

WHITE PAPER

Female Leadership in the Workplace: Building a workplace culture of gender-balance and inclusivity

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Executive summary

Over the last few years, significant progress has been made in building inclusive and equitable workplaces. Fresh forms of conversations and practices are opening up to empower individuals from diverse backgrounds to achieve their full potential and thrive at work. However, there is some way to go in combatting the barriers that many face in their careers and eliminating bias. While there are many examples where women have been demonstrating strong leadership through recent global challenges, the journey towards driving successful outcomes both on a personal and organisational level is often not equal for women leaders compared to that of men.

Based on a review of literature and insights from two panel discussions in Asia-Pacific and Europe, this paper explores the challenges that women are currently facing in the workplace, and what organisations can do to help create a culture of gender balance and equality for all employees.

The following factors have been identified as key to enabling women's success in organisations:

- Tackling barriers at both the systemic and individual levels
- Commitment and accountability from company leaders to drive change for a more inclusive workplace
- Building awareness of unconscious bias throughout the organisation, and identifying policies or practices that are contributing to it
- Treating gender equality as a business imperative and linking it to the company's purpose and values
- Enabling and normalising flexible working for all employees
- Training line managers to understand and support individual needs
- Creating a climate of psychological safety
- Understanding the impact of intersectionality
- Supporting strong relationship networks
- Using data to drive decisions on actions the organisation can take to improve gender balance
- Embedding constant conversations and education on the issues to be addressed, such as intersectionality and psychological safety
- Providing programmes for sponsors, mentors and allies to support and advocate with women.





Introduction

In the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the #MeToo movement and the economic crisis, organisations and their people have been battling extreme pressures over the last two years. With these challenges have come opportunities to have courageous conversations about what equality and fairness look like in the future of work; what changes need to be made to build more inclusive workplaces; and how organisations can adapt to these changes to drive progress both in terms of the success of the business and the communities they impact. These conversations have driven a shift in the capabilities required of leaders towards more compassion- and empathy-based leadership. Female leaders around the globe have risen to the external challenges by supporting individuals' needs, prioritising health and well-being, and taking steps to improve workplace inclusivity. Significant progress has been made on women's empowerment in the workplace¹, with female CEOs becoming more commonplace in multinational companies including YouTube and General Motors². However, there are still many barriers to overcome to eliminate gender bias and create an environment in which women can thrive.

As part of International Women's Day, Roffey Park Institute held panel discussions with HR, L&D and OD professionals in Asia-Pacific and Europe to explore how organisations can develop cultures that enable women leaders' success. Building on the themes emerging from the discussions, this paper aims to uncover the evidence on the barriers women are facing in the workplace, and the organisational strategies that can help to address these issues and foster gender balance.

Following insights gathered during the panel discussions, we scoped a framework of the key factors to be explored. A range of grey literature (including reports from large management consultancies, media articles and policy documents) on these factors was then reviewed to develop a deeper understanding of the issues and provide practical recommendations for companies to address them.

The impact of the pandemic

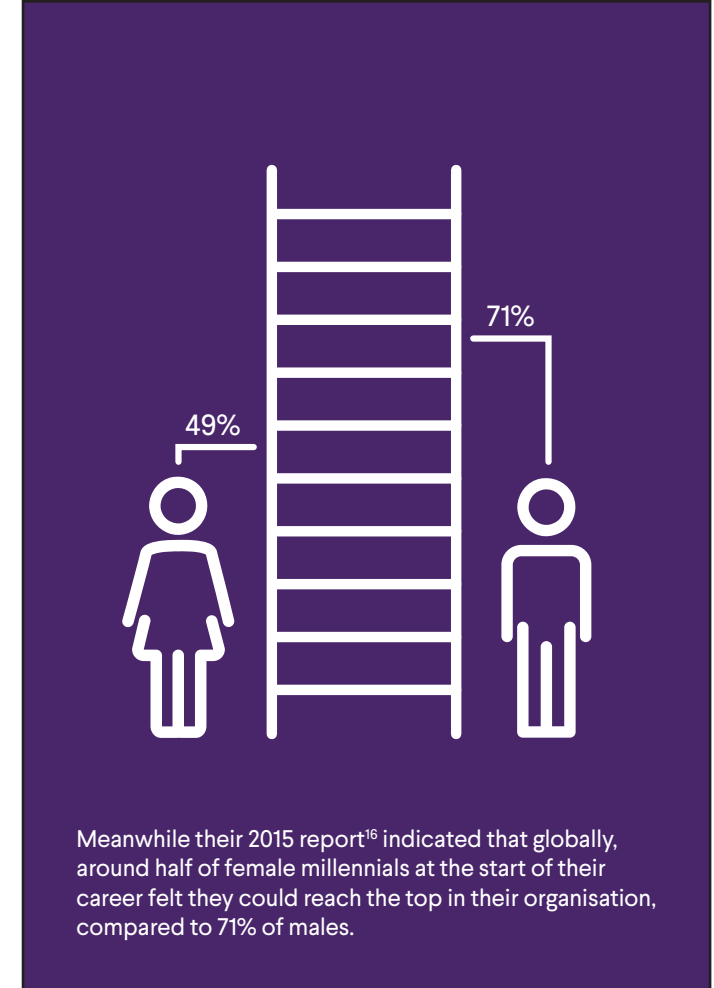
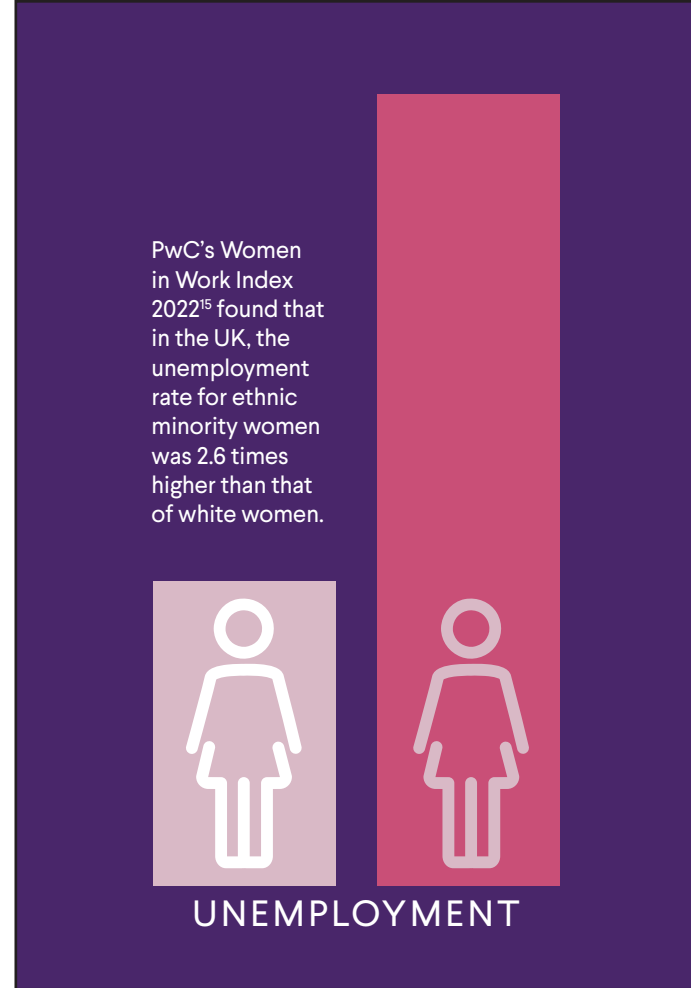
There is evidence to suggest that globally, COVID-19 has had more of a negative impact on women's careers compared to men's. The International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s analysis of labour force surveys³ indicated a greater decline in employment for women than men globally, with this trend occurring across most APEC economies (although in Australia, employment decline is about the same for women and men). According to the OECD⁴, women have been presented with multiple burdens during the pandemic - including playing a key role in the healthcare response to COVID-19; facing higher risks of job loss and economic insecurity; and providing more unpaid work in the household. However, the Institute for Fiscal Studies⁵ suggested that some of the changes to the nature of work could create opportunities to improve gender equality: while women still take on more childcare responsibilities than men, the prevalence of remote working has led to a rise in men's involvement in childcare. Over time, this could help to achieve an even balance in childcare and potentially narrow the gender pay gap.

Although many women have considered leaving the workforce, downshifting their careers, or switching jobs, females in leadership roles have been stepping up to the added pressure on organisations during the pandemic. For example, research by McKinsey⁶ suggested that women are taking more action to support employee well-being and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) compared to men at the same level. Women leaders in politics⁷ have also been demonstrating more human-centred responses to the pandemic: analysis of speeches by Jacinda Ardern, Angela Merkel and other female leaders in Europe and Taiwan indicated more messages of compassion and social cohesion, compared to men's. This reflects discussions at Roffey Park Institute's recent International Women's Day events⁸, which highlighted qualities including empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence as being essential characteristics of a successful female leader. Perceptions of successful leaders

have fundamentally shifted over the last 18 months, with growing recognition that a productive workplace culture requires a more caring, relational style from both sexes to build psychological safety and trust.

Demonstrating empathy has become particularly important for leaders given the negative impact of COVID-19 on mental health. Roffey Park's 2020 research with Profile and Next Step⁹ revealed that just under half of employees in APAC said that COVID-19 has adversely affected their mental health, while 60% felt the mental health of their colleagues has been adversely affected. Meanwhile, research in the UK¹⁰ indicated that young people have struggled more with mental health issues during lockdown; and in Singapore, caregivers were more likely to report feeling stressed in 2021 compared to other workers¹¹. Evidence also suggests that the gender gap in mental health in the US increased by 66 percent during the pandemic¹² - likely due to factors including working mothers having their work at home interrupted, greater financial insecurity, and the majority of frontline and health workers being women.

Organisations are facing what has been dubbed 'The Great Reshuffle' as changes in the world of work are creating opportunities to rewrite strategies for attracting and engaging talent, and focus on employee needs for flexibility and compassion - while simultaneously driving more equitable outcomes and broadening talent pools¹³. Although progress has been made in enabling women's success in the workplace, there have been some steps backward, with fewer women in leadership roles globally in 2021 compared to 2019¹⁴. Women's experiences and opportunities also differ based on their demographic background.



An intersectional approach that takes into account multiple factors including age, location and ethnicity is critical for organisations. Moreover, understanding the lived experience of minority groups can help to develop effective solutions. For example, UN Women's Experiences of women with disabilities in the Asia-Pacific region during COVID-19 report highlights that 'where women with disabilities had been consulted, they were able to give positive examples of how they raised critical issues in the response to COVID-19'¹⁷ (p5).

The need for cultural change: tackling systemic issues within the organisation

The role of leaders

To foster gender balance in the workplace, organisations need to emphasise a culture of DEI that is set from the top. A high-level commitment is required from company leadership to drive meaningful action and pave the way for policies to enact inclusivity across the whole organisation¹⁸. Research by Michelle King¹⁹, director of inclusion at Netflix, found that most leaders are in denial about the differing experiences between women and men at work: almost every senior executive interviewed believed all employees have the same opportunities and are treated in the same way. Since leaders define what behaviours are accepted and rewarded, they are accountable for whether women are equally represented and valued in teams across the organisation. The success of any DEI policy or initiative will be overridden by leader behaviours that marginalise or discriminate against minority groups. According to Professor and Chief Innovation Officer Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic²⁰, companies need to raise the competence levels of both women and men leaders by selecting those for top positions on the basis of leadership potential (measuring competence, humility, and integrity); instead of promoting people on the basis of their charisma and overconfidence (which are typically 'male' traits).

The Center for Creative Leadership²¹ suggests seven intentional acts that leaders can practise to foster inclusivity: deepening self-awareness, fostering social awareness, revealing blind spots, listening to understand, creating connections, leading with courageous vulnerability, and investing resources in inclusion. The presence of role models at the top level is also important, particularly in male-dominant industries. Monash Business School's study of women accountants in Australia²² revealed a need for more role modelling from male and female leaders to demonstrate that flexible working and work-life balance is possible and endorsed. For example, leaders can 'walk the talk' by vocalising their own caring responsibilities and personally using flexible work arrangements²³.

Catalyst created a campaign to #BiasCorrect years of unconscious beliefs through reclaiming the CEO title to Chief Empathy Officer²⁴. This aimed to promote empathy as a core leadership skill that can be universal; challenging prevalent perceptions that it is too 'feminine' for C-suite roles. Global companies that lead with empathy include the Bank of America, where CEO Brian Moynihan believes this quality is a fundamental driver of innovation, engagement, and inclusion:

“As CEO, part of my responsibility is to provide a culture that implements equal pay for equal work, and one that gives women the tools necessary to learn and grow, from the C-suite to our interns... We must have leaders at the top who not only talk the talk, but walk the walk by showing their commitment to these efforts every day... Change requires accountability – that starts with the CEO.

Unconscious bias

Building awareness of unconscious bias throughout the organisation is a starting point to challenging perceptions and behaviours that inhibit women's success. Training tends to focus on building understanding of different types of bias as well as meritocracy, stereotypes and microaggressions. Creating awareness of unconscious bias requires an acute awareness of our own behaviour and actions through regular reflection.

The UK government is launching a programme to help women return to the STEM workforce after taking time out for caring responsibilities²⁵. This aims to tackle the biases women often face when returning to the industry, such as having their CV overlooked and never receiving interview feedback. With the programme running until at least 2024, the Government Equalities Office intends to improve the representation of marginalised women and retain talent across the STEM sector.

'There is plenty that organisations can do to highlight unconscious bias. For example, developing safe, supportive working environments where people can discuss and raise bias; facilitating awareness-raising and championing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; sharing the stories of bias experience and creating a space for everyone to discuss and explore options together; and listening to the organisation to understand and identify where biases may be.' (Ciara Halloran – Senior Consultant, OD, Roffey Park Institute).

Organisations that are committed to removing systemic barriers to gender equality view this agenda as a business imperative, which then underpins strategies designed to eliminate bias. The IBM Institute for Business Value report²⁶ found that among the top percentile of organisations enabling women's advancement, 100% designate the advancement of women as a formal top 10 business priority (compared to 16% of other organisations), and view gender inclusivity as a driver of financial performance (compared to 36% of other organisations). Leaders need to articulate why gender balance is important for the business and link it directly to the organisation's purpose

and values. When employees and leaders believe gender diversity leads to business results, they are more likely to be personally committed to driving change.

Sodexo²⁷ analysed data from 50,000 managers across 90 entities globally and found that teams with a male-female ratio between 40 and 60 percent deliver more sustained and predictable performance compared to less balanced teams. Gender-balanced teams also showed an increase in employee engagement rate, while gender diversity correlated with other business metrics including consumer satisfaction and operating profit.

HR policies and practices

HR should take a systematic approach to identify policies and practices which may contribute to bias or inhibit diverse candidates from advancing into leadership positions²⁸. This may include talent management criteria and competencies included in performance review documents which can have a masculine bias²⁹, as well as the use of language in internal and external communications which may discourage women from applying for roles³⁰. A paper by the World Economic Forum³¹ outlines approaches to DEI in the future of work, which include embedding equity in organisational analysis, employee experience and reward. For example, designing talent selection and development systems based on potential rather than merit is one avenue for combating gender inequalities.

'HP D&I strategies pledge that by 2030, HP's culture is diverse, equal and all-inclusive. To-date, HP Workplace Policy globally ensures pay equity irrespective of gender. Managers adhere to an annual rigorous performance assessment process, so annual salary review and remuneration discussions have no bias. HP provides 12 weeks' paid primary carer leave regardless of gender and leaders are encouraged to be visible role models of flexible working. Hiring Managers also need to update certification every 12 months on HP Belong training, which ensures no bias when reviewing new employee applications.' (Chelsea Rossney - Director, Commercial Channel at HP & Chair HP Women's Impact Network)

DEI policies are important not only for enabling equal progression opportunities for all employees, but for attracting talent. PwC's 2015 report³² found that 85% of female millennials said a company's DEI policy is important when deciding whether to work for an employer. However, 71% felt that while organisations appear to promote diversity, in practice opportunities are not equal for all. This highlights the need to create safe spaces across the organisation for conversations about how measures of success must change. Rather than merely being viewed as a 'passion project', DEI initiatives should be part of the mainstream discussion.

The UK's Gender Equality Roadmap³³ sets out the government's 'vision to enable everyone to contribute to the country's economy and balance caring responsibilities with a rewarding career'. It outlines eight key drivers of inequality and how each will be acted upon:

ISSUE	EXAMPLES OF STEPS TAKEN TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE
Tackling limiting attitudes to gender	
Women tend to work in lower paid sectors and occupations, and are less likely to progress	
The working age benefits system hasn't always tackled the disadvantages that women and those with caring responsibilities face	
Women take more time out of the labour market to care for children	
Women are providing more informal care and unpaid work for others	
Helping people to return to work after taking time out for caring	
Women are more likely to face financial instability later in life	
We need to ensure we have the right foundations for the future	

Building a culture of flexible working for all

As well as flexible working arrangements being critical to helping individuals balance work and family commitments, they have become a key expectation of employees as a result of the pandemic³⁴. Flexible work needs to become 'normalised' to encourage men and women (whether or not they have caring or management responsibilities) to take up arrangements, and break perceptions that doing so is a sign of lack of commitment. According to a LinkedIn survey³⁵, over half (54%) of women in Singapore would like to work flexibly but are worried about the associated stigma, with 28% fearing that taking flexible work options will be deemed as not working hard. To create a culture of flexible working for all, organisations may need to redesign roles to allow for flexible arrangements in some cases³⁶. Research on Australian workers with family responsibilities during the lockdown³⁷ found that 87% said the changes they negotiated with their employer meant they could balance their work and caring responsibilities. The most common type of changes workers sought was around the hours of work, which indicates that some companies may need to take a creative approach to find solutions that help people achieve work-life balance. Well-designed flexible working options can open up progression opportunities for women who are not able to work full-time or standard hours³⁸. Meanwhile, many Singapore businesses³⁹ have reported that improving flexible work policies has driven an increase in productivity levels, as well as strengthening the employer brand.

At telecommunications company Telenor⁴⁰, working from home has broken down hierarchies and siloes through a more cross-functional, project-based way of working. This has boosted efficiency by enabling decisions to be made more quickly and involve more people, according to President and CEO Sigve Brekke. Telenor is embracing trust-based working, in which employees are assessed solely on their outputs, rather than amount of time spent. The company calls this model 'Tight. Loose. Tight' - being 'tight' on setting clear expectations and goals; 'loose' in providing people with the freedom to decide how to meet these goals; and 'tight' again on the follow-up to ensure accountability.

A white paper by the Singapore Government on women's development⁴¹ sets out proposals for 25 action plans in five key areas: equal opportunities in the workplace, recognition and support for caregivers, protection against violence and harm, other support measures for women, and mindset shifts. Alongside the white paper, the Government recently announced that it is introducing a new set of guidelines on flexible work arrangements, doubling the Home Caregiving Grant for beneficiaries from lower-income households, and enabling women aged 21 to 35 to freeze their eggs regardless of marital status.

'A culture that fosters well-being is a culture that embraces flexibility and empathy. To help achieve this, a number of actions should be taken including regular self-assessment to identify areas of improvement; monitoring progress; frequent check-ins to ensure measures and resources are accessible and effective; and providing early intervention support to those experiencing distress. The approach does not need to be resource-intensive: it can start with ensuring that meaningful and regular conversations about performance, development, and well-being are occurring between managers and employees. This will allow all employees to find the tools to help them on their growth journey and step into their full potential.'
(Stephanie Nash- Chief People Office, Circles.Life)

Educating line managers

Line managers play a key role in enabling flexible working arrangements to be successful in supporting employee needs. To ensure these arrangements do not lead to over-work or added pressures among employees, companies can provide training for line managers on having early conversations with their team members about their family commitments, and focusing on outcomes as opposed to amount of time spent in the office⁴². Regular conversations with line managers may be particularly important for younger employees: PwC's 2015 research⁴³ showed that female millennials expect regular feedback and value face-to-face conversations on career development (91%), performance evaluations (88%) and compensation (80%).

Managers have a responsibility to continually develop self-awareness of personal actions and behaviours as part of their own leadership practice, especially as they tend to be the ones interacting with employees on a regular basis. It is therefore important for them to be conscious of issues being faced by individual team members, proactive in identifying and calling them out, and supportive of initiatives in order to lead by example and champion company policies which help shape the culture.

Fostering an environment of psychological safety

Enabling employees to have honest conversations with their managers about their needs and career development ambitions requires a climate of psychological safety. According to Harvard Business School professor Dr Amy Edmondson⁴⁴, *'Without psychological safety, even knowledgeable and well-meaning people cannot contribute at the critical moments that they are needed, because they're reluctant to be wrong, stand out, or upset their manager.'* Women are often reluctant to speak up or take risks at work, and express self-doubt about having the right experience when faced with opportunities to take stretch assignments that position them for career progression - as notably outlined by Meta COO Sheryl Sandberg⁴⁵. A study by Monash University in Australia⁴⁶ revealed that many women feel they have to regularly moderate their behaviours, especially in situations where



they are the only woman in the room. This highlighted that all managers need to take personal responsibility towards creating a culture of psychological safety⁴⁷. While company policies are important in supporting well-being and flexibility for all, they are outweighed by informal types of support including leadership style and relationships. Edmondson⁴⁸ describes how *'The concept of psychological safety is often misunderstood as managers being "nice" and lowering performance standards'*. Rather, it's *'about candour and willingness to engage in productive conflict so as to learn from different points of view'* (p16).

'For psychological safety to exist across the team, leadership must nurture a sense of belonging for everyone - women, older workers, introverts, or otherwise - because employees contribute most when they feel accepted. Employers should be committed not only to their people's well-being, but should also provide pathways for employees who need help, along with flexibility for customisation. Managers, for instance, can moderate meetings and ensure every participant has an equal opportunity to speak up, or that expectant mothers are put up for promotion if they are equally qualified.' (Stephanie Nash - Chief People Officer, Circles.Life)

Great Place To Work in collaboration with Singapore Management University conducted a study on psychological safety and the making of successful teams in Asia Pacific⁴⁹. Their examination of the Best Workplaces in the region indicated that in companies where leaders and managers are perceived as role models, and are trusted to act on feedback and with employees' best interests at heart, levels of psychological safety were higher compared to other companies. They cite the example of Google, which identified that *'members of high-performing teams were more likely to feel secure with one another, to admit mistakes and show vulnerability, to partner with others, and to take on new roles'* (p5) compared to teams that performed less well. They also found that *'Individuals who feel a significant degree of psychological safety are less likely to leave the organisation, "more likely to harness the power of diverse ideas from their teammates, they bring in more revenue and they're rated as effective twice as often"'* (p5).

Creating psychological safety is particularly important for women from minority backgrounds, who must battle stereotypes while calculating the interpersonal risks when they speak up⁵⁰. Evidence from the US and Canada⁵¹ suggests that Asian women are less likely than other groups of women to receive positive feedback on their leadership abilities, even when their performance ratings are strong. Asian women also have fewer informal interactions with senior leaders and are less likely to be noticed as individuals, which may contribute to their contributions being overlooked. To address the impact of intersectionality and foster a culture of belonging in the workplace⁵², managers can regularly ask themselves questions such as, *'What does psychological safety mean to you?'*, *'How are women of colour generally treated when they speak up in your organisation?'*, and *'What are the tools you can use in the short, medium, and long-term to create greater psychological safety for your team?'*

Relationship networks

The Great Place to Work Asia-Pacific 2018⁵³ study revealed that strong personal relationships are positively associated with psychological safety in the workplace. Relationships based on mutual respect are a powerful foundation for helping employees feel secure enough to bring their whole selves to work and take interpersonal risks. Women often face personal as well as systemic barriers to achieving success in the organisation, such as self-doubt and feelings of not being good enough. Managers can help women tackle 'Imposter Syndrome' by having honest conversations about their experiences at work that led to their negative self-judgements, and challenge their perceptions that they lack what it takes to succeed in the company⁵⁴. Having a trusted circle of fellow women to help address barriers and provide support is also important in building this confidence. Research by KMPG⁵⁵ in the US showed that 63% of women (particularly the younger generation) feel they need greater encouragement from others to believe in their potential to be a leader. However, this study also suggested that while most women (70%) believe that helping other women advance in the workplace is important, in reality only 33% act on this.

'I think that female individuals face very different challenges, depending on their chosen career. Industries that have previously been very male-dominated, such as construction, engineering and sports management, in my opinion are the hardest to progress through. Perhaps there is a need for a mindset shift. Should we be filling positions in these industries because it is the women who are pushing hard and earning the right to be there, or because it looks good for the company to have a 50/50 gender split? The latter of the two options doesn't help in navigating a career; it goes the opposite way in succeeding to push women out of the industry when the support isn't there.' (Polly Saunders - Assistant Hospitality Manager, Roffey Park Services)

Setting up women's networks is one way by which companies can accelerate female career advancement and encourage grassroots-level culture change. A report by the OECD⁵⁶ highlights that many companies that have been most successful in retaining and promoting female leaders have established formal networking initiatives (including women's global networks for employees, mentoring and training programmes), which raise the visibility of the challenges faced by women in the workplace.

Emily Ng, head of major accounts for ASEAN, Hong Kong and Taiwan at Zoom⁵⁷, has taken on the unofficial role of a 'coach' to the young women in her team; guiding them through their career development. Recognising the value provided by support from women leaders throughout her professional life, she also volunteers as a mentor for NUS and INSEAD Women in Business students. Meanwhile, one of the company's Employee Resource Groups 'Women@Zoom' provides female employees with access to tools and events to promote their development, such as relationship-building activities with other women across the organisation.

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Understanding that resilience is the process of managing, navigating and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma, then it makes perfect sense that women would want to draw upon their networks to support them in this. I have found it helpful to build my own network of support in three areas:

1 *Developing my own strengths, purpose and values – this has often been through mentors I have worked with and some I have accessed through professional women's or women leadership networks, both associated with my organisation and not.*

2 *Perspective – there are networks I have come across that I find useful such as the 30% Club, alumni groups, Employee Resource Groups, and even social groups.*

3 *Emotional Intelligence (EQ) – it's important to continue to develop our EQ, and I have worked with a variety of executive coaches and am part of groups that support me in this area.*

I believe organisations can support women employees to build their networks in each of the three areas, through for example a women's leadership network, joining the 30% Club and making coaching and mentoring available to women employees who are or aspire to be future leaders.

(Ciara Halloran - Senior Consultant, OD, Roffey Park Institute)

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Data-driven decision-making

The use of data plays an important role in highlighting issues, challenging assumptions, and building understanding of how things can be improved in the organisation to create a more equitable environment. Companies often go into the pitfall of relying on their own preconceptions and historic experiences when trying to improve gender balance. This can lead to particular actions being taken based on an assumption that they will have the biggest impact - however, without solid data to back up these assumptions, there is no guarantee that any intervention will be effective⁵⁸. According to the OECD's global survey⁵⁹, building a culture of measurement is the most important company action in enabling women's advancement to leadership positions.

'HR Policies and DEI strategy need to serve a purpose within the broader context of the organisational strategy. Data provides a basis for commitment to progress, and it can be a powerful driver to open conversations and test assumptions. HR policies play an important role, and data is most valuable if it leads to a daily behaviour change which reflects progress within an organisation's DEI strategy.' (Candice Eaton Gaul - Diversity & Inclusion Leader, RSM International)

The first step to breaking barriers around gender bias in the workplace is to assess the state of unconscious bias throughout the company and measure its impact on staff⁶⁰. Many leaders are hesitant to shine a light on bias and exclusion within the workplace culture, out of fear of causing friction or setting high expectations for immediate solutions⁶¹. However, starting by asking direct questions about employees' experiences of bias can help to co-create ideas on what can be done about it. Organisations can use a variety of means to gather insights on employee sentiment and the state of play of gender balance in the workplace, including anonymous feedback surveys, analysis of language in internal and external communications, and assessment of gender gaps in average time to promotion⁶². While these initiatives are valuable tools as part of a wider DEI strategy, in order to be effective and sustainable in creating a more equal workplace, they must be supported by managers at all levels who are held accountable to the organisational changes. Establishing gender diversity targets with associated metrics to monitor the company's progress against these goals⁶³ can also help to ensure a level of accountability.

At Unilever⁶⁴, the CEO chairs the company's Global Diversity Board comprising senior leaders from across the global business. Members of this board have annual targets for improving gender representation within their areas of the business. The organisation's work on cultural change to drive gender balance is underpinned by stretching targets for each market and function. These targets are based on data on current and historical challenges, and are regularly reviewed and updated.

Driving consistent conversations

While DEI policies and training are important to fostering a more equal workplace culture, organisations need to embed consistent conversations and education as opposed to one-off initiatives. Research by IBM⁶⁵ indicated that companies were introducing more interventions to improve gender equality and inclusion in 2021 compared to 2019, but this had not always translated to better outcomes. For example, there was a decrease in the number of organisations who reported that senior leaders openly challenge gender bias, and that promotions are as common for high-performing women as high-performing men. While there has been limited evidence on the impact of diversity training⁶⁶, it can be effective in promoting knowledge and skills if particular criteria are met: the training takes place over multiple sessions, the content includes both awareness and skills, and it is part of wider organisation initiatives⁶⁷.

Storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful tool for raising the visibility and issues around gender imbalance in the workplace and enabling employees to understand the challenges faced by women. As described by Brene Brown⁶⁸, demonstrating vulnerability by sharing personal stories and asking questions can also develop self-awareness and empathy - qualities that are important for inclusive leadership. Leaders can use storytelling to build credibility and trust; stimulating engagement and commitment to enable change. According to Roffey Park's *Leader-as-Storyteller* report⁶⁹, 'If people are to buy into an organisation's strategy or change programme and really engage with it, they need first of all to trust the storyteller and the story. Genuine involvement in the process can help develop trust and commitment. Their previous experience will also have an impact on how receptive they are to stories for change.' (p29).



Sponsorship

Active sponsorship by members of the C-suite is a critical factor in enabling women to reach top positions. According to a study based on three years of Workplace Gender Equality Agency data in Australia⁷⁰, senior leaders suggested that one of the most important actions in creating gender balance was their role as sponsors; with most investing significant time in identifying and supporting talented women. Sponsorship differs from mentorship, in that while mentors can be anyone in a position of experience and tend to provide an advisory role towards their mentees, sponsors are senior-level executives who act as advocates for their mentees, actively driving their career ambitions by providing them with network connections. HR can develop mentorship and sponsorship programmes to build a pipeline of female talent for senior positions, and foster gender balance⁷¹. These initiatives are particularly important for women, since female leaders tend to be under-sponsored compared to men⁷².

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'At RSM, we realise that gender equality is a critical aspect to diversity and inclusion. In 2021 we launched the RSM Women in Leadership Summit. The events showcase the skilled and experienced women within RSM, demonstrating their talent and expertise. These inspirational women cover topics that are professionally relevant, encouraging employees to lead the way towards driving change. Purposefully inclusive, the RSM Women in Leadership Summit is open to all, allowing for allyship that reaches far beyond just the events themselves.'

(Candice Eaton Gaul – Diversity & Inclusion Leader, RSM International)

Allyship

Employees at all levels throughout the business can act as allies to support and advocate with women in the workplace. Allyship is an ongoing behaviour and practice rather than a single action⁷³, which is available in every interpersonal interaction and can have a powerful impact when demonstrated in small ways. Becoming an ally should start with an examination of the self, and the access and privilege available as an individual. Self-education on the issues experienced by women and identifying the avenues available to leverage change, while accepting that mistakes will happen, enables intentions to be turned into sustainable behaviours that drive inclusive environments. Men have a powerful impact as allies to women at both work and home, through listening and co-creating opportunities and solutions for gender balance⁷⁴. In Asia, CNA Women⁷⁵ spoke to field experts and established allies about what qualities a male ally needs to have, which included: awareness of and passion for gender equity; commitment to a long-term effort; active listening; and willingness to speak up and take action.

'HP is proactive on allyship. We have a number of programmes including the Women's Impact Network which provides initiatives to attract, include, and develop female talent; a six-month leadership development programme providing women with stretch projects across the business to impact critical change; as well as mentor programmes.' (Chelsea Rossney – Director, Commercial Channel at HP & Chair HP Women's Impact Network)

'Bringing men into the conversation is as important as talking about it with women. All men will have women in their lives who they are close to, but perhaps the biggest argument for including them is the positive impact it can have on their future daughters' lives.' (Polly Saunders – Assistant Hospitality Manager, Roffey Park Services)

Everyone across the organisation needs to be involved in building an inclusive and gender-balanced culture. Men and women can begin taking action to break gender bias in the workplace through micro-steps such as avoiding gendered language, reflecting on how they react when women are being slighted or excluded, and participating in conversations on female leadership⁷⁶. As described during the Roffey Park Institute panel discussions, individuals can start being champions of change by:

- Asking questions and listening more
- Being courageous about raising conversations in this space and identifying opportunities to advocate with others
- Celebrating women's successes and acting as cheerleaders for female colleagues – particularly those at early career stages
- Understanding the impact of microaggressions⁷⁷ on women's progress.



Summary

Extreme pressures in the external environment have exacerbated the burdens placed on women, as a result of performing multiple roles at home and in the workplace. While this has contributed to a loss of female talent, the changes in the world of work have created opportunities for employers to reframe approaches to building a strong Employee Experience and a more inclusive workplace for all. Women in leadership roles across the globe have shone out in the battle against COVID-19 by demonstrating the human-centred leadership that has helped to support people and organisations through the challenges.

The following recommendations are made for organisational practice:

1 Foster an inclusive culture through leadership

Removing systemic barriers to women's progress in the workplace requires organisations to treat this agenda as a business priority. Any efforts to facilitate cultural change must be driven from the top, with leadership attitudes and behaviours influencing the success of company DEI initiatives.

2 Tackle unconscious bias throughout the organisation

HR can start by addressing unconscious bias through identifying discriminatory policies and practices, as well as gathering employee feedback on the issues experienced and setting targets to hold managers to account.

3 Normalise flexible working

Creating a culture in which flexible working is the norm is a key priority for enabling all employees to balance their work and life responsibilities; thereby bringing their best selves to work and being empowered to achieve their career ambitions. DEI initiatives such as enabling all individuals to use flexible work arrangements are important not only for enabling equal progression opportunities for all employees, but also for attracting and retaining talent.

4 Support managers to create safe spaces

Training line managers to have open conversations about what support their people need, as well as building leader awareness of the impact of their behaviours, will help to build an environment of psychological safety in which employees feel able to voice concerns and ideas that will help them progress.

5 Embed company-wide initiatives to elevate conversations and provide support at all levels

Initiatives that companies can put in place to provide effective support to women include setting up women's networks, mentorship and sponsorship programmes; and highlighting issues and achievements through the use of data and storytelling. At the individual level, employees across the organisation can take micro-steps to start driving change, including reflecting on their own observations and experiences, engaging in conversations to understand the barriers women face, and identifying the personal resources available to them to act as allies.

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