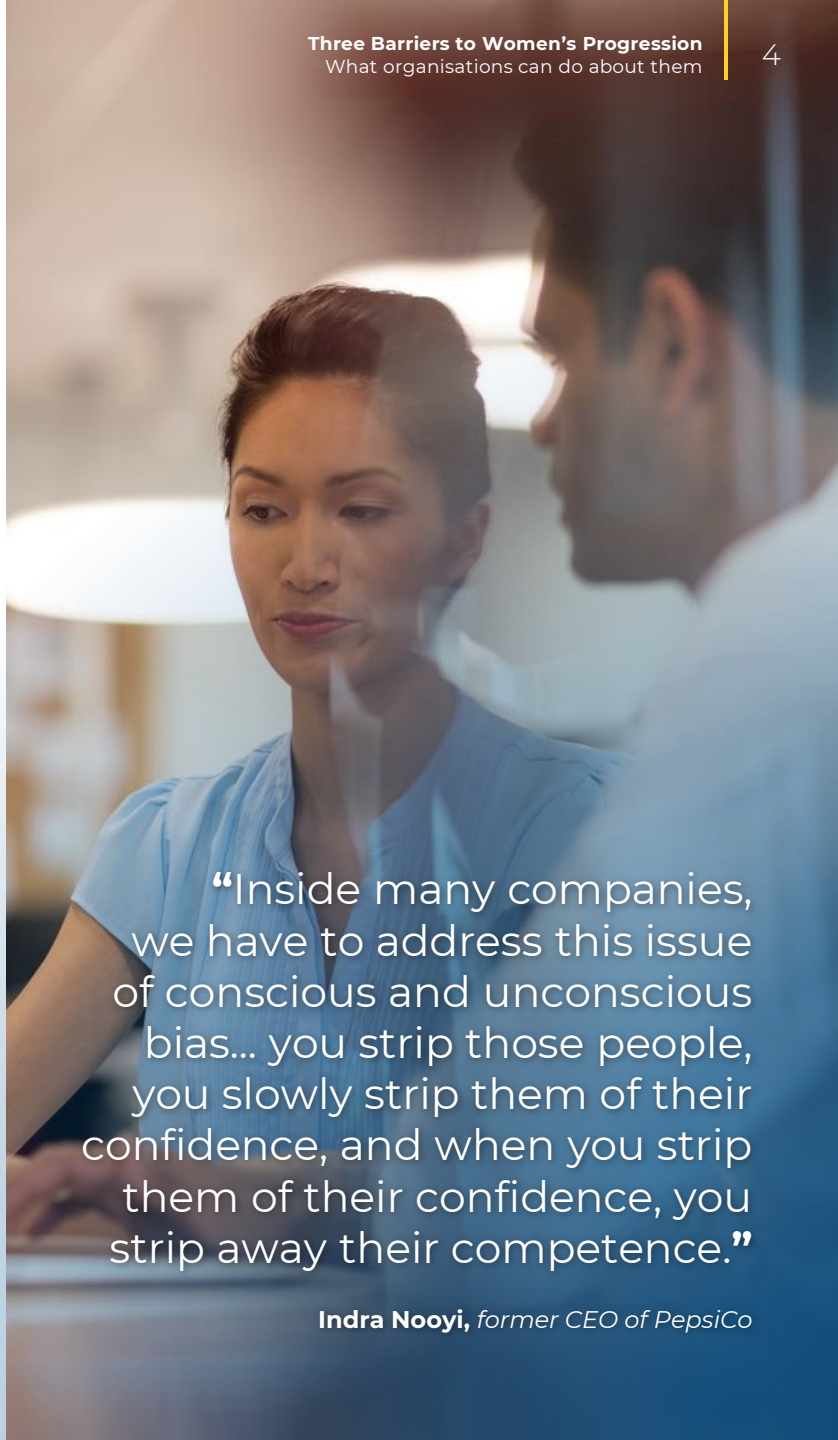
**Sharon Peake**
Founder & CEO
Shape Talent

This research paper introduces three critical barriers to career progression that continue to hinder women's leadership trajectories: societal, organisational, and personal barriers. By framing gender equity challenges within a systemic lens, we underscore the importance of intersectionality, recognising that gender inequity is not a monolithic experience.

Now in its third edition, this research builds on a robust foundation of data and insights. Over the past two years, our validated model has evolved through extensive analysis, incorporating perspectives from over 7,500 respondents globally, providing a comprehensive examination of the challenges women face in leadership advancement. We have further validated our model through an extensive literature review on the experiences of other marginalised genders and sexual orientations. Our findings confirm that many barriers are not exclusive to women but are relevant across LGBTQ+ communities. By identifying and addressing these barriers, we aim to inform policy, corporate strategy, and advocacy efforts, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future.

The road to gender parity remains long, but by confronting these challenges with evidence-based solutions and collective commitment, we can accelerate progress. This research paper serves as both a call to action and a strategic roadmap for organisations and policymakers dedicated to fostering inclusive leadership.

**Sharon Peake**
**Founder & CEO, Shape Talent**





## Acknowledgements

This third edition research paper is the result of two years of teamwork supported by multiple experts to test our Three Barriers® Model across the world, ensuring its scientific robustness and relevance. Specifically, I would like to thank the talented Helena Wacko for her diligence in bringing the research up to date and articulating it so completely, along with Dr Priscila Pereira for her expertise in guiding this work. You both inspire me. My thanks are also extended to Ailish Breen for their review, which has been invaluable in shaping this edition, and Katy Hui of Yoke Design for her beautiful design of this paper. None of this would have been possible without the earlier foundational contributions from Professor Rebecca Jones, who together with Dr Priscila Pereira updated the precursor edition, and of course Elizabeth Dixon whose early work in 2013 was the genesis of the original Three Barriers® research paper.

## Disclaimer

It is important to recognise the limitations of the literature consulted and the broader research base for this research paper. These include the underrepresentation of trans experiences and people of colour, as well as a reliance on predominantly Global North sources. Additionally, much of the literature is shaped by binary frameworks, which often marginalise non-binary identities with cisgender assumptions. We are aware, however, that many of the barriers explored in this paper are also faced by marginalised genders in different ways.

The terminology used in this document reflects the language of the original research sources cited. This includes terms such as BME or BAME. We have retained this terminology to accurately represent the research findings. Also, in this work, we use the term disabled women rather than women with a disability in line with the social model of disability. This approach acknowledges that people are disabled by societal barriers rather than individual impairments. By using this terminology, we recognise that disability is the product of exclusionary systems and practices.

# Glossary of Terms

**Cis/Cisgender:** a term used to describe those whose gender identity matches that assigned to them at birth, i.e., those who are not trans or non-binary.

**Cissexism:** a form of prejudice against trans people, in which a cisgender identity is regarded as the preferred default 'norm' and trans identities are regarded as aberrant, deviant and/or undesirable. Cisnormativity is also used.

**Disability:** a legal term used to refer to persons with a long-term physical or mental disability. The social model of disability views people as being disabled by barriers in society, rather than as a result of their difference.

**Equity:** a principle of fairness and justice that recognises that people do not start from the same position due to systemic imbalances. To achieve true fairness, these disparities must be addressed by providing individuals with the resources and opportunities they need to succeed, rather than assuming the same approach works for everyone.

**Equality:** refers to the idea that all individuals should have the same rights, opportunities, and treatment. While equality ensures uniform access, it does not necessarily lead to fair outcomes, as it does not take into account the different starting points and barriers people may face.

**Ethnicity:** a classification based on shared cultural heritage, traditions, or country of origin, often linked to a person's ancestry or background.

**Gender:** a social and relational construction of differences between masculinities and femininities that are learned and practised. Gender is learned and varies from culture and context. Gender is not a solitary category, rather it exists alongside and in complex interrelationships with other markers of identification such as race, sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion, disability.

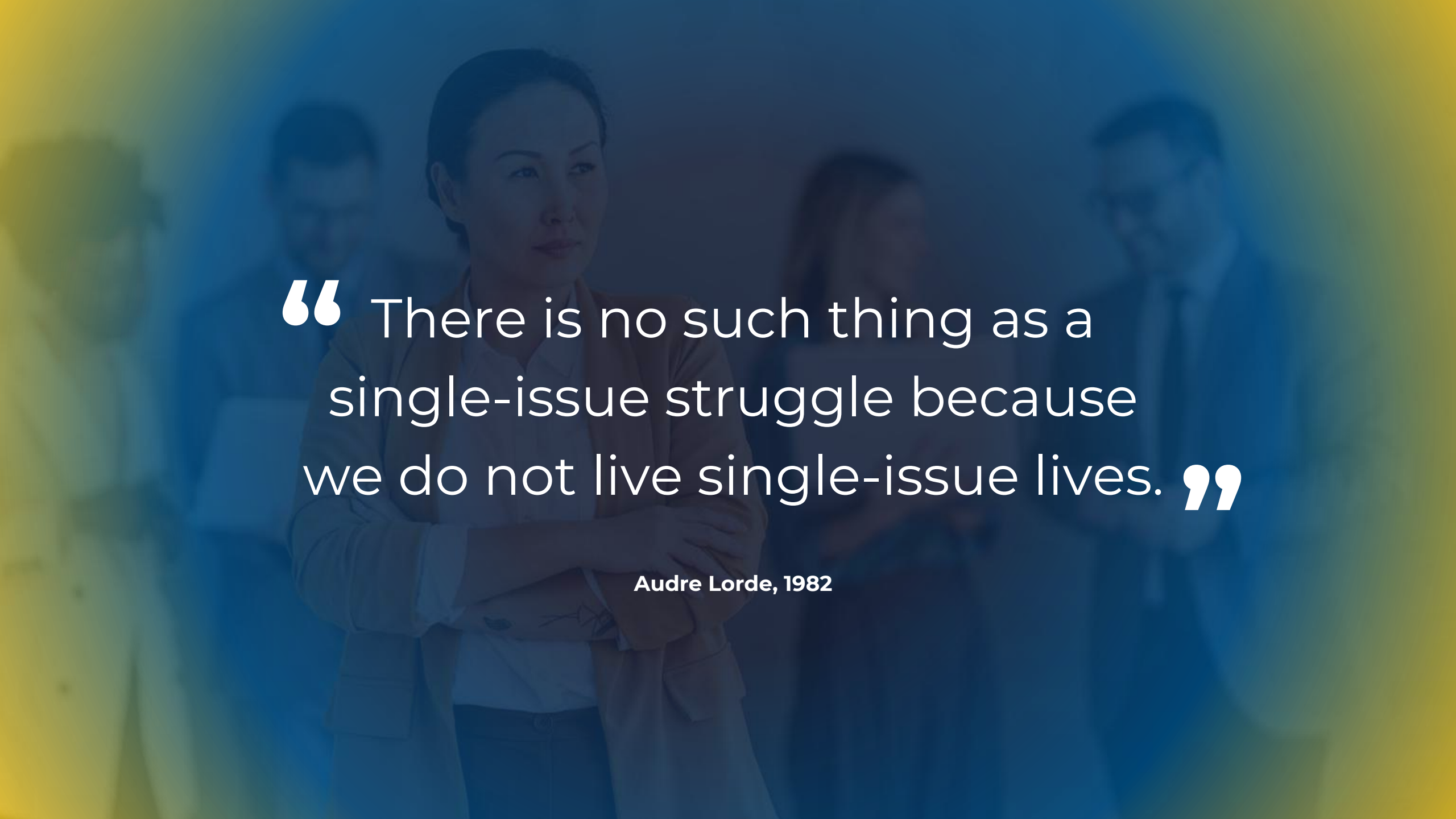
**Gender identity:** one's innately held sense of one's own gender. This may or may not correspond to the sex assigned to a person at birth. One's gender identity is distinct from one's sexual orientation.

**Heteronormativity:** a cultural belief system in which heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships are seen as the preferred default 'norm' and queer identities and relationships are seen as aberrant, deviant and/or undesirable.

**Marginalised genders:** refers to women, non-binary, and gender-diverse people who face systemic exclusion from opportunities, leadership, and resources due to biases and gender hierarchies.

**Patriarchy:** patriarchy is an organisational and social system where dominant power is privileged to men and masculinity, often to the exclusion or disadvantage of women and marginalised genders. It operates through institutions, cultural norms, and relationships that reinforce gender hierarchies.

**Queer:** a term with a number of meanings. It is used by those who do not want to specifically label their sexual/romantic orientation and/or gender identity. Additionally, queer serves as an umbrella term to describe non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities. Queer is also used as a methodology in academic and social sciences, offering a lens to critique dominant gender and sexuality norms. Similarly, it is used in some contexts to show a rejection of particular societal and community norms surrounding sexual orientation, gender identity, and the stability of such categories. Queer was (and still sometimes is) used as a slur directed primarily at gay men. The term was reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community in the late 1980s, but is not universally accepted as a positive term.


“ There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives. ”
Audre Lorde, 1982

# Intersectionality

Intersectionality has become a cornerstone of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts in contemporary workplaces. It offers a framework to understand how interconnected systems of power, such as sexism, racism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia, shape life experiences. These systems can create overlapping forms of inequality, oppression, and privilege that act upon individuals simultaneously.

Intersectionality encourages us to look beyond a single axis of analysis and consider how, in this case, gender is always intertwined with other systems and hierarchies, as well as shaped by other aspects of our identity or life experiences. First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the term highlights how structures of race, gender, class, ability, age, and sexual orientation (among others) do not exist in isolation but interact to influence the way individuals navigate the world.[1] In the context of the workplace, these intersecting structures of oppression can create unique barriers to career progression, workplace inclusion, and leadership opportunities.

Intersectionality challenges the notion of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to addressing inequality in the workplace, emphasising instead how people's lived experiences differ when multiple forms of discrimination converge. For instance, women of colour may face unique challenges distinct from those experienced by white women or men of colour. Similarly, LGBTQ+ individuals might encounter marginalisation depending on the intersection of their gender identity, sexual orientation, and other aspects of their identity. It is critical to understand how these intersections result in distinct experiences.

This paper explores three critical barriers faced by women and marginalised genders in the workplace – societal, organisational, and personal – through an intersectional lens as much as the available data allows. We will examine how issues such as racism, ableism, homophobia, heteronormativity, cissexism and ageism intersect with gender to influence career progression and workplace inclusion. By considering these barriers through an intersectional framework, we aim to uncover nuanced experiences, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how to address gender equity in the workplace.

The Three Barriers® discussed are not isolated but instead are shaped by and influence each other. For example, systemic gender and racial discrimination may restrict access to leadership roles for individuals (organisational barrier), who are also acting as the primary caregiver at home (societal barrier), while implicit biases in organisational culture may be holding them back from negotiating for higher salaries or opportunities (personal barrier). The combination of these barriers, rather than any single barrier in isolation, impacts career advancement – and ultimately gender equity in the workplace.



# The Three Barriers Model®



# 1.

## SOCIETAL BARRIERS

The first of the three categories of barriers relates to the subtle and often unspoken societal and cultural cues and messages we all receive over our lifetimes which reinforce the ways in which we 'ought' to think, behave, and feel according to gendered norms. We call these Societal Barriers.





## 1.1. Gender role expectations

Gender stereotypes shape our day-to-day lived experiences. Stereotypes, underpinned by binary and heteronormative ideals, such as the male breadwinner and female caregiver, influence how nuclear households and organisations are managed. Critically, these gender expectations and stereotypes are often passed between generations unnoticed and can impact, as well as restrict, us throughout our lives and can be very hard to challenge. For example, our recent research among women in European corporations, revealed that 53 per cent of women continue to face barriers in the workplace linked to gender role stereotypes, with women at multiple intersections experiencing this barrier at higher rates.[2] Therefore, for us to break down barriers to gender equality, we must first acknowledge and understand the influence of gender role expectations.

Research has found that gender stereotypes are established at a young age, with children aware of gender by age two. As early as six years of age, children have been found to associate intelligence with masculinity and niceness with femininity.[3] Additionally, the gender stereotyping experienced at an early age has been reported to influence and constrain career choices.[4] Messages around being kind and considerate are reinforced in girls from a very young age.

Girls are often discouraged from assertive and domineering behaviour, typically seen as a sign of leadership in boys, but often labelled as "bossy" in girls. Similarly, messages which warn us not to stray from gender norms are reinforced from an early age. These social cues, which come through various societal channels – the media, parents, teachers, and well-intended family members – gradually build into perceptions about what behaviour and choices are expected in adulthood, leading to differences in career path choices and unfair division of household responsibilities. Similarly, when it comes to leadership, the representation disparity between men and women (and other marginalised genders) remains stark, even in sectors where women are over-represented.[5]

When it comes to leadership, the representation disparity between men and women (and other marginalised genders) remains stark.

Take for instance the healthcare sector; a global review in 2025 found that women, who make up 70 per cent of the healthcare workforce, hold only 25 per cent of leadership positions.[6] Similar evidence like this suggests that society still is not entirely comfortable with women in positions of power.

For example, as part of the annual Reykjavik Index, when asked whether they agree with the statement "I would feel very comfortable with a woman as a CEO of a major company in my country", responses reveal deeply ingrained gender stereotype prejudices. In the UK and the US, only 60 per cent and 58 per cent of respondents, respectively, agreed with this statement in 2024 – and these are the two countries with the highest percentage of women CEOs. In France, only 51 per cent of people are comfortable with a woman as the CEO of a major corporation. This figure drops to 48 per cent in Italy and to just 36 per cent in both Germany and Japan.[7] This question has been tracked over time, documenting shifts in attitudes. The most recent index reveals that some of the progress made is now at risk of deteriorating, showing that stagnation has turned into a reversal.[8]

For LGBTQ+ identities, stereotypes often result from an interplay of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and cissexism. For example, lesbian women are often stereotyped as being more masculine than heterosexual women, and gay men are often stereotyped as being more feminine than heterosexual men, both of which are reductive and subject these groups to a set of assumed expectations regarding behaviour and expression in line with these stereotypes.[9]

These expectations can lead to specific types of discrimination, such as gay men being viewed as hyper-sexualised, weak, and even less hireable in certain professions, or lesbian women being viewed as unattractive and/or hyper-sexualised depending on their adherence to gender norms.[10]



> "I had a particularly negative, nasty experience with one of the senior people in the firm. He sort of indicated that he would fix me, and sort me out: 'Don't be bothering with that kind of nonsense' kind of thing, 'You're far too pretty' kind of stuff."
>
> **Geraldine,** *survey respondent*

Bisexual people can face stereotypes of promiscuity and infidelity, or experience bi-erasure whereby their identity is not recognised at all – for example, 63 per cent of bisexual women in our research of women in European corporates identified gender stereotypes as a significant barrier.[11] And trans people have faced increasing hostility and suspicion over the last decade in the media and society more broadly, particularly in the UK and US.[12]

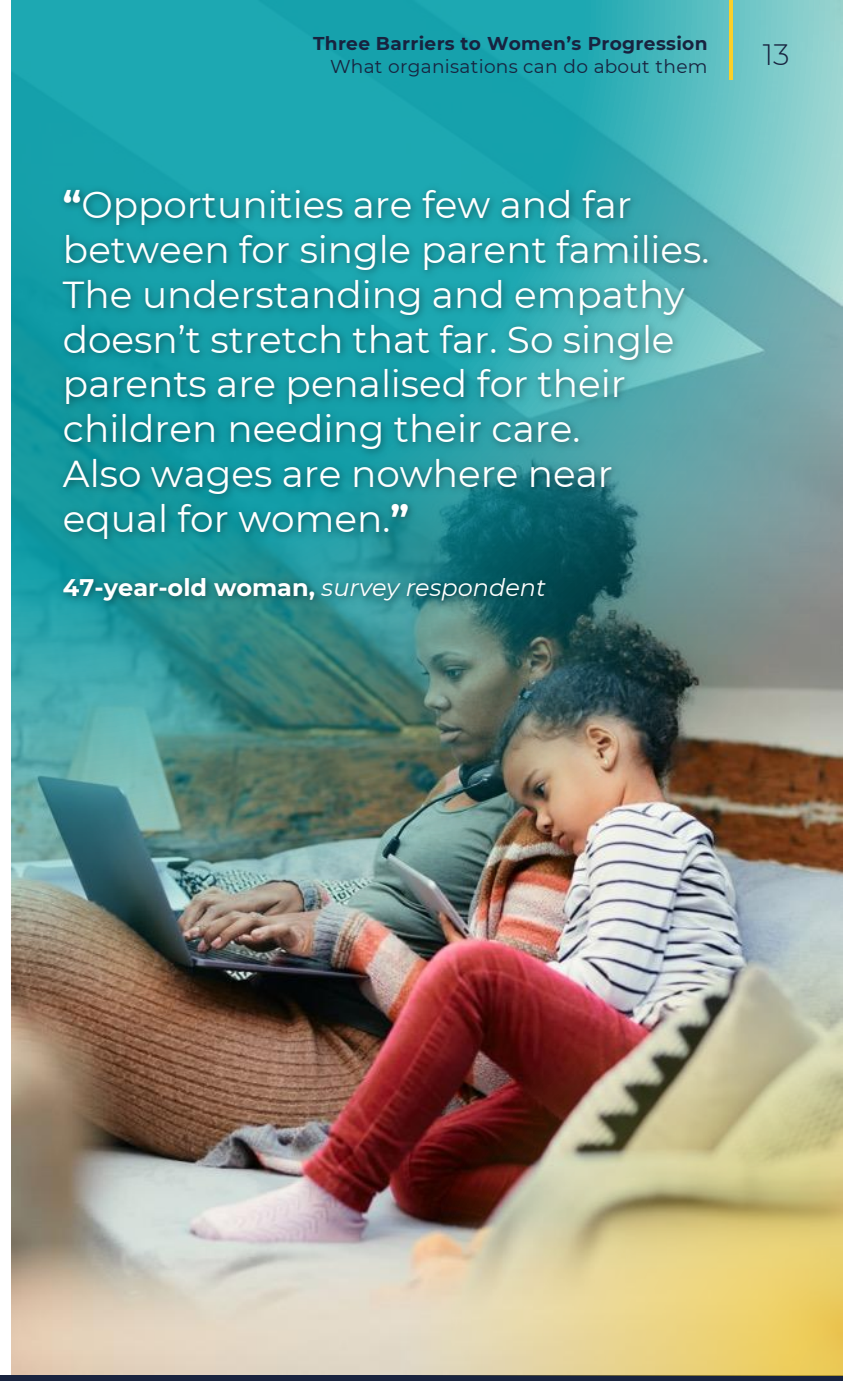
## 1.2. Women as primary caregivers

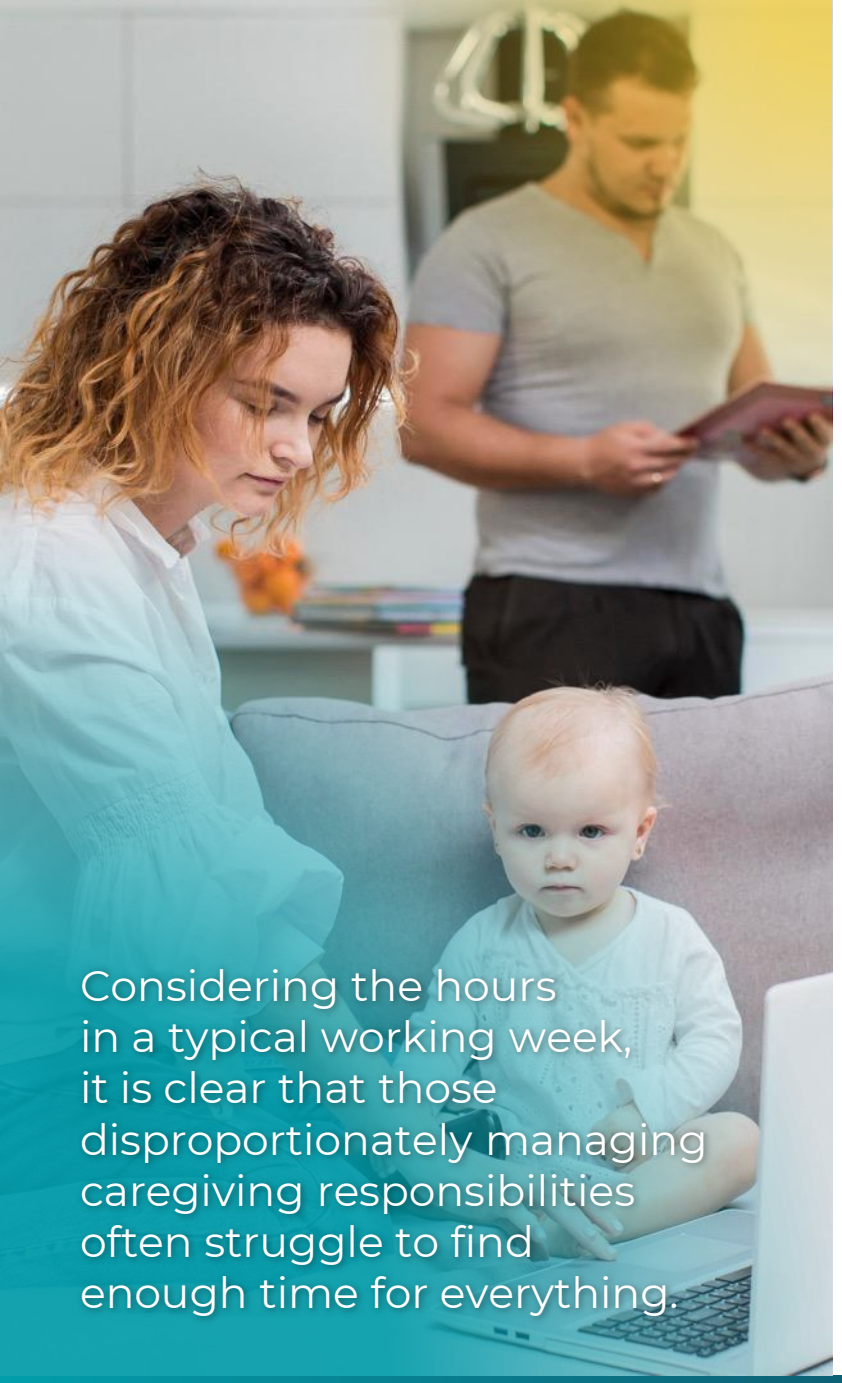
Despite an increase in the number of fathers taking up primary caregiving responsibilities, gender stereotypes continue to fuel the belief that women – in heterosexual relationships – do the job better and should be responsible for childcare. Our research among women in European corporations found that 39 per cent experience barriers in the workplace as a result of having most of the caregiving responsibility.[13] In contrast, within queer families, research has repeatedly found that same sex couples typically have a more equal distribution of household labour.[14] Moreover, our survey of women in European corporates affirmed that Black women take more caregiving responsibilities at home when compared to their white counterparts.[15] Therefore, it is not surprising that almost one in two stated they struggle with work-life balance when they start a new job. This might lead them to opt out from career advancement and promotions – in turn demonstrating the layered impacts of being the primary caregiver.

More women than men are repeatedly found to be making career sacrifices for their opposite-sex partner, including relocating, turning down attractive job opportunities, and working part-time or flexible hours. Work deprioritisation for working mothers is even more likely if job quality is low, and mothers of young children are more likely than men to opt out of employment altogether. For example, a 2024 study examining 134 economies highlighted the enduring impact of the motherhood penalty, revealing that in over half of these countries, women remain 20 per cent less likely to be employed a whole decade after having their first child.[16] The combined challenges of navigating paid employment and their role as primary caregivers means that when job quality is low, the stress and challenge is simply just not worth it.[17]

This is an important issue for society to address, as illustrated by research amongst 773 heterosexual fathers in the UK which found that heterosexual women are 21 per cent more likely to progress their careers after having children if their male partner plays an active role in childcare.[18] In turn, a much higher number of men assuming primary caregiver roles in heterosexual couples is essential to help change perceptions and organisations can play a critical role in encouraging this through the provision of paid parental leave options. Similarly, it is important that organisations recognise the particular constraints of single parents who act as primary caregivers. This employee demographic faces significant workplace challenges, including limited access to flexible and senior roles, high childcare costs, and career interruptions.

> "Opportunities are few and far between for single parent families. The understanding and empathy doesn't stretch that far. So single parents are penalised for their children needing their care. Also wages are nowhere near equal for women."
>
> **47-year-old woman,** *survey respondent*






## 1.3. Unpaid work

An unequal distribution of unpaid work constrains women's availability to participate in paid work. For example, this can be due to caring for children or elderly parents, or in the case of the 'sandwich generation', caring for both. This unequal distribution is well illustrated amongst the 1.3 million people in the UK who are 'sandwich carers', where 61 per cent of sandwich care falls on women, in turn compounding the inequalities already present in the workplace and at home. Additionally, research from 2024 uncovered the significant and specific toll the balancing act of sandwich care takes on carers' mental and physical health, often lasting for years.[19]

Recent data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) reveals that approximately 708 million women worldwide are excluded from the labour force due to unpaid caring responsibilities.[20] Additionally, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in the UK has provided numbers on unpaid care expectancy (an estimate of the average number of years spent occupying an unpaid carer role) showing large, gendered discrepancies. For example, 15-year-old girls could expect to spend more of their remaining years providing unpaid care (7.6 years) compared to boys (5.3 years).[21]

These figures underscore the significant and persistent gender disparities in unpaid care work, both globally and within the UK. However, these disparities, and how they are felt vis-a-vis paid work, do not only manifest along gendered lines, but also racial ones. In the US, more than 80 per cent of Black mothers are breadwinners compared to 50 per cent of white mothers, whilst still typically being primary caregivers. [22] In turn, this dual role intensifies the unequal burden of unpaid labour that Black women disproportionately shoulder, as they are forced to manage both responsibilities simultaneously. Indeed, UK research found that women from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds are disproportionately impacted by unpaid caregiving responsibilities, making them the most likely demographic to be out of the labour market at all stages of their careers.[23]

Considering the hours in a typical working week, it is clear that those disproportionately managing caregiving responsibilities often struggle to find enough time for everything. This leads to the so-called Double Burden or Second Shift, which becomes increasingly unsustainable as work demands grow and leads to many qualified women working beneath their true potential and even experiencing a detrimental impact on their health.[24] In our research of women in European corporates, 35 per cent continue to experience the Double Burden of paid and unpaid work as a significant barrier. And again, this barrier is not experienced equally; for Black women, this number rose to 42 per cent and for Asian women to 41 per cent.[25]

It is clear that gender equality in the workplace cannot be achieved without gender equality at home. With women shouldering the lion's share of domestic and care responsibilities in society, it reduces their ability to take on the most senior roles in business. It also prevents men from benefiting from greater flexibility at work. Millennials are now demanding more flexibility in the way they work and in striking a better work-life balance. Increasingly, our customers report that contemporary fathers are pushing back on traditional working models, wanting to spend more time with their children and share the responsibility of their development and upbringing.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, research found that 47 per cent of fathers in the UK wanted to transition to a less demanding job due to the challenges of balancing work and family life.[26] Meanwhile, 48 per cent would accept a pay cut for improved work-life balance, demonstrating how work-life balance fails to be the reality for working parents, including single parents and dual career households.[27] Moreover, recent data from the UK, post Covid-19, found that half of all families face financial challenges when fathers take paternity leave, and one in five fathers or partners are unable to afford to take paternity leave.[28]

"The single greatest barrier I've faced is the female burden of unequally distributed labour in the home."

**52-year-old woman,** *survey respondent*





## 1.4. Political gender representation gap

Diverse political representation is crucial in ensuring that policies and statutory responses address the needs of all people, rather than just a select few. When decision-making in politics reflects a wide range of identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences, policymakers are better equipped to create fair and effective legislation that serves the entire population. Without this diversity, critical gaps can emerge in policy areas such as employment rights, leaving certain groups without the necessary support. It is difficult for organisations alone to close these gaps. While some may take proactive steps to address inequality, many lack the resources, expertise, or incentive to implement meaningful change without legislative guidance. Strong legal frameworks provide a foundation for fair practices.

A great example to demonstrate that political representation matters is the stride towards improving gender equality in politics in Spain. The gender quota system, introduced in 2007, required "a mandatory quota of 40 per cent women in electoral lists in all elections".[29] When there are more women in political leadership, there is more attention given to women's health, gender equality in the workplace, and reproductive rights. For example, Spain was the first country in Europe to introduce statutory menstrual leave, better reflecting the needs of a diverse electorate.

However, political empowerment remains a significant dimension of the gender gap. As of June 2025, women hold 27.2 per cent of parliamentary seats globally, a notable increase from 11 per cent in 1995. However, only 22.9 per cent of Cabinet members heading Ministries are women, and in some countries, women are not represented at all. Only 18 out of the 193 United Nations member states had a woman serving as Head of State, and merely 20 countries have a women Head of Government.[30] Moreover, as of 2024, a total of 113 countries worldwide have never had a woman serve as head of state.[31]

When there are more women in political leadership, there is more attention given to women's health, gender equality in the workplace, and reproductive rights.

These figures mask an even starker reality when considering race, ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ representation. Racial and ethnic minorities remain severely under-represented in governments relative to their share of the population, and among those who do hold office, men are disproportionately over-represented.

The whiteness of political leadership in Europe and North America is a persistent issue, shaping whose voices and perspectives are prioritised in policymaking. Similarly, LGBTQ+ representation remains extremely low at a global level, despite some singular historical breakthroughs, including the appointment of the first openly gay head of state in 2022, and the first openly lesbian head of government in 2009. Many LGBTQ+ individuals face significant barriers to political participation, including stigma, electoral discrimination, and safety concerns.

The underrepresentation of women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of colour in politics has far-reaching implications. Research from the US has found that even a small number of openly gay legislators can have a transformative effect on their straight colleagues' views.[32]

Similarly, increasing gender-diverse representation in government has been linked to policies that better support families and address systemic inequalities. Nordic countries, for example, which historically have had a more gender-diverse representation in politics, have long championed shared parental leave policies. In contrast, the UK only introduced shared parental leave in 2015, with uptake remaining low due to financial barriers and a lack of societal support in challenging traditional gender roles.[33] However, it is also important to recognise that simply being a woman or a member of the LGBTQ+ community in politics does not automatically translate into policies that advance the rights or interests of these groups; political action and commitment to equity are equally essential.

Until governments step up to remove these structural barriers, organisations can play their part by offering enhanced policies to increase work-life balance such as enhancing paternity pay to encourage uptake of shared parental leave.



# 2.

## ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS

The second category of barriers relates to hurdles experienced in the workplace. Some of these are 'systemic' (meaning structural and institutional barriers that are embedded in policies, procedures, and organisational practices) such as key experiences and networks which are more difficult for women to access. Others relate to organisational cultures and norms which disadvantage women. We call these Organisational Barriers.



Systemic obstacles

## 2.1. Elusive critical experiences

Systemic obstacles interfere with women achieving the critical experiences, relationships, and exposure necessary for career success. Critical experiences are often the building blocks of senior careers: [34] international assignments or leadership of a high-profile project, such as the transformation or launch of a revenue-producing product, running a turnaround project or helping to establish a new business line, are highly valued in organisations, particularly when it comes to general management career paths. Yet, women are not always getting these critical experience opportunities, with men reporting higher levels of career-related development opportunities.[35]

The research on why this occurs is mixed: some research suggests it can be a consequence of trying to avoid the social 'backlash' incurred by women acting out of stereotype, such as self-promoting or demonstrating ambition. An intersectional examination reveals the specific challenges faced by some women; one of the most common stereotypes faced by Black women is that of aggression and dominance.

These stereotypes falsely portray Black women as "hostile, angry, and rude", in stark contrast to the more docile and submissive qualities stereotypically associated with white women.[36] Therefore, for Black women – already burdened by stereotypes around assertiveness – navigating the delicate balance between defying and conforming to these expectations becomes even more complex, carrying a heightened risk of negative consequences and backlash due to the double bind.[37]

Stereotypes falsely portray Black women as "hostile, angry, and rude", in stark contrast to the more docile and submissive qualities stereotypically associated with white women.



Other research suggests women suffer 'benevolent sexism' in how work is allocated, with less challenging tasks assigned to them.[38] This understanding can also be extended to disabled women. For example, disabled professional workers have noted the "soft bigotry of low expectations" in the workplace.[39] Moreover, critical experiences become even more 'elusive' when women 'off-ramp' from their career - typically occurring between the ages of 28 to 45 to look after children or sometimes for eldercare. Women in these situations may miss the important high-profile and visible assignments that often accompany this career phase.[40]

This combination of less exposure and visibility serves as a key risk factor for women's progression through the pipeline. Studies have found that men achieve more promotions during these years than women.[41]

In addition, 'off-rampers' often face a reduction in responsibilities and a lower-profile job on their return to the workplace. Here, a convergence of ageism and sexism can culminate in so-called 'gendered ageism'; which although a constant throughout a woman's career (including for young employees at earlier stages in their careers) manifests in particular ways for midlife women. In midlife – typically considered to be ages 40 to 55 – gendered ageism systematically marginalises women's contributions, limits their career advancement and can even push them out of the workplace.[42] Their skills are often perceived as being out of date or they are forced to prove themselves again at work. Organisations can mitigate these obstacles by addressing the unconscious biases that often underpin the 'career break penalty' and by offering women visibility-enhancing experiences, even where they do not proactively raise their hand for such opportunities.





## 2.2. Unequal mentoring and sponsorship

Mentoring programmes are widely used in organisations to support people.[43] A study reported in Harvard Business Review found that more high potential men than high potential women were promoted and men and women received different benefits from mentoring. Women's mentors helped them to understand themselves and their preferred ways of operating, as well as how they may need to change and adapt as they progress to increasingly senior roles. Men, on the other hand, described how their mentors helped them take charge of their careers and plan their next career move. More critically, men described their mentors as backing them up in public.[44] In essence, the men were receiving greater sponsorship from their mentors than the women were from theirs. Without a sponsor's influence to advocate for the 'sponsoree' in the most senior executive circles, women are not always equally considered during closed-door career and succession discussions.

Another study found that while men in general are 25 per cent more likely than women to have a sponsor, senior-level men are 50 per cent more likely to have a sponsor.[45] Our research on women in European corporations found that unequal access to sponsorship remains a significant organisational barrier for 27 per cent of those surveyed. This increases to 33 per cent for Black women.[46] This gap is important given data also indicates how senior leaders from the LGBTQ+ community or from racially under-represented groups are more likely than leaders in majority groups to say that sponsorship relationships have had a positive influence on their careers.[47] Therefore, providing equitable access to sponsorship and consequently addressing the 'sponsorship gender gap' is an important element of enabling women's career progression.

Women are not always equally considered during closed-door career and succession discussions.

## 2.3. Lack of role models

It would seem there is truth to the adage "if you can't see it, you can't be it": studies have found that the availability of role models increases career commitment and satisfaction.[48] Yet, in many work domains, there is an absence of role models representing women and other marginalised groups. For example, research found that 66 per cent of respondents are able to name a famous man working in technology, while only 22 per cent can name a famous woman.[49] Similarly, research by Audeliss revealed that only 66 per cent of the BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) community in the UK can identify a BAME business role model, in turn demonstrating the overwhelming whiteness of contemporary role models.[50]

In most industries, women are over-represented in support functions, and men are over-represented in strategic functions and areas with profit and loss responsibility. At a managerial level, more women find themselves in human resources, administration or marketing roles, with men more concentrated in operations, research and development, and commercial leadership roles.[51] Also, disabled women, having some of the lowest employment rates, are more likely to work part-time and in service positions, compared to non-disabled women, further limiting visible role models.[52] Having senior-level women in the workforce, particularly in traditionally male-dominated areas, helps to show more junior women that there is a path to the top for them too.

Disabled women, having some of the lowest employment rates, are more likely to work part-time and in service positions.



## 2.4. Limited access to informal networks

A powerful network can positively influence a career by regulating access to sponsors, jobs and information, and by augmenting reputation and power. This in turn influences the speed and likelihood of promotion.[53] But how do our networks vary by gender, as well as race, disability, age, sexuality, and other identity markers? Various studies have shown that informal networks are often segregated by these identities, especially gender and race. As such, women, especially of colour, are less likely than white men to have the strong professional networks, workplace support, insider information, and social ties that are critical to promotion.[54] Research shows that while women are equally capable of forming network ties as men, systemic barriers often prevent them from connecting with the most influential individuals. Women often experience this activity as more challenging given the disproportionate burden of unpaid caregiving responsibilities that they shoulder. Balancing networking with family and caregiving obligations – tasks that are deeply gendered – can make it difficult for women to invest the time and energy required to build the necessary professional connections.



As a result, networking not only becomes a more complex and time-consuming endeavour, but it also highlights the broader gendered inequalities in access to power, opportunities, and resources.[55] Organisations can help redress this balance by providing formal opportunities for women to interact with high-status executives across functional, organisational, and geographic lines, and to formally 'hand over' primary client responsibility in a managed and positive way, thus reducing the reliance on informal networks outside of work time. Some of these challenges with networking and interpersonal relationships can also exist for LGBTQ+ employees, often due to the dominance of 'boys clubs' within organisations, typically controlled by heterosexual men – which act as exclusionary to not only LGBTQ+ employees but many diverse groups of employees. For queer people, managing a stigmatised identity and/or sexuality, and the uncertainty around coming out, may make it harder to build professional networks – and fear of harassment and stigma can reduce confidence and social engagement.[56] Disabled individuals can face other significant networking barriers, including inaccessible venues and digital platforms.[57]

## 2.5 Flexible working: the silent career killer

Flexible working is a common organisational solution to balancing work and home responsibilities, and women with access to it are more likely to remain in the workforce after maternity. Options such as part-time working, compressed hours, working from home, or having flexible start and finish times can all help make this juggling exercise easier. However, the Centre for Work-Life Policy reported that flexible work arrangements, no matter how well designed, can become a career killer for women.[58] Flexible working can carry a stigma that women are less committed to their jobs and their careers. Managers have been found to be more sceptical of women, particularly mothers, working remotely, as they are traditionally expected to manage household chores and childcare responsibilities while at home, leading to a disproportionate rate of flexible working requests by women, and especially mothers, being rejected.[59] A 2024 Unison survey of over 44,000 women in the British public sector found that 30 per cent had their flexible working request denied, with 25 per cent facing multiple rejections.[60] Similarly, a 2021 Trades Union Congress survey of public and private sector workers found that half of mothers had their requests either refused or only partially accepted.[61]

These examples point to the so-called 'flexibility stigma', which refers to the belief that employees who use flexible work arrangements – such as flexitime, remote work, part-time hours, or other family-friendly options – are less committed, less motivated, and therefore less productive. However, this stigma fails to account for the many reasons why flexibility might be needed, whether due to a disability or caregiving commitments. As a result, these workers often face negative career outcomes,[62] stigma, and penalty when working part-time. Research from Plymouth University has identified the 'fatherhood forfeit', with men rated lower than women in promotability, hireability, competence and commitment, when working part-time.[63] These findings suggest that while organisations are offering flexible working, the penalty of taking this option means that the opportunity to progress one's career is forfeited.

Encouraging flexible working as the norm, rather than the exception, for all employees will help dismantle these outdated perceptions of flexible working being gendered or the exclusive right of parents. Organisations must also ensure flexible working is genuinely inclusive, particularly for disabled people. UK research shows many disabled workers lack essential equipment for remote work, while the widespread use of videoconferencing often overlooks accessibility needs.

For example, one in 11 disabled workers who worked from home faced difficulties participating in online meetings due to their disability, impairment, or health condition.[64]



> "Women who have access to remote working and flexible schedules are significantly less likely to drop out of the labour market or reduce their working hours after maternity."

**Professor Heejung Chung**
*King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership*



Culture and work norms

## 2.6 Perceived ambition gap

Are women less ambitious than men? Ambition is a tricky topic, with many research studies yielding conflicting findings on this question.[65] Catalyst found no differences between high potential men and women in their aspirations for board positions, across Europe, the US, Asia and Canada, and a study by Bain & Company also found that women are just as ambitious as men, suggesting that the perception of lower ambition in women is likely to be due to gender expectations about ambition.[66] Conversely, in a UK study, the Centre for Talent Innovation found that women were more ambitious than men: this appeared to be irrespective of whether the women had children or not.[67] The Boston Consulting Group found that men and women have similar levels of ambition at the beginning of their careers, but ambition levels can be diminished by the experiences of women over time. If these experiences are positive, then ambition is nurtured, but if these are negative, then ambition is damaged.[68] So, one might conclude that women are similarly ambitious, but more sceptical about their opportunities to progress, and more so if they have experienced a lack of career support in the past.

However, it is also crucial to unpack the perceived ambition gap at other identity intersections. For instance, midlife women are subjected to pervasive stereotypes about their ambitions at the intersection of ageism and sexism. As they age, there is a prevailing assumption that women are less driven to succeed than their younger counterparts, when the opposite is often true – for example, 70 per cent of midlife women in a UK survey wanted to advance upward. Moreover, while Black women are almost three times more likely than white women to aspire to high-ranking roles, white women are approximately twice as likely as Black women to attain those positions, demonstrating the interplay of sexism and racism.[69]

There is a prevailing assumption that midlife women are less driven to succeed than their younger counterparts, when the opposite is often true.



## 2.7. 'Always available' cultures

McKinsey reports how the dominant global business model equates senior leadership with 24/7 availability and geographical mobility at all times.[70] Furthermore, 77 per cent of respondents in an International Labour Organization survey felt these to be implied requirements of senior leadership careers.[71] Being responsive to email or calls at all hours, including during holidays, is often expected and those who can relocate internationally are typically rewarded with the top jobs. However, these expectations will present varying degrees of difficulty depending on one's positionality.

For instance, expatriation opportunities present particular considerations for LGBTQ+ employees when work assignments involve working in countries that are unfriendly to queer people, or unsafe due to legislation and social norms that outlaw diverse gender expression and sexualities.[72]

Moreover, research indicates that while the 'always available' culture affects everyone negatively, senior-level women are significantly more likely than men to feel under pressure to work more and to be 'always on'.[73] This likely draws from the evidence that women feel they need to outperform men in order to advance their careers.

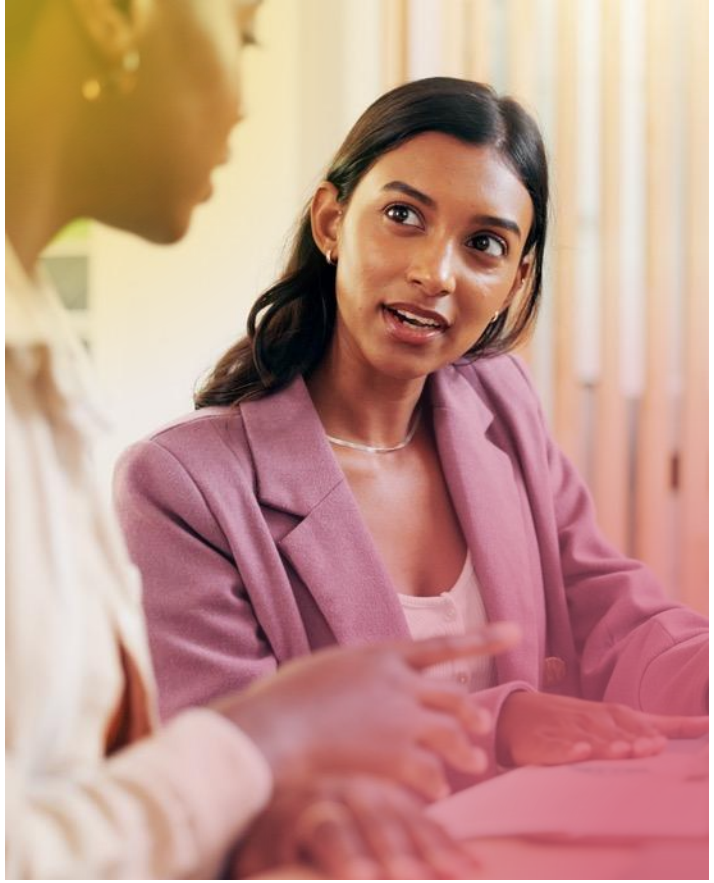
Difficulty also arises for women in reconciling these demands with their domestic responsibilities and this is compounded by the fact that women tend to be less digitally connected outside of working hours than men.[74] Comparatively, it is also more socially acceptable for men to sacrifice family time for the sake of career progression.[75]

The presence of an 'always on' culture leads to the Double Burden for women given they carry more of the domestic and care load. The combination of the Double Burden and the expectation to be 'on' at all times has been identified as one of the central barriers to women's career advancement.[76]

## 2.8. Implicit bias and gender stereotyping

Implicit bias and gender stereotyping represent significant barriers to women's advancement but are often difficult to observe and thus can be challenging to influence. For example, gender stereotyping, as outlined under societal barriers, manifests in the workplace, meaning that relative to men, women can experience a lower return, and even a penalty or backlash, for demonstrating stereotypically masculine traits such as ambition, confidence, and assertiveness in the workplace.[77] The accumulation of different forms of bias and stereotyping has a more complex effect when we disaggregate the data by ethnicity as well as gender. According to our research of women in European corporates, 61 per cent of Black women experienced more barriers related to gender stereotypes, compared to 52 per cent of white women. [78]

In the US, the persistent gender gap in promotions highlights the ongoing bias women face in career progression. In 2018, for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 79 women advanced. By 2024, this number had risen only slightly to 81, underscoring the enduring impact of bias on the 'broken rung'. This barrier is particularly pronounced for women of colour.



"Get anyone you know talking about gender stereotypes. These false assumptions cannot survive being held up to the light of day.."

**Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala**
*Director General of the World Trade Organization*

While 81 women overall were promoted for every 100 men, the rate was 89 for white women, but significantly lower for Black women (54) and Latina women (65). McKinsey's 2024 Women in the Workplace report also points to regression in progress, noting that "after notable improvements in 2021 and 2022, Black women's promotion rates this year regressed to 2020 levels".[79]

These implicit biases and stereotypes are further reinforced by leadership structures within organisations. A large-scale study by the International Labour Organization found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that organisations with a male CEO and/or Chair were more likely to have male-dominated organisational cultures.[80] But which direction does causality run: do CEOs and Chairs influence the culture or does the culture influence the choice of appointee? A study comparing the views of heterosexual married men whose wives were engaged in full-time employment, with those whose wives were not in paid employment, investigated whether a man's domestic situation impacted his views of equality in the workplace. The researchers discovered that men in 'traditional' marriages were likely to view gender equality in the workplace less favourably, and were more likely to make decisions that prevented qualified women from advancing. Taken together, these findings illustrate how implicit bias and stereotypes operate at multiple levels: in individual attitudes, organisational leadership, and cultural norms. The result is a systemic pattern that restricts women's advancement .[81]

## 2.9. Microaggressions, discrimination, and everyday sexism

Studies consistently report that discrimination,[82] lack of equal opportunity[82] and sexual harassment are common experiences for women and marginalised genders. A growing number of countries around the world are now placing a legal duty on employers to prevent and eliminate harassment in the workplace, including Canada, France, Sweden, India, Australia (which has introduced a positive duty requirement to eliminate harassment and hostile working environments), and most recently the UK. In the UK, legislation sought to address this issue through the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act in 2023, which strengthens protections against sexual harassment in the workplace. The Act requires organisations to take proactive measures to prevent sexual harassmen and address third-party harassment, compelling them to adopt a more strategic approach to managing workplace risks.

This long-overdue protection is important, as the evidence highlighting the prevalence and impact of workplace harassment is concerning. For example, around 35 per cent of women report having experienced harassment at some point in their career, whether it be sexist jokes, inappropriate touch, or other unwanted advances or behaviours.[84]

A 2018 study found that women are significantly more likely than men to face everyday discrimination, or microaggressions, with 64% of women reporting this as a workplace reality. These include having to provide more evidence of their competence; being interrupted; having their comments dismissed; being subjected to demeaning comments; being expected to take notes; or being mistaken for someone much more junior (twice as often than men).[85]

Forward to 2024, in the annual Deloitte Women@Work report, a total of 43 per cent of women reported experiencing non-inclusive behaviours such as harassment or microaggressions in the past year, despite a decrease from the previous year. Additionally, a quarter of women had faced inappropriate comments or actions from senior leaders, and 16 per cent of those who left their employer cited harassment or microaggressions as a key reason for leaving. Similarly, our research from 2024 underscored the reality of enduring microaggressions: among the women in European corporates surveyed, we found that 64 per cent of Black women and 57 per cent Asian women reported experiences of microaggressions, compared to 51 per cent of white women. Our research also found that 61 per cent of disabled women reported having experienced microaggressions.[86]

Furthermore, eight out of 10 respondents across a range of under-represented groups (e.g., gender identity, ethnicity, or sexual orientation) report having experienced microaggressions at work.[87]



LGBTQ+ employees can also encounter interpersonal discrimination, including homophobic, biphobic, and/or sexist discrimination. For example, UK research found that LGBT+ women are more than twice as likely as LGBT men to report unwanted touching (35 per cent vs. 16 per cent) and nearly twice as likely to experience sexual assault (21 per cent vs. 12 per cent).[88] Moreover, on average, trans employees face a significantly larger amount of discrimination, harassment, and violence in the workplace than their cisgender colleagues – illustrated by recent US research finding that 82 per cent of trans workers have faced discrimination or harassment in their lives.[89] This can include deliberate deadnaming (using a trans or non-binary person's birth name after they have changed it), misgendering, and broader exclusion and marginalisation, beyond stereotypical perceptions of harassment as blatant and overt.

Moreover, disabled women also experience distinct forms of microaggressions, discrimination, and sexual harassment, as well as a higher frequency in some cases. For example, UK research found that 68 per cent of disabled women have faced workplace sexual harassment, compared to 52 per cent of women overall. In the same survey, the respondents cited the fear of not being taken seriously as a barrier to reporting instances of harassment.

Further, being the 'only' person in a particular identity (such as gender, ethnicity, LGBTQ+ status, etc.) can exacerbate negative experiences at work. A report by McKinsey shows that women who are 'onlys' are more likely than women who work with other women to experience microaggressions and everyday sexism.[91] Such behaviours can deter women from aspiring to advance their careers and can also reduce their belief that career advancement is possible. The strain of working in conditions where individuals are subjected to biased remarks, microaggressions, and sexual harassment leads to a drain on their capacity to achieve their full potential. The minority stress model refers to "the discrepancy and conflict that arises between the values of the minority group and the dominant culture or society", including from workplace discriminations, that in turn "create conditions of excessive stress" and "adversely impact both physical and mental health". [92]

For individuals to be able to engage fully in the work they love, and collaborate effectively with their colleagues, they must be free from the threat of discriminatory behaviours.[93] Moreover, for many women and marginalised people of colour, the experience of 'onlyness' – due to both gender and racial identity – can create a sense of isolation and exclusion. While the experience of being an 'only' is common among women, it is undeniably influenced by racial dynamics. Research shows that this experience is particularly pronounced for women of colour. For example, a McKinsey study of 64,000 employees in North America revealed that while 20 per cent of women overall reported being an 'only', this figure more than doubled to 45 per cent for women of colour.[94] For many, this creates a paradoxical experience of simultaneously feeling excluded and rendered invisible, yet also highly watched and scrutinised.[95] These experiences and subsequent feelings have big impacts – in fact, women who experience being an 'only' are 1.5 times more likely to consider leaving their job, and for people of colour this figure is even higher.[96]

> "I was up a ladder cleaning the ceiling and a colleague grabbed my behind twice. My manager saw the whole thing and when I complained, he said that I must like that sort of thing because I am a bi woman."
>
> **Participant,** *TUC, The Cost of Being Out at Work survey*

## 2.10. Leaders: born or made?

Patriarchal norms surrounding gender and leadership, as well as heteronormative expectations, are significant barriers for many prospective leaders, particularly for women and LGBTQ+ individuals. The Great Man theory, which originated in the 1800s, but is still present in modern workplaces, is built on the premise that leaders are born and not made. The theory argues that great leaders are born with traits typically associated with men and masculinity, such as ambition and competition. This contributes to an implicit bias against women in leadership. Powerful sociological wiring means that men are judged by a more lenient standard than women, which is even more pronounced in traditional, male-dominated cultures. In essence, women are working to a higher standard than men.[97]

Organisations need to recognise and eliminate these underlying biases in appointment and promotion decisions and rethink how they define leadership. This also means accounting for intersecting biases in shaping leadership. Historically, women of colour have faced systemic barriers rooted in both gender and racial oppression, limiting their access to leadership roles. For example, data from the UK in 2024 revealed that fewer than one per cent of top UK board roles are held by women of colour, with women overall making up just 13 per cent of these positions.[98]

Moreover, in the US, Black women hold only four per cent of managerial positions compared to 33 per cent of white women, while LGBTQ+ employees, especially those who identify as transgender or non-binary, often face additional challenges such as harassment, discrimination, and lack of representation in leadership.

These challenges are compounded for individuals at the intersection of multiple marginalised identities, who face not only the scrutiny that all women and gender-diverse individuals encounter but also prejudice and exclusion. LGBTQ+ employees, for instance, are often subject to biases linked to both their gender identity and sexual orientation, which can undermine their leadership potential. A 2019 study interviewed high-ranking lesbian professionals who don't fit the traditionally masculine leadership mould, revealing the ongoing dilemma they face: conforming to male-defined executive presence or forging their own leadership path. While the research demonstrated that there is now more room for diverse leadership styles, the enduring influence of the 'Great Man' theory remains.[99]

So, while some progress has been made, the journey to leadership for women of colour and LGBTQ+ individuals remains slow, with many of today's diversity initiatives failing to address the complex and intersecting nature of these barriers.



Organisations must address these biases by rethinking leadership models to recognise a broader range of traits that reflect diverse identities. This means embracing inclusive definitions of leadership that move beyond traditional norms and celebrating qualities such as empathy, collaboration, and social purpose – qualities that are often overlooked but vital to effective leadership.

# 3.

## PERSONAL BARRIERS

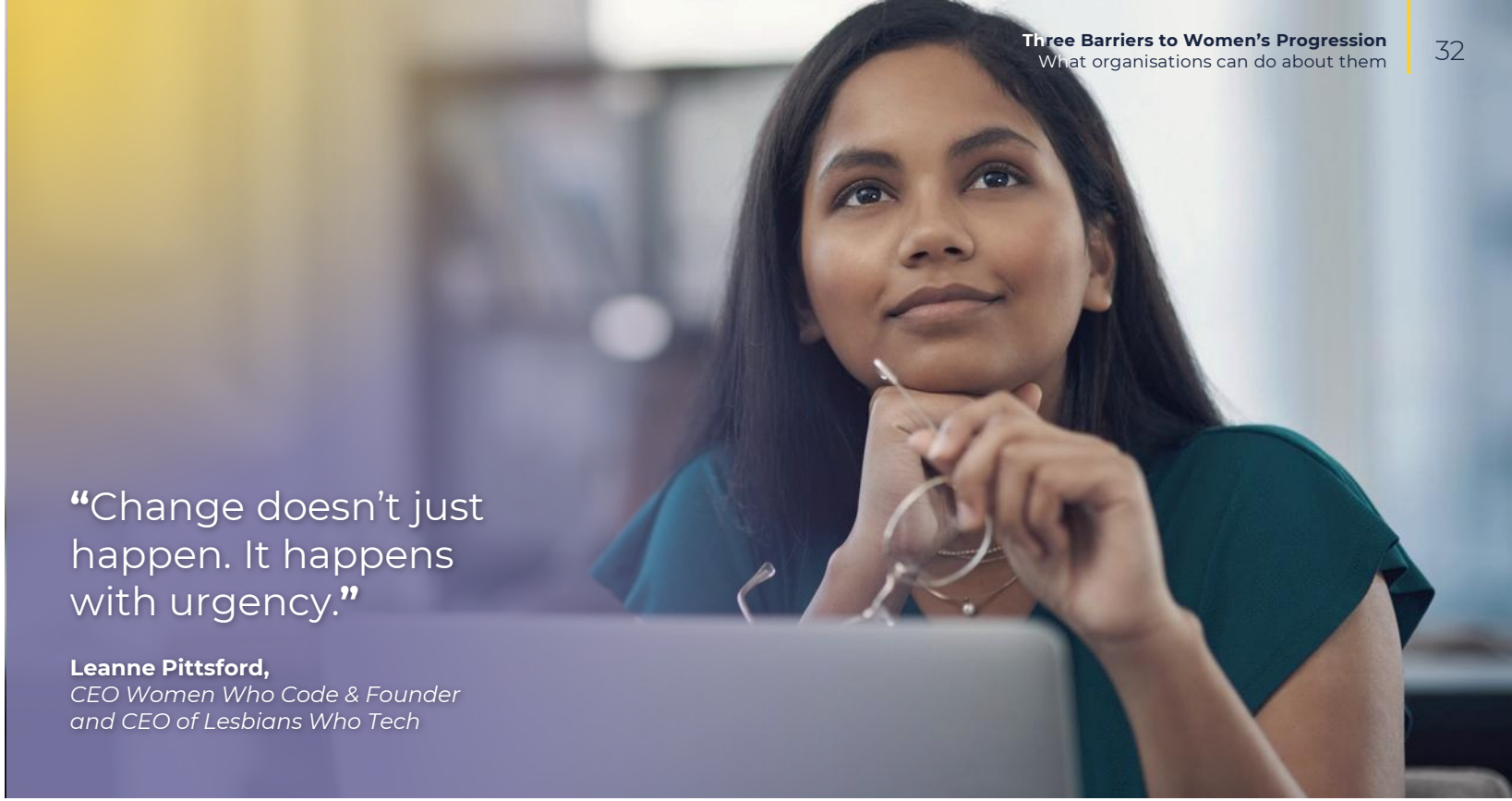
The third category of barriers relates to how women present themselves in the workplace. These personal barriers include reticence to put themselves forward for high-profile assignments, hesitancy to push for visibility during meetings, the pressure to replicate male, cisgender, heteronormative models of leadership, and the challenges of navigating the distribution of unpaid work. These behaviours are often shaped by societal and workplace norms that reinforce stereotypes, leading individuals to internalise these expectations. We call these Personal Barriers.



## 3.1. The confidence gap?

Lower levels of confidence are sometimes touted as a factor accounting for fewer women at the top. Our research of women in European corporates found that 51 per cent of women perceived self-confidence as a significant barrier – and this barrier was more pronounced for Black and Asian women, as well as disabled women.[100] Various studies have shown that women tend to understate their performance, while men more often overstate theirs. The topic of confidence still appears to be viewed through a male lens: relative to men's 'over-confidence', women can appear 'under-confident' and suffer career penalties as a result; for simply not adopting the same behaviours. The so-called "confidence gap" is therefore less about women lacking confidence, and more about biased systems.

Indeed, research has found men benefit from being rated on potential, whereas women are more likely to be assessed on performance and track record.[101] Organisations can mitigate against this by reviewing selection criteria for fairness. Additionally, line leaders can proactively encourage women with potential to apply for promotion opportunities. Organisations must also pay attention to the fact that business leaders – who are still predominately male, cisgender, and white – tend to "struggle to advance members of under-represented groups because they model their development strategies on their own paths to success". Addressing confidence is ultimately about addressing the inequities baked into how talent is reviewed and recognised. [102]



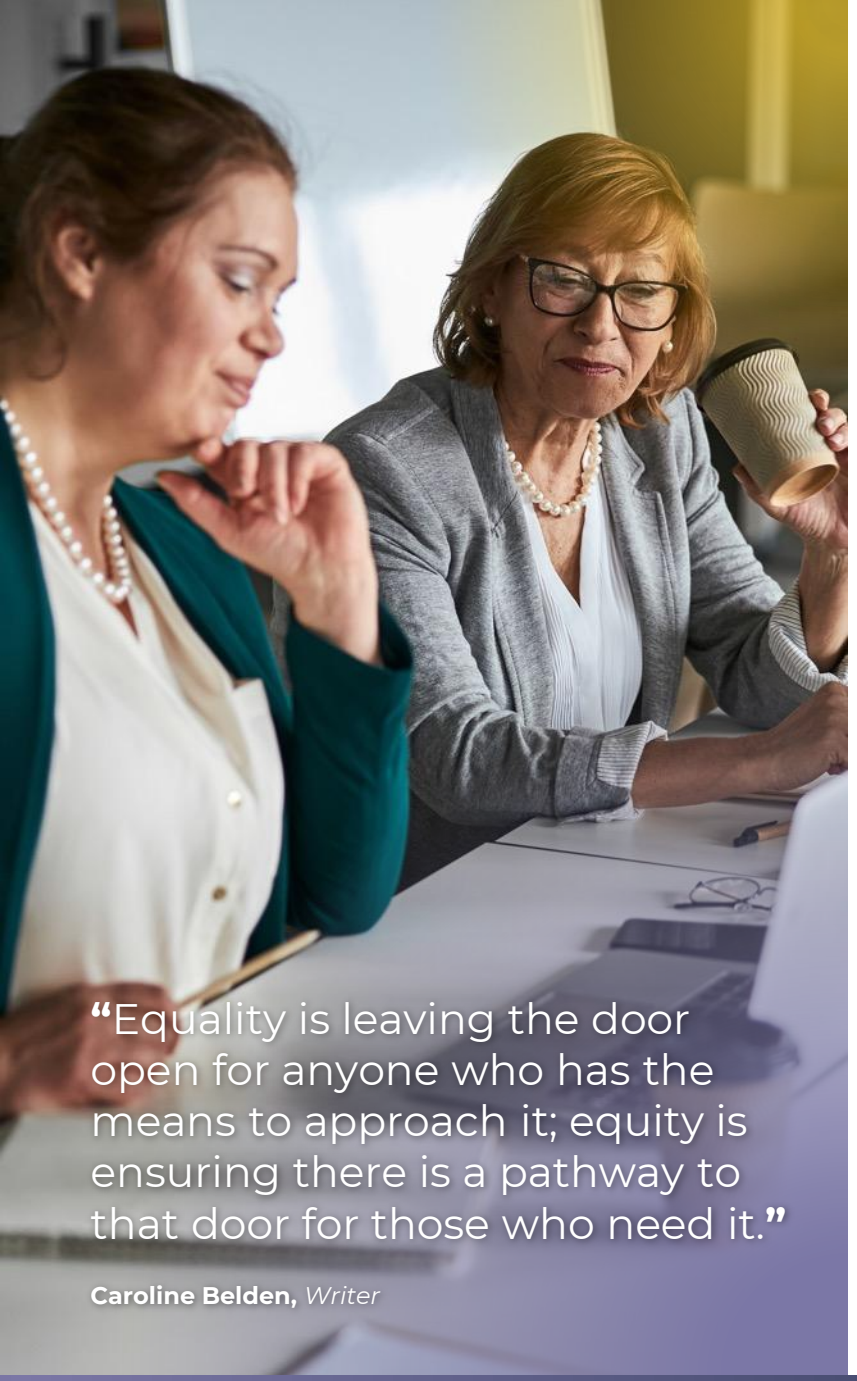
"Change doesn't just happen. It happens with urgency."

**Leanne Pittsford,**
*CEO Women Who Code & Founder and CEO of Lesbians Who Tech*

## 3.2. The negotiation penalty

Research into the negotiation outcomes of men and women have suggested that women are less likely than men to instigate negotiations[103] and that they negotiate less well against male, cisgender and white negotiation standards – however, this is the result of a complex interplay of all three barriers.[104]

For example, behaviours that appear to violate gender norms, such as a woman negotiating on her own behalf, can result in a social penalty for the woman. This can be referred to as a negotiation penalty – and is one that remains a significant barrier: in our research of women in European corporates, 50 per cent experienced the negotiation penalty when advocating for themselves.[105]



"Equality is leaving the door open for anyone who has the means to approach it; equity is ensuring there is a pathway to that door for those who need it."

**Caroline Belden,** *Writer*

We also found that this penalty was more pronounced for Black women (54 per cent), Asian women (55 per cent) and disabled women (56 per cent). Wider research has also confirmed this, finding that female negotiators often achieve less favourable outcomes than their male counterparts, largely due to the influence of gender stereotypes, but also finding that cultural norms are highly significant.[106] Consequently, women need to weigh up the benefits of negotiation against the potential social backlash, in a way that men do not need to balance.[107]

Interestingly, it seems that women can negotiate just as successfully, or more so, than men when negotiating on behalf of a colleague or their company, as this demonstration of advocacy is not perceived to violate gender norms.[108] However, as with many of the barriers to career progression, the picture is complex. Other research has found that in a sample of Australian workers, there was no difference between men and women in relation to asking for a pay rise, although women were less likely to secure a pay rise after asking. However, it was found that both part-time men and part-time women tend 'not to ask' for a pay rise (and women are more likely to work part-time).[109]

For women and diverse employees who are situated at multiple intersections, a safe and inclusive workplace also plays an essential role in effective negotiation – as organisational norms shape identities and influence workers' confidence in advocating for themselves.[110] Yet, even when advocating confidently, biases and backlashes persist. Research has found that Black job seekers are expected to negotiate less than their white counterparts and face lower salary outcomes when they challenge this expectation.[111] This is especially true for Black women and other women of colour, as reflected in persistent gendered and racial pay gaps (albeit driven by multiple factors) as well as the significant pay disparity faced by disabled women.[112]

Negotiation strategies which have proven successful for women are clarifying the acceptable standards of behaviour in the negotiation; raising awareness of gender stereotypes; demonstrating the legitimacy of the negotiation (such as "my negotiation skills are an asset which benefit the team and the organisation"); and demonstrating concern for organisational relationships.[113]

## 3.3. Leadership and the likeability penalty

Another area that is often fraught for women concerns leadership style. Early social conditioning dissuades girls from being assertive or domineering. Subtle cues over a woman's lifetime reinforce behaviours that are collaborative, caring, and win-win in nature. These behaviours are not associated with the more typical masculine leadership seen in many senior roles. Research indicates that when dealing with conflict at work, women often use coping strategies that are focused on collaborating with others, rather than directly engaging in the conflict. However, these strategies may inadvertently negatively impact career progression by causing women to remain 'behind the scenes'.[114]

The desire to avoid conflict may be partially explained by the fact that the ability to be decisive and make tough decisions is sometimes seen to be at odds with a more feminine approach to leadership. It is a double bind for women as research shows that men's likeability is positively correlated with success, whereas for women it is hard to be seen as both competent and likeable at the same time. [115]

In short, women suffer a 'likeability penalty' in roles traditionally associated with men – in our research of women in European corporates, 41 per cent experienced this likeability penalty as they progressed their careers.[116]

Crucially, this likability penalty manifests differently for different women. For example, women of colour often face even narrower expectations to conform to a more 'palatable' version of themselves, likable yet inauthentic, known as the 'tightrope bias'. While this bias affects all women, it is especially pronounced for women of colour navigating systemic racism in the workplace.[117] It is important that organisations support authenticity and don't inadvertently penalise deviation from the styles of leadership traditionally associated with men, whiteness, and cisgender identities.

The ability to be decisive and make tough decisions is sometimes seen to be at odds with a more feminine approach to leadership.



# 4.

## HOW TO COUNTERACT THE THREE BARRIERS®

To address the structural barriers preventing women from advancing in the workplace, organisations must implement targeted, evidence-based interventions.





To achieve meaningful and lasting change, organisations must go beyond compliance-driven diversity initiatives and address both the structural and behavioural elements necessary for sustained change.



**Address Societal Barriers**: Gender roles, structural norms and policy gaps

## Design the organisation to meet the needs of modern family set-ups, including dual career households

| | |
|---|---|
| **Adopt flexible working as the default** | Embed flexible-first policies across all roles, including leadership positions, to ensure equitable access for everyone, especially disabled women, marginalised genders, and those with caregiving responsibilities. Make flexible working a core aspect of job descriptions and ads, and clearly outline the available options for every role. Introduce this as the default rather than a discretionary option. Start by seeking employee input to identify employee needs and preferences regarding flexible working. |
| **Establish part-time leadership roles, job-share arrangements, and remote working pathways** | Create formal pathways to leadership that include part-time, job-share, and remote options. These should be clearly outlined and incorporated into leadership succession planning practices. |
| **Equalise parental leave policies** | Review parental leave policies to remove gendered assumptions about caregiving responsibilities. Ensure equal, non-discriminatory parental leave policies, normalise their uptake at all levels, and set review dates to update existing policies. |
| **Implement 'right to disconnect' policies** | Introduce clear 'right to disconnect' policies to mitigate the expectation of after-hours availability. These policies should be communicated organisation-wide and actively enforced. |



**Dismantle Organisational Barriers:**
Gendered culture, policies and workplace practices

## Counteract gender biases by changing processes, practices, and systems first

| | |
|---|---|
| **Enable pay progression transparency, beyond compliance** | Implement proactive strategies to close gender, ethnicity, race, and disability pay gaps. Start with a company-wide pay audit to identify gaps, then create clear salary structures and transparent career progression pathways. Report these findings annually to ensure accountability and progress. |
| **Incorporate intersectional impact assessments in policy design** | Conduct intersectional impact assessments on all workplace policies and initiatives to identify and address potential disadvantages for employees from marginalised groups (who are you leaving behind?). Ensure these assessments are mandatory and are integrated into the policy development process. |
| **Apply universal design and accessibility principles** | Ensure that workplace structures, policies, and technologies are universally designed to accommodate neurodivergent and disabled employees. Regularly assess accessibility across all systems and provide guidelines for making necessary accommodations. |
| **Debias talent management and recruitment** | Review job descriptions, leadership and potential criteria, and promotion and talent processes to disrupt biases based on gendered, racialised, ageist, and ableist systems. Implement structured training for hiring managers on equitable interviewing, decision-making, and talent management practices. Regularly audit recruitment and promotion processes to ensure they remain bias-free as much as possible. |



## Ensure appropriate governance and monitoring

| | |
|---|---|
| **Know your starting point** | Pinpoint, by intersection, the underlying barriers at play in your organisation. These are often different to the surface-level symptoms reported in unstructured focus groups and so it is important to get to the real, underlying issues in order to create a meaningful plan for progress. Ensure alignment and buy-in from the executive leadership team to the resultant strategy and plan. |
| **Monitor resource allocation and access metrics** | Measure resource distribution by introducing metrics to understand how resources and roles are allocated across different groups. Implement tools such as internal dashboards that track gender ratios on development budgets, recruitment, and promotion data, and ensure these metrics are regularly reviewed by leadership teams. |
| **Strengthen anti-discrimination policies and proactive monitoring** | Introduce anonymous reporting mechanisms to encourage employees to report workplace discrimination and harassment without fear of retaliation. Ensure that anti-bullying and discrimination policies explicitly address microaggressions and provide clear examples of misconduct. Regularly monitor and track discrimination incidents to identify trends and areas for improvement. |



## Actively nurture a culture that is psychologically safe and inclusive of all genders

| | |
|---|---|
| **Engage all genders in gender equity** | Ensure that gender equity is seen as a shared responsibility and benefit across all employees. Engage men by creating spaces – such as listening circles – for men to openly discuss their concerns and experiences around gender equity. Addressing barriers to engagement is a critical precursor to advocacy. |
| **Develop inclusive leadership and advocacy** | Build line leader capability in inclusive leadership through well-designed and well-executed behavioural change programmes, to enable role modelling and culture setting. |
| **Address microaggressions and intersectional biases** | Implement comprehensive microaggression training that covers sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, cissexism, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination. Establish active bystander training programmes to equip employees with the skills to recognise and challenge discriminatory behaviours. |



## Structure career development with measurable processes, strong manager capability, and positive action programmes to level the playing field

| | |
|---|---|
| **Embed inclusive leadership competencies** | Integrate inclusive leadership competencies into leadership frameworks, ensuring that leaders are equipped with the skills to foster equity, diversity and inclusion within their teams and day-to-day work. Provide ongoing training for all leaders to build these competencies. |
| **Equal access to career development and leadership opportunities** | Implement structured sponsorship programmes for under-represented women, ensuring access to senior networks, high-visibility projects, and advancement opportunities. Cross-gender sponsorship programmes can help to break down stereotypes and encourage mutual learning. |
| **Set representation targets** | Set representation targets for women of colour, disabled women, and LGBTQ+ individuals in leadership positions, and pair these targets with accountability mechanisms. Use the Gender Proportionality Principle to set stretching but achievable targets. |



## **Overcome Personal Barriers**: Career support and opportunities

| | |
|---|---|
| **Equip line managers to foster inclusive career progression** | Require managers to conduct regular, structured career progression discussions with their teams, ensuring fair access to career development opportunities. Ensure that these discussions are standardised and tracked to avoid bias in the process. |
| **Talent acceleration programmes for leadership development** | Establish talent acceleration programmes that focus on advancing a gender balanced talent pool. These can be either single or mixed gender programmes, but importantly, should have an inclusive design based on addressing the barriers to women's career progression. |
| **Provide safe spaces to address personal barriers and stereotypes** | Create designated safe spaces or support groups, such as Employee Resource Groups, where employees, especially women and marginalised genders, can openly discuss and address the personal barriers they face in the workplace. These spaces can address stereotype threats such as confidence gaps and barriers to visibility and networking. |



# About Shape Talent

**Shape Talent is an award-winning gender equity consultancy.**

Our business is built around solving inequality and our work, in partnership with our clients, will impact lives for generations to come.

While our focus is on enabling more women to move into senior leadership roles, we also believe it is important to recognise the prejudice that other minoritised genders encounter and the critical need to dismantle barriers to all genders. Therefore, we strive to build inclusive workplace cultures that will positively impact everyone.

We partner with forward-thinking organisations who recognise the benefits of accelerating gender equality. We know that real transformation requires change at both a behavioural and a structural level. Our approach addresses both. We do this through diagnostic work, consulting, development programmes, and group and individual coaching interventions. We believe in concentrating our efforts on approaches that will yield the greatest benefits.

As experts in the design and delivery of results-driven gender equity programmes, Shape Talent brings together a psychology-led philosophy with evidence-based methodologies.

Founded in 2017, Shape Talent is led by Sharon Peake and is supported by a team of highly experienced psychologists and social scientists, gender equity experts, EDI consultants, senior talent leaders and coaches.

We've helped a diverse **range of organisations** to Accelerate Gender Equality.


Sharon


Helena


Priscila

# Research paper authors

## Sharon Peake
*Founder & CEO*

Sharon Peake is the Founder and CEO of Shape Talent. She is a chartered psychologist and gender equity expert with over 20 years' experience in global businesses working across six continents and over 25 countries. She founded Shape Talent in 2017 to help businesses accelerate the progression of women into senior roles. Sharon is a well-known voice in gender equity, with recent awards and recognition including: IoD Director of the Year – EDI 2024; Management Today Women in Leadership Powerlist 2024; Top 50 LinkedIn Female Empowerment voices (at #30 globally); Global Diversity List 2023 for Senior Executives. She has participated as a UN Women UK participant in the UN CSW 67, 68 and 69 (Commission on the Status of Women).

## Helena Wacko
*Researcher and EDI Analyst*

Helena Wacko a Researcher and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Analyst at Shape Talent. She is currently pursuing a MSc in Gender Research at the London School of Economics and Political Science with plans to continue to a PhD. She holds a BA in History, Politics, and Economics from University College London and an MA in Global Thought from Columbia University, where she was a Fulbright Scholar. Additionally, at Columbia University, she pursued a certificate from the Institute for the Study of Sexuality and Gender.

## Dr Priscila Pereira
*Director of Research and Innovation*

Dr Priscila Pereira is the Director of Research and Product Innovation at Shape Talent. She began her PhD in Gender Studies in 2007 while working as an in-house practitioner, holding various European and global leadership roles, including HR Director, Vice President of Learning and Development, and Head of Talent, Leadership, and Inclusion. Priscila is a certified coach and has supported women to progress to leadership roles across the globe. Toward the end of her PhD, she also lectured in leadership at Oxford Brookes Business School and was part of the University's Centre for Diversity Policy, Research, and Practice.

# Shape Talent's approach

How we help you achieve gender equity

**THE ISSUE**

Three Barriers to Women's Progression




**THE SOLUTION**

Gender Equity Acceleration Model




**THE OUTCOME**

Gender equitable workplaces

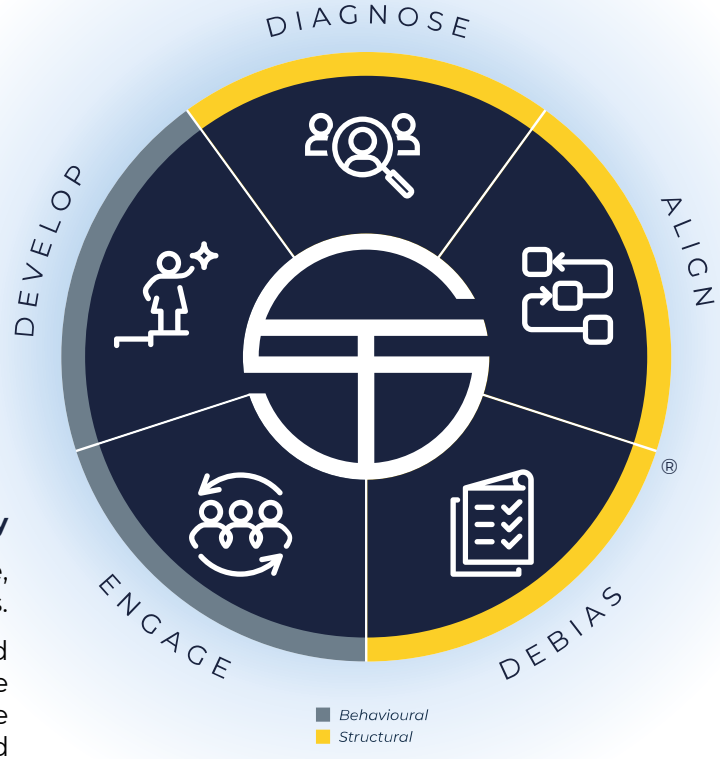


# The solution

## Gender Equity Acceleration Model

### Identify barriers and create a plan

Define the starting point and the gap between here and the ideal end state. Create a targeted plan to address the gap.




### Accelerate women into leadership roles

Create safe spaces to unlock women's potential, equipping them with the knowledge, tools, and support to maximise their careers.

### Set strategy and align with business goals

Ensure clarity of vision, with EDI efforts aligned with business strategy

Ensure a personal commitment from a quorum of executives is in place, together with a driving coalition.

### Build a culture of inclusion and equity

Help all genders to understand the challenge, see 'what's in it for them' and be active allies.

Ensure psychological safety, build inclusive leadership capability and ensure strong allyship. Ensure Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) are aligned with the EDI strategy and optimised.

### Address bias in systems and practices

Remove bias from existing processes and create processes and practices that support the change, including family-friendly approaches. Raise awareness of stereotype barriers and counter them.

# Three Barriers Diagnostic Survey®

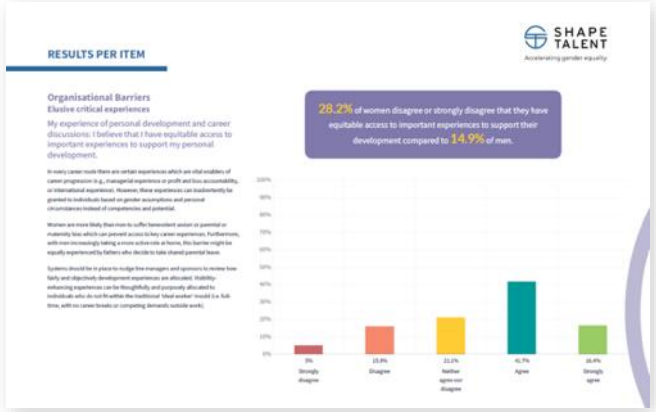



Most existing diagnostic tools, such as engagement surveys, are designed based on the evidence of dominant groups. They cater to the needs of these groups, often expecting minoritised groups to fit in. This approach results in data that may not be meaningful or actionable, highlighting the need for a more tailored approach.

Our Three Barriers Diagnostic Survey® captures the real experiences of women in your organisation through robust data collection. We present these insights in a way that motivates your C-suite to act, equipping them with the knowledge and tools needed to achieve gender parity in leadership.

Our evidence shows that 82% of women face workplace barriers. It's clear that diversity programmes that do things the same old way are not delivering. With our Three Barriers Diagnostic Survey®, we offer a fresh perspective for understanding the problem, combined with a targeted roadmap for meaningful, sustainable change and a measurable return on your investment.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Business benefits** | • Uncover game-changing insights to pinpoint the root causes of gender inequality and attrition<br>• Drive action by identifying best practices and areas of risk in your business<br>• Deliver impact through a focused, balanced action plan |
| **Evidence-based** | • Developed from our proprietary Three Barriers® Model in collaboration with PhD researchers and data scientists, ensuring validity and reliability |
| **Extensive data** | • Drawing from over 7,000 data points from professional women across industries and countries |
| **Customisable data** | • Tailored to suit your organisation's structure, scale, and global presence. Analyse specific variables such as:<br>  • Geographic location<br>  • Function and business line<br>  • Individual teams<br>  • Under-represented intersections, such as ethnicity, age, LGBTQ+ status, and more. |
| **Multilingual** | • Questionnaire available in six languages (English, Spanish, Swedish, German, French, Italian) with other languages available as required, to accommodate multi-country workforces. |







**Notes:**
The Diagnostic has three output reports: Summary Report, Detailed Report and Comments Report. Comments are reported verbatim in local language to preserve their authenticity.
Exploratory analysis of the data is conducted to test hypotheses.
Questionnaire is administered via a third-party platform and participants are invited to participate via a URL link from an external platform.
The full psychometric properties of this survey are available to review here.

# Three Barriers® Debias Audit




**Pinpoint the bias in your talent management practices**

We review key talent processes such as attraction, recruitment, promotion, and succession, along with wider people practices to identify opportunities to eliminate bias and remove blockages in the talent pipeline.

Our Three Barriers® Debias Audit provides a thorough review of processes, policies, and culture to identify and disrupt gender biases in the talent management lifecycle.

Shape Talent works directly with your designated internal project team to conduct the audit, collating various documents and policies, and coordinating fact-finding interviews to assess the current state.

On completion, we provide a detailed analysis with tailored recommendations on how the organisation can best tackle talent challenges and allocate resources for the greatest impact.

**Our audit provides you with:**

- An objective measure of the presence of biases and gender stereotypes in all stages of the talent management lifecycle
- A gender balance maturity indication, demonstrating how well you can attract and retain women
- A maturity report highlighting opportunities for improvement in the talent management processes
- Recommendations linked to measures of success, including key metrics or KPIs for effective ROI



# Breaking Barriers Talent Acceleration Programme




Shape Talent partners with complex multinational organisations who are serious about gender equity – we develop and accelerate talent while addressing the personal, organisational, and societal barriers that women experience, many of which also apply to non-binary people. We do this in service of enabling all **genders to achieve fulfilment** based on what success looks and feels like for them, not based on gender norms or stereotypes. By utilising the principle of inclusive design, our solutions benefit not just those who face the greatest barriers, but all individuals.

Our Breaking Barriers Talent Acceleration Programme is our flagship accelerator programme for leaders wanting to advance to the next level in their careers.

The programme helps organisations looking to accelerate talent into leadership positions. It combines powerful workshops, sponsorship, and coaching circles specifically focused on addressing the career barriers faced by women, but which benefit all genders.

Our programme content is tried and tested, and we work with you to select the components that best suit your needs. Where Shape Talent has undertaken a diagnostic of the key barriers in your organisation, we will target and embed content specific to these areas.

### Participant benefits

- Enhanced networks
- Helps build an authentic leadership style
- Boosts confidence and motivation
- Peer support and social learning from peers

### Organisational benefits

- More talent promoted into leadership roles
- Greater talent retention
- Greater talent engagement
- Greater leadership impact of participants
- Practical, action-focused content adapted to your culture and needs
- Stakeholders benefit from the 'ripple effect' of learnings taken back to the workplace



"One of the best leadership trainings I've done to date in my career. It distinguishes itself and equips you with all the tools you need to step up to executive level."

**Deidre,** *programme participant*

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