

womenAccelerate:

A Compendium for Women in Leadership







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CEO, EdelGive Foundation**

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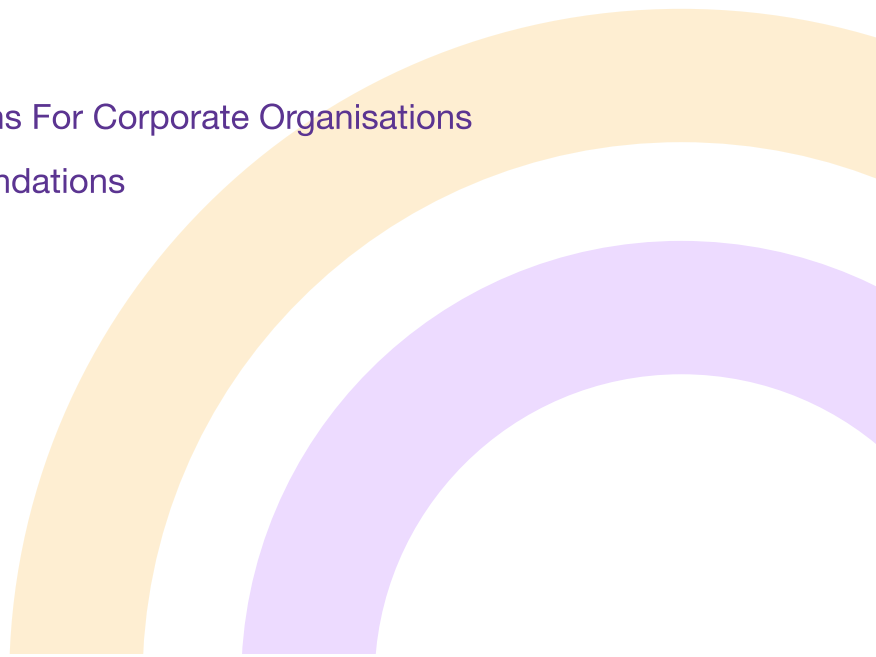
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Leadership Note



Naghma Mulla

CEO, EdelGive Foundation

For generations, leadership has been framed as an exclusive domain, a carefully guarded space where half the population remains conspicuously absent. This exclusion isn't merely a loss of potential; it's a glaring oversight of the diversity of voices and perspectives that are critical to driving innovation and solving the world's most complex problems. Can we truly call ourselves innovative when the voices of women—their ideas, insights, and experiences—are missing from the tables where decisions are made?

Through Stree-Leads, EdelGive Foundation seeks to challenge this status quo. Our mission goes beyond advocating for women in leadership—it's about dismantling the invisible barriers that have held them back for far too long. The launch of this campaign was inspired by a pivotal study on pathways to leadership for women in finance and economics.

Among its most striking findings was the 'broken rung'—that is a lived reality of countless women navigating professional landscapes shaped by socio-cultural norms, career breaks, and the absence of reentry support. Our approach here blends strategic advocacy, purposeful collaborations, and strong corporate allyships to place women at the heart of leadership conversations.

At the forefront of these efforts is *womenAccelerate: Voices of Emerging Leaders*. For women professionals, it's a platform to share bold ideas, access mentorship from industry stalwarts, and emerge as catalysts for change. For corporates, it's an opportunity to showcase best practices and set new benchmarks for workplace equity and inclusiveness.



This launch marks a significant milestone in our ongoing commitment to gender equity. As we look ahead, our journey continues with renewed vigor—focused on creating collaborative opportunities, amplifying women's voices, and driving systemic change that uplifts not just women, but society as a whole.

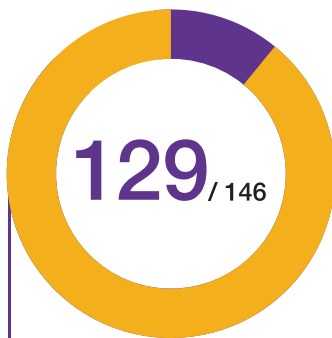


India's Growth Story

A Gendered Reality ♦♦♦♦

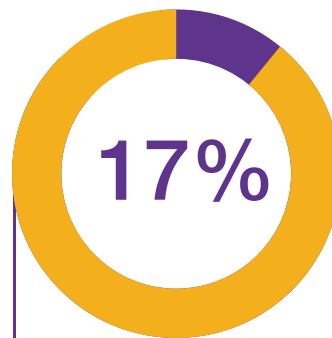
As India marches toward its vision of becoming a developed nation by **2047**, a stark challenge remains: **gender disparity in leadership.**

INDIA RANKS



In the World Economic Forum's **Gender Parity Index**, lagging behind major economies.

WOMEN HOLD ONLY



of **senior management position** in corporate India, far below the global average.

Despite efforts to improve representation, persistent challenges in policy, workplace culture, and societal attitudes continue to hinder progress.



India's National Push for Women in Leadership

Key Policy Interventions:

2001

The **National Policy on Empowerment of Women** laid out a blueprint for women's advancement, focusing on economic and social policies that foster participation, decision-making, and equal opportunities.

2010

The **National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW)** streamlined gender-focused initiatives through **inter-sectoral coordination**, ensuring a more cohesive approach to women's development.

Women-Led Development: A Transformative Shift

From welfare-focused policies to women-led development, a significant shift is underway. India's focus is now on empowering women as decision-makers, entrepreneurs, and change agents.

This paradigm shift is evident in:

Power of 'Nari Shakti'

Women are no longer just participants in the economy or recipients of welfare; they are agents of empowerment, leaders shaping their trajectory.

Education & Skills Development

Programs like Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana and the Vocational Training Programme for Women have been instrumental in equipping women with market-ready skills.

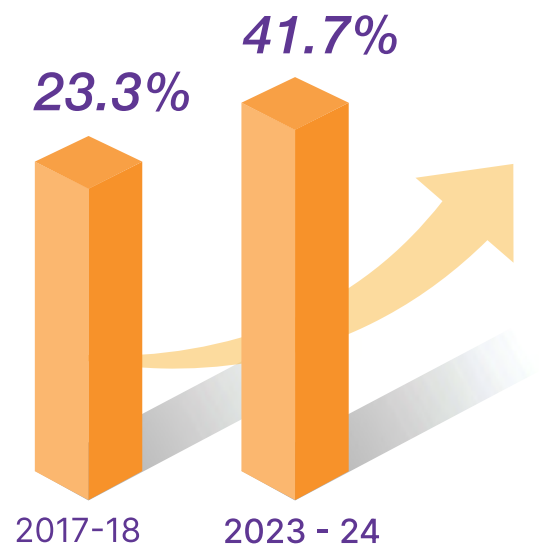
Financial Inclusion

Digital initiatives like Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana and Digital India have increased financial literacy and economic agency among women.

The Impact: Measurable Progress

A direct outcome of these interventions is the rise in Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR):

41.7% in 2023-24 (up from 23.3% in 2017-18) a remarkable increase, largely driven by a surge in rural women's workforce participation



The Broken Rung in Women's Leadership Journey

Growing Participation

Women's presence in the economy is rising, but challenges remain, particularly in corporate leadership roles.

Low Leadership Representation:

- Women hold only 17% of director positions in corporate India (below the global average of nearly 20%).
- Women in chair positions decreased between 2018 and 2021.
- Only 17% of middle and senior management roles in India are occupied by women (compared to 32.4% in advanced economies and 32.8% globally).

Trends in Leadership Hiring:

- From 2016 to 2021, female leadership hires increased to 25.2%.
- However, in 2023, this number declined to 24.2%, showing stagnation in progress.



Labor Force Participation Trends

- Women's LFPR peaks between ages 30-40 before dropping sharply.
- Men's LFPR remains near 100% between ages 30-50 before gradually declining.

Global Perspective

- Women account for 42% of the global workforce but only 31.7% of senior leaders.
- Women hold nearly half of entry-level positions but occupy less than a quarter of C-suite roles.
- Female leadership hiring dropped from 37.5% in 2023 to 36.4% in early 2024.

womenAccelerate:

Purpose Of The Compendium

Goal

Empower women professionals to accelerate their leadership journey through advocacy, best practices, and collaboration.



Promoting Gender Diversity

Encourage greater representation of women in leadership roles.



Identifying Best Practices

Showcase successful strategies that accelerate women's leadership.



Driving Collaboration

Bring together corporates, government, NGOs, and academia.



Translating Insights Into Action

Use collective insights to inspire long-term structural shifts that make leadership more accessible and equitable for women.

The WomenAccelerate Compendium

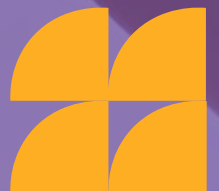
To analyse real-life insights from women professionals and henceforth foster change in workplaces - advancing women into leadership roles, and ensuring their equal presence at the decision-making table.

The background of the entire image is a photograph of several hands stacked together in a supportive gesture, with fingers pointing upwards. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter. The quote is centered over this background.

“

*Real change happens when
women stop adapting and
start architecting the system.*

”





EDELGIVE: **CATALYZING EQUITY** **AND LEADERSHIP**

At EdelGive, giving isn't just a philanthropic act — it's a strategic intervention in shaping a more equitable future. For over a decade, EdelGive has stood at the intersection of social innovation and inclusive progress, building bridges between funders and grassroots. With a sharp focus on systems change, community voice, and collaborative action, EdelGive has championed organizations working at the forefront of education, livelihoods, and — critically — women empowerment.





STREE-LEADS: FROM PARTICIPATION TO LEADERSHIP

EdelGive's Stree-Leads initiative has been launched to accelerate women's advancement into leadership roles within the private sector by addressing critical barriers to gender equity in the workplace.

Although gender diversity is acknowledged as vital for progress, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions across India. *womenAccelerate* seeks to bridge this gap by providing opportunities and support to those ready to lead.

THE VOICES OF EMERGING LEADERS

At the heart of **Stree-Leads** lies **womenAccelerate**, a platform that transforms conversations into catalysts for change. It brings together both established and emerging women leaders to challenge norms, share insights, and reflect on untold perspectives and systemic barriers.

From mentoring and storytelling to advocating for strategic policy shifts, **womenAccelerate** goes beyond career advancement—empowering women with ownership, visibility, and a voice in shaping their future.



womenAccelerate

Powering Ideas. Propelling Leaders.



This is just the beginning

As part of EdelGive Foundation's continued commitment to advancing women's leadership, **Stree-Leads' womenAccelerate** has been launched to support and accelerate the advancement of women into leadership roles within the private sector. This initiative tackles critical barriers to gender equity in the workplace, aiming to provide women with the resources and opportunities needed to rise to the top.

Despite gender diversity being a recognized driver of organizational and societal progress, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles across India.

womenAccelerate is here to bridge this gap, empowering women professionals with mentorship, resources, and a platform for visibility and ownership.

As found in the EdelGive report, advancing gender equality in leadership could unlock untapped potential, boosting India's GDP and driving progress.

The next phase will see shortlisted participants engaging in a tailored virtual mentorship program, connecting with senior leaders who will guide them in scaling and refining their ideas. The goal is clear: to move from insight to real-world impact, creating measurable shifts in how women ascend to leadership roles.

womenAccelerate is more than an initiative—it's a movement aimed at redefining leadership with women at the center. Through this platform, we've invited women across sectors to submit innovative ideas for dismantling barriers to leadership, particularly in industries like finance and economics, where gender representation remains heavily skewed.

An expert jury panel has reviewed these submissions based on innovation, relevance, and impact potential. The most compelling ideas have been selected for inclusion in this compendium, offering a vision of women's leadership shaped by women themselves.



How *womenAccelerate* took shape ♦♦♦♦



The *womenAccelerate* compendium is an initiative born from a national call to action. We invited India Inc. to demonstrate how they are making inclusion real—through measurable outcomes and cultural shifts.

A rigorous evaluation process ensured that each submission was authentic, innovative, and impactful, laying the foundation for an initiative that drives meaningful change in women's leadership.

THE PROCESS

Open Call for Entries

Over 100 aspiring women changemakers submitted bold ideas to shape the future of leadership.



01

Initial Screening

From all entries, 45 ideas were carefully filtered and evaluated by our expert Jury.



02

Final Selection

The top 5 transformative ideas were selected for their potential to drive real systemic change.



03

The Winning Entries

Chosen by our Jury, these entries highlight some of the strongest voices driving gender inclusion in the workplace.



**Amrita Singh
Shrivastava**

PlanetSpark

A public speaking educator and certified content writer, Amrita helps young learners find confidence through storytelling and stagecraft. She believes every voice matters, and every girl deserves to use hers.



**Pallavi Sobti
Rajpal**

Utthan

Joint CEO of Utthan, Pallavi drives gender justice and inclusive community empowerment across Gujarat. Since 1981, Utthan's brave initiatives have reshaped local leadership and social equity, giving many young girls the opportunity to grow. She stands firm in the belief that equality starts with bold conversations.



**Sanjana
Adinarayan**

Edelweiss Asset

Management Limited

With a foundation in Economics and Commerce, Sanjana excels at transforming data into actionable strategies. Her work in research, pricing for small-scale businesses, and SOP development sharpens profitability and growth. Her belief in gender-balanced leadership drives her to create spaces where women can thrive.



Saumya Chaudhary

Yes Bank Ltd.

As a Product Manager at YES BANK, Saumya bridges innovation with user-centric design. An entrepreneur at heart, she grew Backyardblender into a 100k+ strong community, collaborating with brands like Amazon and Flipkart. She leads with the conviction that women belong at the forefront of change.



Shreya Kaushal

Yes Bank Ltd.

An XLRI alumna, Shreya brings over seven years of experience in credit risk and rural banking. At YES BANK, she develops financial solutions for underserved communities. Her work reflects her belief: empowering women uplifts entire economies.

Amrita Singh Shrivastava

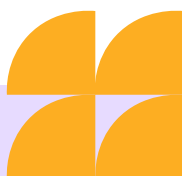
→ PlanetSpark

Key Challenges

Women who take extended career breaks, particularly homemakers, often face significant barriers when re-entering the workforce. These challenges include outdated skills, diminished confidence, lack of professional networks, and limited access to leadership roles. Many organisations do not have structured pathways for reintegrating experienced women professionals, leading to an underutilization of talent and a gender gap in leadership.

Featured Idea

A Tailored Career Reintegration Program designed to support women returning to the workforce after a career break. The initiative would focus on skill development, confidence-building, mentorship, networking, and flexible work arrangements to facilitate a smooth transition back into leadership roles.



Detailed Outline of the Idea

Skill Development and Reskilling

- Personalised assessments to evaluate existing skills and knowledge gaps.
- Targeted courses in digital literacy, leadership, project management, and industry-specific skills to align with market needs.
- Practical training sessions to ensure women are equipped with up-to-date competencies for modern workplaces.

Confidence Building and Leadership Training

- Workshops and coaching sessions on self-esteem, public speaking, and leadership development.
- Activities focused on self-awareness, communication, and leadership styles.
- Exposure to role models and success stories to inspire women to pursue leadership positions.

Mentorship and Networking

- A structured mentorship program connecting participants with industry professionals for career guidance.
- Networking events to introduce participants to potential employers and expand professional connections.
- Access to peer support groups to foster collaboration and shared learning.

Flexible Return-to-Work Opportunities

Promote part-time roles, remote work, and job-sharing to ease re-entry for women balancing personal responsibilities. Partner with flexible employers to support a smooth transition back to work.

Collaboration with Employers

Work with companies to create returnships and mid-career internships, while advocating inclusive hiring and showcasing the value of diverse life experiences.

Smart Implementation

Leverage strategic partnerships for funding and job placements, offer sector-specific upskilling, and track progress via assessments and mentorship. Share success stories to inspire participation and employer buy-in.

This holistic approach empowers women to rejoin the workforce with renewed confidence, equipping them with the tools, support, and flexibility needed to thrive. At the same time, it enables organizations to tap into a highly skilled, motivated, and often overlooked talent pool — driving both inclusivity and business performance.

Pallavi Sobti Rajpal

↳ Utthan

Key Challenges

Limited resources for smaller organisations:

While intent and policies exist in small organisations, particularly in the development sector, the lack of readily available funds hampers efforts for providing additional flexibility.

Operational Challenges During Maternity Leave:

When an employee takes extended leave, managing project deadlines and deliverables becomes difficult. Given that a single team member may be responsible for up to 10 villages, their absence creates a significant gap, particularly in the social sector, where personal relationships with communities are essential.

Balancing Flexibility in Field-Based Roles:

In organizations like Utthan, where much of the work is field-based, hybrid work is not always a feasible option. Striking a balance between fieldwork and flexibility remains a pressing concern.

Lack of Donor Support for Policy Implementation:

Donor reluctance to fund specific policies. Instead, donors expect all operational costs, including flexibility policies, to be absorbed within the organisation's existing budget. This constraint further limits the ability to enhance support structures for employees.

Featured Idea

As the CEO of a social sector organisation dedicated to equity and creating democratic spaces, I feel it is important to empower new mothers to return to work so as to provide them a smooth journey towards leadership. To support their transition, I envision the “**Empower Her Return**” initiative—a program that would respect the unique challenges of social sector work, offering flexible structures and a supportive communities that recognizes the invaluable contributions of working mothers. This would directly address the guilt, lack of flexibility, and limited support

that new mothers face. By offering flexibility, mentorship, and donor-backed policies, we would help mothers re-enter the workplace with confidence, redefining motherhood as an asset that enriches an individual and thus the organization. This initiative is about more than just supporting individual women—it's about building a resilient, inclusive workplace that upholds values of equity, collaboration, and sustainability.

When we invest in new mothers, we invest in future leaders who bring strength, perspective, and commitment to our work. Through “Empower Her Return,” we can create a thriving workplace where all employees feel seen, supported, and inspired to grow.

- **Flexibility and Transition Plans:** The demanding schedules in the social sector can make returning to work challenging for new mothers. A key part of the programme would be providing flexible re-entry plans. This approach would allow mothers to return gradually, perhaps starting with reduced hours or hybrid roles, with the freedom to adjust their schedules as they grow more comfortable. By prioritizing flexibility, we send a clear message that their well-being, growth, and contributions are deeply valued.
- **Community Support and Mentorship:** In the social sector, collaboration is our strength. Through mentorship programs, “Empower Her Return” would offer new mothers a robust support network where they can connect with women who've balanced work and motherhood in this field. These mentors would provide practical guidance and emotional support, helping returning mothers feel understood and valued. Additionally, peer circles would foster solidarity among new mothers, allowing them to share experiences and strategies, building a genuine community of support.

**Policy Adjustments and Childcare Solutions:**

Recognizing the financial constraints, “Empower Her Return” advocates for donor-supported, family-friendly policies such as childcare subsidies and flexible work hours. Partnering with donors would allow us to offer resources that ease the logistical burdens on new mothers, so they can focus fully on their roles. For example, subsidies or partnerships with local childcare providers could make a substantial difference. This level of support would not only benefit mothers but also strengthen organisations by enhancing productivity and retention.

Donor Engagement and Advocacy: To make this vision a reality, we need our donors as partners. We would need to engage donors, showing them that supporting mothers is essential for our team’s morale and effectiveness. By illustrating how family-friendly policies drive mission success, we can encourage donors to see these as strategic investments.

Additional Insights on Implementation:**• Strengthening Gender Equity Policies:**

Organisations should develop clear gender equity policies that align with their mission and objectives. It is essential to build a strong case for these policies by demonstrating their benefits, such as enabling employees to continue contributing effectively even when on leave.

• Clear Communication and Role Adjustments:

Effective communication, supported by well-defined guidelines, can help ensure that all team members understand the value of these policies. This approach prevents additional workload burdens and promotes a structural shift in responsibilities.

• Budget Integration for Team Well-Being:

To ensure long-term sustainability, organisations should integrate these policies into their regular budget planning. While funds are already allocated for team engagement activities, there should be a more intentional focus on budgeting for team well-being and fundamental commitments to employees.

• Showcasing Impact Through Case Studies:

Developing case studies that highlight the experiences of returning mothers and their contributions in the workplace can be a valuable tool for advocacy. Aligning these stories with SDG 5 can also make them more compelling for donors and stakeholders.

• Regional Peer Support Circles: Creating geographically based peer circles can foster stronger connections among employees. Since cultural contexts vary, these localized support networks can be more relatable and beneficial than broader, city-based networks.**• Embedding a Peer-Driven Buddy System:** A

buddy system can serve as a natural support network within the organisation. Unlike traditional mentorship programs, this model is built on peer-to-peer support, where employees with similar experiences help each other organically. This structure does not require enforcement but can be seamlessly integrated into the organisation’s culture.

Sanjana Adinarayan

→ Edelweiss Asset Management Limited

Key Challenges

Inherent biases:

Unconscious and inherent biases still exist towards women, especially in male-dominated sectors.

Inconsistent engagement:

Many initiatives are sometimes driven more by the need to tick off a box than by genuine intention to create change. For example, you often see one-off sessions happening around women's days, led by women for women, but these are seasonal or rather opportunistic.

Resistance to Change:

Threat to men in leadership roles when more women enter these spaces.

Workload and Time Constraints:

People come to work to complete their tasks, and allocating time and energy to such initiatives isn't always feasible given the existing workload.

Featured Idea

As a young woman in finance, a field traditionally dominated by men, I encounter subtle gender biases and stereotypes in my everyday work. Below are a few innovative ideas that can work together. One of the best ways to understand and empathize with challenges that are unique to every individual is through shared stories and creating a sense of community. In my view, a community can be fostered through the following approaches:

- **Pairing with Leaders and Women's Leadership Circles:** Connect aspiring women leaders with mentors from diverse backgrounds in senior management and create small groups for women to share experiences, challenges, and strategies for overcoming biases.
- **Reverse Mentorship:** Encourage male leaders to learn from their female counterparts about gender biases and challenges, fostering empathy and support.

In addition, I believe that the key to create an environment that is conducive to employees across gender, age, backgrounds, etc. is to have open, equal and objective guidelines such that there is a mitigated scope for discrimination. Some ways it can be achieved are:

Leadership Pathways: Create transparent pathways for advancement that outline the skills and experiences needed for leadership roles.

Bias Training: Implement mandatory training for all employees on unconscious bias, emphasizing its impact on decision-making and leadership.

I believe women do not require any other special training or added skills relative to their male counterparts. All it takes is an opportunity and an environment which is conducive to providing such opportunities. In today's day and age, there are many men who champion women's rights just as dedicatedly as women. However, a lot of well-intentioned men who want to be inclusive may not be fully aware of the intricacies of the struggles faced by women. That is why reverse mentorship would be a very good practice where experiences can be shared with male leaders so they would also be incorporating some of the practices in their daily life. Secondly, an open pathway would enable men and women to do better in enhancing their skills and having a healthy competition to do what is required of their role without gender being an incriminating factor or roadblock to prove leadership qualities.

Additional Insights on Implementation:

- **Clear Goals:** The management committee along with the Human Resources department must establish long-term goals with a five-year vision and track yearly progress to stay on course. A well-defined program framework can be developed to guide these efforts.
- **Program Champions:** Corporates can identify individuals who embody and advocate for the program's vision, driving momentum and inspiring others.

Saumya Chaudhary

→ Yes Bank Ltd.

Key Challenges

Unconscious and inherent biases still exist towards women, especially in male-dominated sectors.

Featured Idea

An innovative idea to promote women's leadership in the private sector is the creation of a "**WINGS - Women in Growth and Success**" program.

Program Structure:

The WINGS program would be built around three pillars: personalized growth tracks, a 360-degree mentorship model, and a leadership sandbox for experiential learning. The objective is to equip women with the tools to overcome systemic barriers while fostering leadership development within the corporate environment.

1. Personalized Growth Tracks: Recognizing that women in different career stages have distinct needs, WINGS would offer three specific tracks:

- **Emerging Leaders (0-5 years of experience):** This track focuses on foundational leadership skills such as decision-making, negotiation, and public speaking, helping women build confidence as they navigate their early career.
- **Mid-Level Leaders (5-15 years):** Aimed at accelerating career growth, this track would offer coaching on strategic thinking, team management, and networking, while providing access to senior leaders for increased visibility.
- **Senior Leaders (15+ years):** Designed for women preparing for executive roles, this track emphasizes executive coaching, leading through change, and succession planning, ensuring participants are ready for the C-suite.

2. 360-Degree Mentorship Model: One of the core features of WINGS is its 360-degree mentorship model, which includes both traditional mentorship and reverse mentorship. In reverse mentorship, younger employees provide senior leaders with insights on

modern trends such as digital transformation and innovation, while senior leaders offer career guidance. Additionally, each participant would be paired with a career sponsor from senior leadership, whose role is to actively advocate for their career advancement. Sponsors ensure that women have opportunities to take on high-visibility assignments, receive promotions, and build executive presence.

3. Leadership Sandbox: A key differentiator of WINGS is its Leadership Sandbox, a virtual, risk-free environment where participants can practice leadership through simulated business challenges. In these scenario-based exercises, women would tackle real-world issues like crisis management, strategic decision-making, and team leadership.

Additional Insights on Implementation:

- **Diversity KPIs and Accountability:** To ensure the effectiveness of the WINGS program, the organization would establish measurable diversity KPIs, tracking the promotion of women into leadership roles, retention rates, and overall gender diversity at senior levels.
- **Ensure Transparency:** Implementation of transparent processes for promotions, pay, and leadership opportunities would help towards build trust and reduce biases.
- **Conduct Interviews to Measure Impact:** Hold detailed one-on-one interviews with mentees to evaluate how mentorship has influenced their confidence and career growth.
- **Tracking success of the Programme:** Establish and assess both qualitative and quantitative metrics to track the program's impact, such as, retention rates of mentees, number of women advancing to leadership roles, and, involvement of more women in high-visibility projects.

Shreya Kaushal

→ Yes Bank Ltd.

Key Challenges

- **Lack of Awareness About Opportunities**

Many women in tier II and tier III cities have the potential and willingness to take on leadership roles but lack awareness of available opportunities and policies within their organizations. Increasing outreach and communication can bridge this gap and ensure they are well-informed.

- **Lack of Awareness About Female-Friendly Policies:**

Women in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities often remain unaware of female-friendly workplace policies.

Featured Idea

Establishment of a **Leadership Accelerator Program** exclusively designed for women employees of an organisation. This program could empower women by providing them with resources, confidence and connections needed to advance into leadership roles. This program will aim at

- **Identification:** Preparing a cohort of women employees who have the potential to take up senior/ leadership roles basis their vintage skills, performance and other important parameters relevant to the organisation.

- **Mentorship Matching:** Pair emerging female leaders with experienced executives in their organisation for personalized mentorship, focusing on career growth and navigating challenges.

- **Skill Development Workshops:** Offer workshops on essential leadership skills, negotiation tactics, and financial acumen tailored for women, addressing specific barriers they face on regular basis.

- **Networking Events:** Create opportunities for women to connect with other leaders and potential sponsors, fostering a community that encourages collaboration and support across organisations/ industries.

- **Flexible working Options:** Implement a mix of on-site and off-site working options to accommodate diverse schedules and geographic locations.

Detailed outline for the "Leadership Accelerator Program"

Program Structure : Program Duration and Format:

- **Duration:** 12-18 month program.

- **Format:** Combination of workshops, mentorship, networking events, and online modules.

- **Eligibility Criteria:** Target mid-level female professionals aspiring to move into senior leadership roles. Application process may include a personal statement and recommendation from a current manager.

Key components are as appended below:

- **Mentorship Matching:** Initial assessment to evaluate participants' goals and challenges. Pairing each participant with a mentor based on industry, career goals, and personality fit. Schedule bi-monthly meetings to discuss progress, challenges, and strategies.

Skill Development Workshops

- **Leadership Styles:** On understanding and developing personal leadership style.

- **Negotiation Skills:** On techniques for salary negotiations and influence.

- **Financial Literacy:** On basics of corporate finance and budgeting.

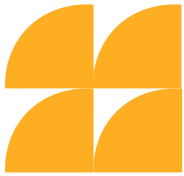
- **Public Speaking:** On building confidence in presenting ideas.

- **Guest Speakers:** Invite successful female leaders to share insights and experiences.

Networking Events:

- **Roundtable Discussions:** Facilitate smaller, focused discussions on relevant topics.

- **Alumni Network:** Create a network for past participants to maintain connections and provide ongoing support.



Flexible working Options:

- Hybrid work options to be provided to ensure better management on personal & professional front to such employees. Work from home options twice a week may be offered

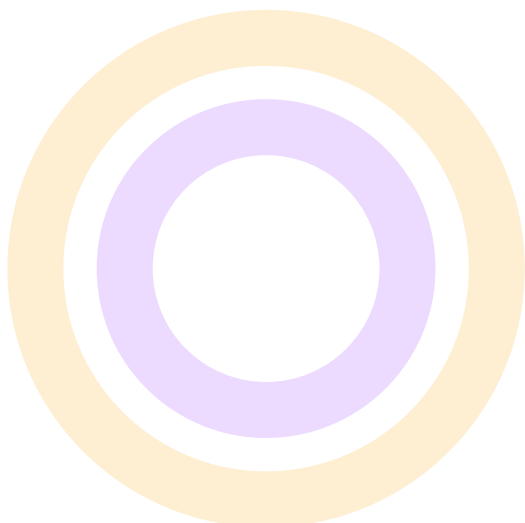
Measurement and Evaluation :

- **Pre- and Post-Program Assessments:** Evaluate participants' skills and confidence levels before and after the program.
- **Feedback Surveys:** Collect feedback after each workshop and event to improve the program continuously.
- **Success Tracking:** Monitor career progression of participants for 1-3 years post-program to assess impact.

Marketing and Recruitment :

- **Outreach Campaigns:** Use social media, professional networks, and partnerships with women's organizations to highlight testimonials and success stories from past participants
- **Long-term Goals:** Create a sustainable ecosystem which aims to establish a continuous loop of mentorship and support.

By implementing this comprehensive approach, the Leadership Accelerator Program can significantly empower women, enhance their leadership skills, and facilitate their rise in the corporate world.



Additional Insights on Implementation

Strategic Mentor Selection: Mentor selection should be aligned with the participant's goals and challenges. Rather than assigning mentors arbitrarily, participants should have the flexibility to choose from a leadership list based on their aspirations. The selection process should prioritize alignment with leadership styles and career ambitions, regardless of gender.

Voluntary Mentorship Program: The mentorship program should be voluntary in nature, ensuring that both mentors and mentees are genuinely committed to the process rather than being assigned roles forcefully.

Measuring Success Through Gender Ratio: The effectiveness of leadership programs can be measured through changes in gender ratios at leadership levels. A structured tracking mechanism should analyze how many leadership roles have been created for women, with data categorized by department and city (across Tier 1, 2, and 3 locations).

Leadership Programs as Retention Tools: Leadership development programs play a significant role in encouraging women to continue working within organisations. Structured career growth opportunities contribute to employee retention and long-term engagement.

Female-Friendly Policies and Leadership Pipeline: Proactive female-friendly policies help in strengthening the leadership pipeline. Women returning from maternity leave should be better supported, ensuring their reintegration into the workforce and leadership roles.

Leadership Quotas for Women in Male-Dominated Fields:

A structured quota for women in leadership roles—particularly in male-dominated domains like sales—can help create a more balanced and inclusive leadership landscape.

The Jury

The voices who shape change ◆◆◆◆

As we celebrate the women who are accelerating forward, it is equally important to honor those who help light the path. This compendium brings together profiles of our Stree-Leads Jury — individuals whose vision, insight, and experience have shaped the journey of this initiative.

These are leaders, disruptors, believers, and bridge-builders. Their perspectives span industries, generations, and geographies — but they are united by one purpose: to ensure that more women lead, and lead with conviction.



Aparna Uppaluri

**Founder & principal Advisor,
Antara Advisory
Former COO, Tata Trusts**

Aparna Uppaluri, former COO of Tata Trusts, is an interdisciplinary leader with expertise in philanthropy, women's rights, public health, and arts & culture. With over 20 years of experience across sectors in India and Canada, she is known for building collaboratives and bridging creative expression with social justice.



Nidhi Bhasin

**Chief Executive Officer,
Digital Green Trust**

Nidhi Bhasin is a prominent leader in social development, advocating for technology-driven social impact. With over 25 years of experience, she holds strategic and leadership roles across program management, fundraising, and thought leadership. She is a key voice on impact financing, gender, climate change, sustainability, and diversity, with a strong focus on empowering women in program implementation.



Nirupama Rao

Former Foreign Secretary, Government of India

Nirupama Rao is a former Indian Foreign Service officer who served as India's Foreign Secretary (2009–2011), the first woman High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and China, and Ambassador to the U.S. (2011–2013). She has been a fellow at prestigious institutions, taught at Brown and Columbia Universities, and authored *The Fractured Himalaya*. A recipient of numerous awards, she is also the Founder-Trustee of the South Asian Symphony Foundation, promoting regional harmony through music.



Paula Mariwala

Founder, Aureolis Ventures

Paula Mariwala is a physicist, technologist, investor, and entrepreneur with over 25 years of experience. A Stanford alumna, she has been a key player in India's startup ecosystem, leading investments in over 35 early-stage companies. Through Aureolis, she focuses on impact-driven ventures in education, gender equality, and sustainability, leveraging technology for meaningful change.



Vidya Shah

Executive Chairperson, EdelGive Foundation

Vidya Shah is the Executive Chairperson of EdelGive Foundation, driving funding and capacity-building for grassroots organisations across India. With over 30 years of experience, she has served on the boards of several civil societies and international organisations. A former CFO of Edelweiss, she previously worked in investment banking. Recognized among India's Top 100 Women in Finance, she was honored as the "Exemplary Woman of the Year" in Philanthropy by Abhyuday Vatsalam in 2022.

Reflections from The Jury

Nidhi Bhasin CEO, Digital Green Trust

Leadership, for me, has been both a journey of purpose and persistence. Growing up in a society where traditional norms often defined a woman's role, I was fortunate to have mentors and opportunities that allowed me to challenge these expectations. My time at the Delhi School of Social Work was pivotal, it gave me not just academic grounding but also the courage to believe in the transformative power of community-led change.

Over the past 25 years, I've worked across social development, technology, and nonprofit leadership. My two decades at the Concern India Foundation allowed me to lead impactful programs in education, health, disaster rehabilitation, and community development, with a particular focus on empowering women. Later, as CEO of Nasscom Foundation, I led the organization in using technology as a force for good, bridging the digital divide in underserved communities and positively impacting over 15 million lives across India. Today, at Digital Green Trust, I'm even more excited to explore how technology, gender, and climate intersect to transform agriculture and empower smallholder farmers.

As a leader, I am committed to fostering environments where women can thrive. Policies that encourage mentorship, provide flexibility, and actively challenge biases are not optional—they are essential. It is through such practices that we can create a leadership culture where women are empowered to reach their full potential and rewrite the narrative of what leadership looks like.



However, this path hasn't been without challenges. Women face significant barriers when it comes to leadership. Structural biases, often unspoken, remain pervasive, and many women I've worked with—including myself—have encountered self-doubt shaped by societal expectations. I've learned that self-limiting biases can sometimes be the hardest to overcome, but they can also be the most transformative when addressed. For me, surrounding myself with mentors and champions who believed in my abilities was crucial in breaking through those barriers. All through my life it's other women who have supported me and helped me to grow. It was mostly other women who saw my potential and nudged me to push my boundaries and in turn I try to do the same by mentoring and supporting some young women to see their own potential.



Reflections from The Jury

Nirupama Rao

Former Foreign Secretary,
Government of India

From a young age, I dreamed of becoming a diplomat—immersed in reading, deeply curious about the world, and always eager to learn more. My parents encouraged my love for history and current affairs, shaping my outlook from a very early stage. Growing up in different parts of India, shaped by the lifestyle of an army family, gave me a pan-Indian perspective. I aspired to excel in everything I did—and my relentless hard work—pushed me forward.

As a diplomat, I was often away from home and family, living in distant places because of work, but my curiosity about different cultures and my enthusiasm for learning helped me immensely. Whether it was managing relationships with challenging neighbours or representing India on the global stage, I approached each task with sincerity, openness, and determination.

Throughout my career, I've faced hurdles like many others do, but I never let them stop me. I truly believe that challenges are meant to be overcome with perseverance. My upbringing instilled in me an immense inner strength—something I leaned on whenever the going got tough.



I also believe that leadership isn't just about taking charge; it's about fostering environments where everyone—especially women—can thrive. Empowerment isn't just about occupying positions of power; it's about creating spaces where individuals can contribute meaningfully and be supported in their professional growth.



From becoming India's first woman High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, to being the first Indian woman Ambassador to China, to ultimately serving as India's Foreign Secretary—each step was driven by my commitment to making a difference.

Today, I see more and more women rising in leadership, and it's heartening to see their voices being recognized. However, there's still much work to be done. Women have the capacity to lead with grace, intelligence, and resilience, and it's our collective responsibility to ensure they have a seat at the table. My advice to the next generation is simple: believe in your convictions, build inner confidence, be resilient, and persevere. For millennia, this has been a male-dominated world. That is now changing. 'Gender' is more than just a simple mantra today, it is a movement, it is a revolution and it is changing the ways of the world. We can take strength and inspiration from that. Our voices are being increasingly heard. Swami Vivekananda once said: "There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible to a bird to fly on one wing".

In retirement, my passion for music, my writings, and my teaching at universities like Brown and Columbia Universities have helped me stay grounded and helped me to continue to give back to the community. I believe in the power of knowledge, creativity, and cross-cultural understanding—and that's what drives me every day.

Throughout this journey, I've learned that resilience, hard work, and unwavering conviction are key to breaking barriers. And as women, when we come together with shared intent, we can truly drive change—changing not just our workplaces, but the world at large.



Reflections from The Jury

Vidya Shah

Executive Chairperson, EdelGive Foundation

My leadership journey has been one of serendipity. After spending over a decade in the financial services industry, culminating in my role as Chief Financial Officer at Edelweiss, I was fortunate to transition into leading the mandate of sustainable giving—an opportunity that allowed me to support grassroots organizations across India.

Having held leadership roles in two distinct sectors - finance and social development, I have come to recognize the pivotal role of mentorship in shaping my journey.

The guidance I received not only helped me navigate the unique dynamics of both fields but also provided a valuable sounding board for ideas, a source of encouragement during challenges, and insights that broadened my perspective. This experience reinforced the importance of continuous learning and the value of cultivating meaningful relationships.

In my journey, I recall moments when women had to stand up to be counted, particularly in large meetings often dominated by men.

In such settings, women were often expected to dress differently or speak louder to assert their confidence and authority. While these barriers have gradually started to shift, they remind us of the work that is still needed to eliminate biases at work. As a leader,

I have consciously worked to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes—whether male or female—and have prioritized fostering conversations around these issues.

For aspiring leaders, I emphasize that leadership is not solely about analytical ability; it's about creating cohesion within teams, balancing compassion with courage, and drawing strength from the purpose behind our work. My experiences, including moments of failure—have been profound teachers. Each failure has offered invaluable lessons, reinforcing that setbacks are not the end but rather the stepping stones moving me to achieve deeper learning and improved outcomes.



Creating greater awareness about stereotypes is essential for building a more inclusive environment where everyone can thrive.

This journey of breaking stereotypes has been supported by the men in my life who have championed my leadership—my father, my husband, and my son. Through their unwavering support, they have shown me the power of allyship in action and demonstrated the crucial role men play in fostering women's leadership. This personal experience reflects a broader need for change. The power of allyship has emerged as a key recurring theme in the entries we have received, highlighting the significant role male colleagues and family members play in advancing women into leadership. True allies do more than offer encouragement—they actively create platforms and opportunities, ensuring that women can step into leadership roles with confidence and influence.

According to me, the most meaningful measure of a leader's legacy is the ability to touch lives, inspire change, and create a lasting impact. As a leader, I am deeply committed to empowering the next generation of women leaders, building a strong pipeline of future leaders. I believe that leadership is about fostering an environment where others can thrive. I encourage every leader to come together and collectively work towards creating a culture where success is amplified—where empowered individuals extend their influence beyond the organization, driving meaningful and sustainable changes in society.



A background image showing several hands of different skin tones stacked on top of each other, symbolizing unity and teamwork. The image has a purple tint.

“

*Change isn't a campaign.
It's consistency. One inclusive
policy, one open door, one
brave yes at a time.*

”



Corporate Voices

Driving change from within



Workplaces reflect where we are — and where we're headed

To understand how inclusion can become mainstream, we needed to understand the changemakers. That meant going to India Inc. — where ideas, influence and investment meet.

As part of the Stree-Leads *womenAccelerate* initiative, we reached out to corporate leaders to gather insights on how organizations are enabling more women to rise to leadership roles. These conversations revealed both promising shifts and ongoing challenges.

What did we uncover?

Across our research and conversations, some key patterns emerged — in what's working, what's evolving, and where gaps remain.

The following ground-up case studies from leading organisations across sectors showcase a meaningful shift toward building inclusive, future-ready workplaces. Each example is a real-world playbook — showing that intention, when backed by structure, leads to real progress.

Why corporate action matters

- The private sector employs the majority of India's urban working women
- Most women's first experience with leadership happens at work
- When businesses shift, entire ecosystems shift — from policy to perception





AXIS BANK

Axis Bank:

The Guiding Light for Inclusion in BFSI

Axis Bank, one of India's leading private sector financial institutions, is actively redefining what an inclusive workplace looks like. With a focus on building teams that mirror the diversity of India's social fabric, the Bank has embedded equity and inclusion into its systems, policies, and leadership culture — ensuring that opportunity is accessible

at every level, for every individual. It's successfully expanded its HR practices to enable a more inclusive, and diverse workforce—supporting women and historically excluded groups across life stages and geographies. Since 2021, a dedicated DE&I team has been embedding inclusion into its core culture.

The Challenge: Breaking Barriers to Representation

4 key findings:

- ➔ **Gender Gaps in Financial Leadership** Despite evolving industry landscapes, women's representation — especially in mid and senior roles — remains limited, largely due to structural biases and legacy hiring patterns.
- ➔ **Limited Re-entry Pathways for Women** Life stage transitions and career breaks often result in women exiting the workforce, with very few structured programs available to support their return to meaningful roles.
- ➔ **Barriers for Underrepresented Groups** LGBTQIA+ professionals and persons with disabilities have historically faced hiring biases, policy gaps, and limited workplace visibility, restricting their growth and inclusion.
- ➔ **Rigid Work Models Limiting Participation** Traditional office-based roles and inflexible work arrangements have made it harder for diverse talent, especially caregivers and women, to sustain long-term careers in banking.

How Axis Bank Tackles It: Strategic Movements for Inclusion



Axis Bank's DE&I journey is built on strategic programs designed to embed inclusion into the Bank's systems, policies, and everyday operations. From re-entry pathways for women, to targeted leadership mentoring, to inclusive health coverage — each initiative ensures meaningful representation across geographies and identities.

01



Mentorship-Driven Leadership Development

Axis Bank ensures every mentor in leadership programs guides at least one woman mentee, actively opening doors to opportunity, experience sharing, and network-building for women aspiring to leadership roles.

02



Inclusive Hiring & Affirmative Messaging

Every job post carries an open invitation: “#ComeAsYouAre.” The Bank encourages applications from women, LGBTQIA+ and PwD candidates, signaling an environment where diverse talent is not only welcomed but valued.

03



The ComeAsYouAre Charter

Axis Bank's LGBTQIA+ inclusion charter (launched in 2021) ensures equal access to health benefits, leave policies, and workplace protections — creating a workplace where all identities are respected and affirmed.

04



Axis GIG-A: Work from Anywhere

The GIG-A model allows professionals to work remotely, helping women, caregivers, and underrepresented talent participate in the workforce without location-based limitations.

05



HouseWorksIsWork: Second Career Pathways

Launched in 2022, it's a flagship re-entry program that welcomes professionals, especially women who've taken career breaks, offering them structured pathways back into mainstream roles at the Bank.

06



AxisVIBE & WiM: Building Awareness

Axis Bank runs specialized outreach for women students and professionals through AxisVIBE and WiM (introduced in 2022), helping the next generation understand their role in shaping an inclusive, future-ready BFSI industry.

07



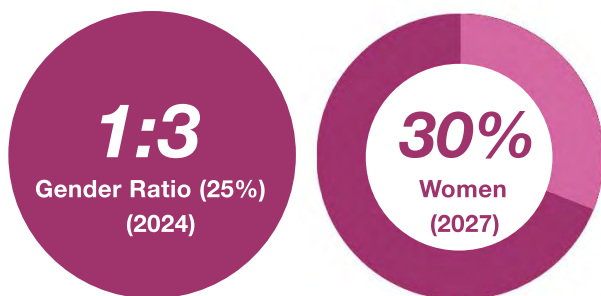
WeLead: Bridging Regional Gaps

This targeted hiring program recruits women MBA graduates from Tier-II cities, offering them mid-management roles and expanding the pool of women in leadership pipelines across geographies.

Impact and Measurable Outcomes

→ Improved Gender Ratio

Axis Bank's gender ratio now stands at 1:3, with a focused roadmap to reach 30% women in its workforce by 2027, backed by proactive hiring and mentoring at all levels.



→ Representation at Micro Level

Beyond macro hiring targets, the Bank has mandated that every team must have at least one woman, ensuring that gender diversity is embedded into daily operations.

→ Returnship & Flexibility Success

With HouseWorksWork and GIG-A, Axis Bank is helping women navigate life transitions and rejoin the workforce through flexible work models and structured support.

→ Inclusive Hiring in Action

Axis Bank's affirmative hiring messages and dedicated programs ensure underrepresented groups — including LGBTQIA+ and PwD candidates — feel welcomed and empowered to apply

→ Embedding DE&I Culture

With initiatives like AxisVIBE, WiM, and its DE&I certification course, Axis Bank is nurturing a workplace culture where inclusion is understood, practiced, and celebrated.



Women employees at Axis Bank

CONCLUSION

Axis Bank is committed to building a diverse and inclusive workplace by addressing socio-cultural barriers and enabling women's growth through targeted programs. With a goal of 30% women in its workforce by 2027, the bank focuses on inclusive hiring, career development, and retention through structured long-term strategies.



BSV

bringing life to life

Bharat Serums & Vaccines Ltd (BSV): Championing Women's Leadership in Pharma

Empowering Women in Pharma: The BSV Womentoring Initiative

For over 50 years, Bharat Serums & Vaccines Ltd (BSV) has been a leader in women's healthcare, pioneering treatments for reproductive health issues such as infertility, endometriosis, and postpartum haemorrhage. Beyond its medical innovations, BSV has championed gender diversity—not just through products for

women, by women, but by fostering an inclusive workplace where women thrive.

At the core of BSV's gender diversity commitment is Womentoring, its flagship mentorship program designed to empower women through structured guidance, leadership training, and career progression opportunities.

The Challenge: Creating Leadership Pathways for Women in Pharma

The pharmaceutical industry has long struggled with gender diversity, particularly in leadership roles. Key barriers include:

-
- ➔ **Low representation in leadership**
Industry average for women in R&D is 10-14%, while BSV leads at 25%.



**25%
BSV**

**10-14%
average**

➔ Lack of mentorship

Women often lack structured guidance for career growth.

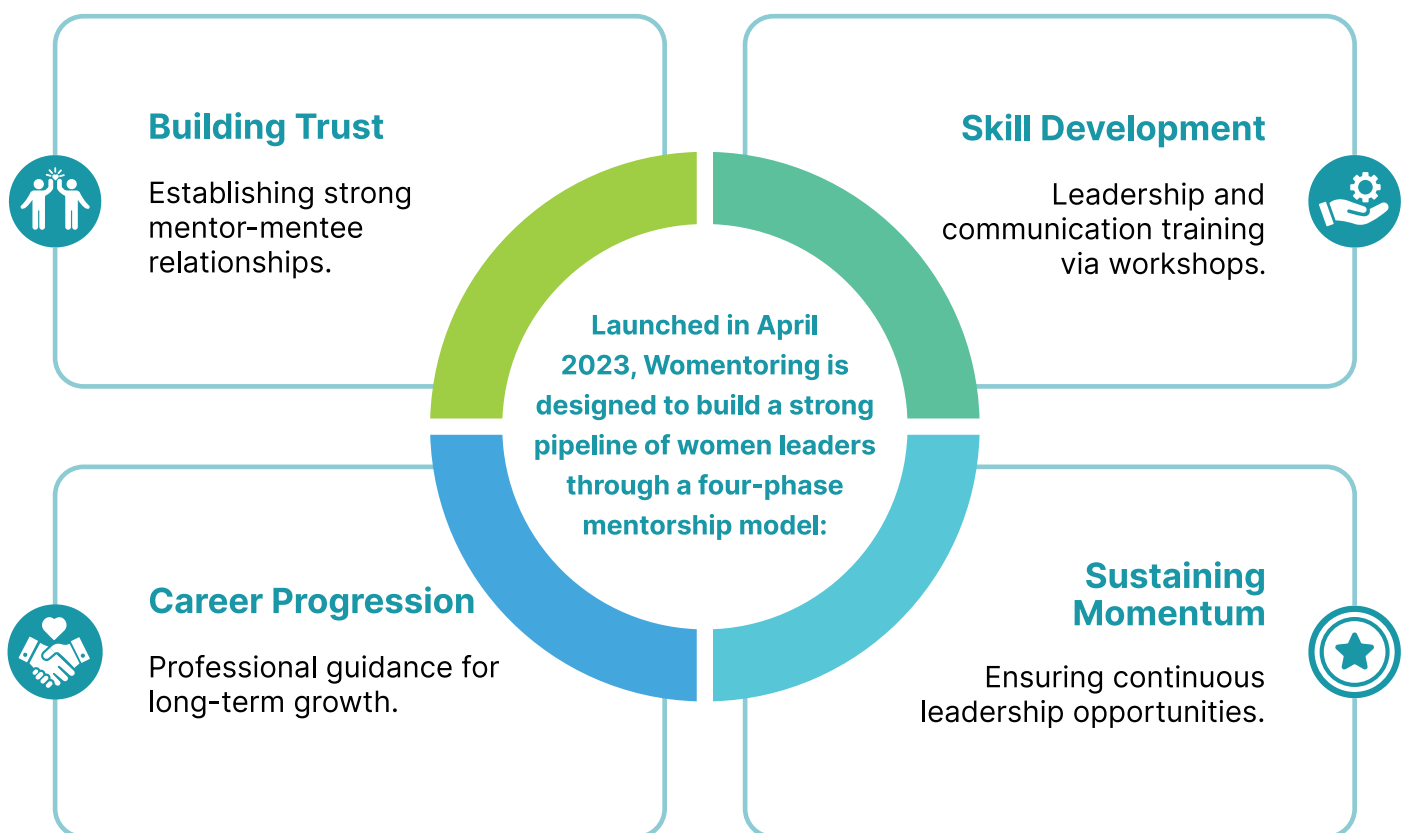
➔ Limited visibility

Women leaders often miss external recognition, slowing advancement.

➔ Career stagnation post-maternity

Rigid work structures hinder progress after maternity leave.

BSV's Solution: Womentoring—A First-of-Its-Kind Initiative



Key Components Driving Impact

➔ Executive Leadership Commitment

Womentoring is championed by BSV's leadership team, with mentorship integrated into scorecards for senior leaders.

➔ Beyond Boundaries Series

A leadership forum featuring icons like IAS officer *Ashwini Bhide*, Olympian *Anju Bobby George*, and IPS *Purnima Gaikwad*, sharing mentorship experiences.

➔ Structured Mentor-Mentee Pairing

Every woman employee is matched with a mentor (regardless of gender) for career guidance.

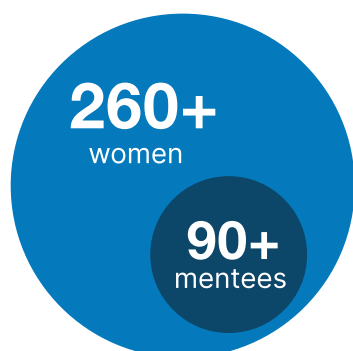
➔ Celebrating Women Leaders

External recognition, with BSV employees winning top industry awards like JOMBAY's 1000 Women Leaders (2023) and Exchange4Media's Innovator of the Year (2023).

Impact & Measurable Outcomes

➔ High Engagement

90+ mentees enrolled in the first phase, out of 260+ women employees.



➔ Growing Leadership Representation

Gender ratio increased from 8% (2020) to 12% (2023), targeting 30%.



➔ Industry Recognition

Named a "Best Organization for Women" by The Economic Times (2022-2024).



➔ Digital Influence

Womentoring discussions on LinkedIn (1.8L followers), Twitter, and Instagram to engage industry leaders and celebrities.

CONCLUSION

Through **Womentoring**, BSV is redefining gender diversity in the pharmaceutical sector, fostering a culture where women feel empowered, supported, and recognized.

With its "for women, by women" philosophy, BSV is not only increasing female representation but also shaping the future of healthcare leadership in India—ensuring that more women enter, thrive, and lead in the pharma industry.



Turning women-centric challenges on its head with her success mantras, *IAS Ashwini Bhide*, Managing Director of the Mumbai Metro and Additional Municipal Commissioner of the BMC delivered an illuminating talk at the BSV Womentoring 'Beyond Boundaries' series.





Edelweiss AMC:

Championing DEI in Financial Services

Edelweiss Group, a leading Indian financial services conglomerate headquartered in Mumbai, has established itself as a key player in the Banking, Financial Services, and Insurance (BFSI) sector. Edelweiss Asset Management, the group's asset management arm, is led by Radhika Gupta, Managing Director and CEO.

Recognising the importance of fostering gender diversity in leadership, the organisation has implemented a series of initiatives to provide women employees with networking opportunities, mentorship, and direct engagement with leadership.

The Challenge: Breaking Gender Barriers in Finance

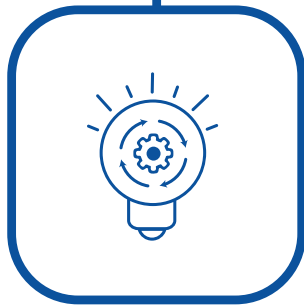
The finance industry has long been a male-dominated space, with women struggling to break into leadership roles. Edelweiss AMC identified several challenges contributing to this disparity:

➞ Unconscious bias in recruitment that hindered diversity in hiring.

➞ Inadequate support for women returning from maternity leave, leading to career stagnation.

➞ Limited mentorship opportunities for aspiring women leaders.

➞ Lack of workplace flexibility needed to balance professional growth with personal responsibilities.



Understanding that maternity leave should be seen as a natural phase of life rather than a career setback, Edelweiss AMC took a proactive approach to addressing these issues and building a more inclusive workplace.

Structured Recruitment Process

The organisation developed a recruitment framework that actively prioritises female participation while eliminating biases. Hiring decisions are consciously made based on skill, merit, and cultural fit rather than gender.

'Writing Her Story' Forum

This exclusive platform enables women to learn from successful leaders through interactive sessions and specialised workshops. Notable speakers include *Priti Rath*i (Anand Rath*i* Group), *Shipra Singh* (Mint), and *Tanya Dubey* (Creator Chart), who share insights on career growth and overcoming challenges.



Mentoring Circle

Launched in FY21, this initiative brings together small groups of 5-8 mentees guided by experienced mentors. It provides career support, skill-building opportunities, and networking avenues in a collaborative setting.

Quality of Hiring (QoH) Metrics

Edelweiss AMC introduced QoH metrics to assess the effectiveness of hiring practices. This tool evaluates the integration of new hires within the organisation, ensuring an optimised and bias-free recruitment process aligned with diversity goals.

Performance Culture – D3R Model

The company follows the D3R model, which focuses on clear goal setting, continuous feedback, skill development, and merit-based rewards. This structured approach enhances employee engagement, career growth, and retention.

Impact and Measurable Outcomes

Edelweiss AMC's commitment to diversity and inclusion has yielded significant results:

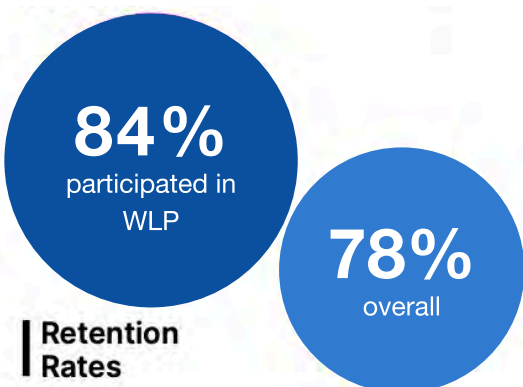
➔ Gender Diversity Growth

FY 23  24%
FY 24  31%

The gender ratio within the organisation has increased to 31% in FY24 from 24% , driven by structured recruitment and QoH metrics.

➔ Improved Hiring and Retention

The unconscious bias-free hiring process has enhanced recruitment effectiveness. Retention rates for women who participated in the Women Leadership Programme (WLP) stand at 84% as compared to 78% across the organisation.



➔ Award-Winning Workplace Culture

Edelweiss AMC received the "Most Preferred Workplace 2022-2023 – BFSI" award from **Marksman Daily**, recognizing its leadership in diversity and inclusion.

➔ Flexible Work Arrangements

Women returning from maternity leave have reported easier reintegration into the workforce due to the company's flexible work policies.

Success Stories: Inspiring Leadership

Several women leaders within Edelweiss AMC have benefitted from these initiatives, emerging as role models for future generations:

Rashida Roopawalla COO

She credits her career growth to the company's leadership development framework and inclusive workplace culture.

Archita Bhutoria Head of Risk

She highlights the flexible and emotionally supportive maternity leave policy as a key factor in her smooth return to work.

CONCLUSION

Through its structured hiring process, mentorship programs, leadership forums, and workplace flexibility, Edelweiss AMC has set a benchmark for gender diversity in the Indian BFSI sector. By actively addressing unconscious bias and creating a culture of empowerment, the organisation showcases how corporates can drive meaningful change and build a truly inclusive workforce.



Godrej Capital : Building Inclusive Growth



Godrej Capital, the financial services arm of the 127-year-old Godrej Group, is redefining how an inclusive financial workplace looks in India. Since its launch in 2020, the company has combined trust-driven lending with people-first practices to strengthen gender

representation and support historically excluded talent across roles and functions.

The 4 Key Challenges They're Addressing

➔ Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership

While women are steadily advancing, senior and leadership roles across BFSI still remain male-dominated, limiting true representation in decision-making spaces.

➔ Limited Women Presence in Frontline & Field Roles

Frontline customer-facing and collections teams often lack gender diversity, driven by stereotypes around safety, mobility, and capability.

➔ Lack of Structured Career Re-entry Programs

Career breaks — especially for women — continue to impact long-term growth, due to absence of formal pathways for return and progression.

➔ Breaking Bias Beyond Gender

Transgender individuals and other marginalized identities face additional systemic hurdles in hiring, development, and workplace belonging.

From Intent to Action: Godrej Capital's Inclusion Programs



Strengthening Women in Leadership

Nearly 40% of CXO positions and 30% of senior management roles at Godrej Capital are held by women — a result of intentional hiring, mentoring, and leadership sponsorship designed to challenge systemic imbalance.



Frontline First: Expanding Representation at the Ground Level

Through programs like **WinS (Women in Sales)** and targeted hiring drives, Godrej Capital is reshaping representation in frontline business functions. In 2024 alone, 14 women, including 4 transgender women, joined the collections team.



SheRises: Building Community & Belonging

Founded in 2020, SheRises is an Employee Resource Group designed to create space for women and allies to connect, learn, and lead. Beyond fostering dialogue on wellness and financial independence, SheRises also actively shapes policy and supports women through every life stage.



Learning & Growth: Building Careers, Not Just Jobs

Programs like Headway (for mid-level women managers) and WiSE — Women in Sales Excellence (for early-career women) offer targeted learning, hands-on coaching, and peer networks that address both gender biases and skill gaps, ensuring women thrive in leadership and frontline sales roles.



Policy-Backed Inclusion: Safety, Support, and Progression

Godrej Capital's workplace policies are designed to address real-life needs. These include the *Caregiver Support Policy*, *Menstruation Support Policy*, *Travel Safety Policy*, and a *Gender-Neutral POSH Policy* — all aimed at fostering equity and safety, across all identities.

Measurable Impact & The Way Forward

➔ **Bridging the Leadership Gap**

Focused hiring, mentorship, and internal advocacy are helping shift the leadership narrative — turning representation into reality.

➔ **Breaking Barriers at the Frontline**

By challenging industry stereotypes, frontline roles are evolving into more diverse, welcoming spaces for women and LGBTQIA+ professionals.

➔ **Fostering Belonging, Beyond Policy**

Inclusion at Godrej Capital moves beyond formal structures — community-led spaces empower women to connect, grow, and lead with confidence.

➔ **Building Future-Ready Talent Pipelines**

Continuous investment in development ensures women across roles are equipped to lead, navigate challenges, and influence change.



The Way Forward: Sustaining Inclusive Growth

➔ **Deepening Leadership Pipelines**

Focused mentorship, sponsorship, and growth programs will expand women's representation in leadership roles.

➔ **Broadening Inclusion Beyond Gender**

An intersectional lens will help shape policies that reflect diverse identities and lived realities.

➔ **Driving Culture Through Everyday Allyship**

Embedding inclusion into day-to-day decisions makes it a shared responsibility, not just an HR function.

➔ **Listening, Learning & Evolving**

Continuous feedback and benchmarking will guide Godrej Capital's progress toward deeper equity and inclusion.





YES Bank:

Advancing Gender Diversity and Inclusion in BFSI

Yes Bank Ltd, one of India's largest private sector banks, has been at the forefront of promoting gender diversity and fostering an inclusive workplace. Recognizing that a diverse workforce drives innovation and business success, the bank has

implemented strategic initiatives to enhance female representation and create a work environment where women can thrive.

The Challenge: Addressing the Gender Gap in Leadership

Despite progress in gender inclusion, financial institutions have traditionally faced challenges in achieving equal representation across all levels.

Key barriers included:

-
- | | |
|--|---|
| ➔ Under-representation of women in senior roles , limiting opportunities for decision-making influence. | ➔ Work-life balance constraints , affecting career continuity for women, particularly after career breaks. |
| ➔ Lack of mentorship and leadership training , reducing the pipeline for women in executive roles. | ➔ Unconscious bias and workplace discrimination , impacting hiring, promotion, and retention. |



Strategic Initiatives for Women's Empowerment
Yes Bank identified the need to develop a facilitative ecosystem where women could engage, grow, and ascend to leadership positions. To tackle these challenges, Yes Bank developed a comprehensive work-life transformation agenda focused on multiple interventions:



01

Policies on Safety and Anti-Discrimination

The bank has implemented robust policies on sexual harassment, bias, and workplace discrimination. Regular employee training sessions equip staff with the knowledge to identify and counteract prejudices, fostering a culture of social sensitivity and accountability.



02

Professional Development and Leadership Programs

Through structured leadership courses, mentoring programs, and career development workshops, the bank nurtures women employees, equipping them with the skills necessary for leadership roles. These programs support professional growth and decision-making capabilities.



03

Flexible Work Arrangements

Recognising the importance of work-life balance, Yes Bank has incorporated remote work, flexible schedules, and childcare support facilities. These measures enable employees to effectively manage personal and professional responsibilities.



04

Recognition and Incentives for Diversity Advocates

Yes Bank acknowledges HR partners and managers who actively contribute to diversity hiring and inclusive management. Women employees are provided with cross-functional assignments, leadership training, and access to external professional networks to enhance career progression.



05

Step Up2 YES Returnship Program

Designed in collaboration with the **Aspire for Her Foundation**, this initiative helps women re-enter the workforce after career breaks. The program offers mentorship, specialised training, and career transition support to facilitate a seamless reintegration into corporate life.

Impact and Measurable Outcomes

The implementation of these initiatives has significantly strengthened gender diversity within Yes Bank:

➔ Improved Gender Ratio

FY 2023-24  21.8%

FY 2024-25  25%

The representation of women in the organisation increased to 21.8% in FY 2023-24, with a targeted goal of 25% by FY 2024-25.

➔ Recognition for Diversity Efforts

Yes Bank was awarded **"India's Best Bank for Diversity and Inclusion 2023"**, reinforcing its commitment to an equitable workplace.

➔ Enhanced Workplace Culture

Flexible work policies and leadership initiatives have fostered a culture of inclusivity, enabling women to seamlessly integrate into leadership pipelines.

➔ Success Stories: Empowering Women Leaders

Women employees at Yes Bank have shared positive experiences, highlighting the impact of these initiatives:

Step Up 2 YES Returnship Program Participants:

Women returning to the workforce expressed that the mentorship and career transition support provided them with the confidence to resume their corporate journeys.



Women Leaders in Senior Roles

The bank's leadership development framework has enabled several female employees to take on key decision-making positions, reinforcing gender diversity in leadership.



Flexibility and Career Growth

Employees have acknowledged that the bank's flexible work arrangements and leadership initiatives allow them to balance personal commitments while advancing professionally.



CONCLUSION

By embedding gender diversity into its core strategy, Yes Bank has not only enhanced its workforce composition but has also cultivated a culture of equity and inclusion. Through structured returnship programs, leadership training, and flexible work policies, the bank is setting a benchmark for diversity in the BFSI sector, ensuring that women are empowered to thrive and lead in the financial industry.

A person's profile is shown in silhouette, facing right. The interior of their head is filled with a vibrant sunset sky, featuring orange, yellow, and blue clouds. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white.

“

*Between ambition
and access lies the
system.*

*This compendium is
our contribution to
closing that distance.*

”





Ground up Insights ♦♦♦♦

Survey on women's strengths, biases and barriers

Understanding how women's economic empowerment (WEE) is perceived across genders is critical to driving real, systemic change. To probe these perceptions, we conducted a WEE perception poll across genders, focusing on three key areas:

- The unique strengths women bring to the workplace
- The most damaging biases holding women back
- The biggest barriers to women's economic empowerment

The Unique Strengths Women Bring to the Workplace

Participants highlighted several key strengths that women contribute to professional spaces:

Multitasking



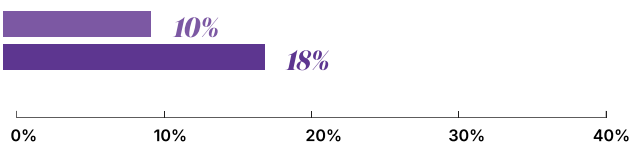
Holistic Perspectives



Empathy & EQ



Collaboration Skills



These insights emphasize that women bring a mix of emotional intelligence, adaptability, and teamwork — critical drivers of success in any organization.

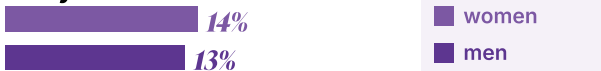
Workplace Biases Against Women

Despite their proven capabilities, biases—both overt and subtle—continue to hold women back. The poll revealed some of the most frustrating stereotypes:

Family comes first to them



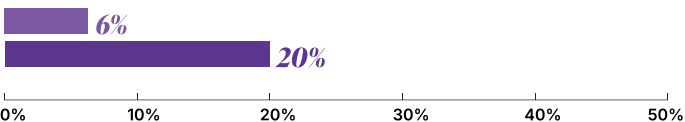
They are not affirmative



They are too emotional to lead



They don't walk the talk (not action oriented)



The fact that both men and women overwhelmingly pointed to the “too emotional to lead” stereotype as a major barrier signals an urgent need to challenge outdated perceptions.



The Biggest Barriers to Women's Economic Empowerment



Leadership bias



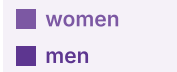
Unequal burden of domestic responsibilities



Gender pay gap



Limited access to mentorship



The clear identification of unequal domestic responsibility shows the requirement to drive championship of WEE not only within the office space but also within the confines of our homes.

The Road Ahead:

From Recognition to Action

The message is clear - While women's strengths are valued, systemic challenges persist. To move forward faster, we must:

01

Reframe Strengths

Recognize empathy, collaboration, and multitasking as strategic assets, not gendered traits.

02

Bust Biases

Confront assumptions around emotionality, leadership, and caregiving head-on.

03

Dismantle Barriers

To drive targeted awareness and advocacy campaign focusing on equal distribution of domestic responsibilities between the genders

Allyship starts with awareness—but must end in action.

The time for incremental change has passed.

Let's build workplaces where women's leadership isn't a rarity—it's a norm.

Straight from the Experts:

Overcoming Processes and Challenges

Understanding DEI as an Ongoing Journey

The discussion on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), led by Dr. Geeta Kumar, highlighted DEI as an ongoing journey rather than a one-time fix. Workplaces and workforce dynamics are constantly evolving, requiring organizations to remain committed, adaptable, and consistent in their efforts. Dr. Kumar stressed that there are no quick solutions, and persistence is key to achieving meaningful progress.

Addressing Policy Gaps and Ensuring Equity

A significant focus was identifying policy gaps, such as maternity leave extensions. While well-intentioned, these policies face challenges like maternity bias and high costs for organizations. Dr. Kumar noted that the maternity leave policy loses its purpose if there is a strong bias against hiring owing to pregnancy. She also discussed the backlash against the POSH Act, which initially focused only on women, and how progressive organizations are now extending protections to all employees. The importance of regular employee engagement surveys cannot be overstated as they are crucial in understanding lived experiences and ensuring policies are effective. She also highlighted the importance of pay transparency to address gender pay gaps, arguing that hiding salary information perpetuates inequalities. Transparent pay structures build trust and fairness, fostering inclusivity. Additionally, she pointed out that retaining employees is cheaper than hiring new ones, underscoring the need for effective retention strategies.

Creating an Inclusive and Adaptive Workplace

Psychological safety emerged as a critical theme. Employees need to feel safe, respected, and valued to bring their best ideas forward. This includes not just physical safety but also emotional and psychological well-being. Dr. Kumar emphasized the need for infrastructural development to create a

INSIGHTS FROM

Dr Geeta Kumar

Founder & Principal Consultant
Pragati, Partners in Progress



Dr. Geeta Kumar is a multifaceted professional with over 30 years of experience across various industries and cultures. Through her consulting firm, Pragati, she empowers individuals and organizations to realize their full potential. Passionate about holistic growth, she shares research-backed insights on DE&I, sustainability, well-being, and personal development.

supportive environment. Another critical aspect of workplace dynamics is generational differences, especially with Gen Z and Gen Alpha entering the workforce, which pose new challenges. The younger generations typically have different expectations regarding work-life balance, flexibility, and communication. Leaders must adapt to create inclusive environments rather than imposing traditional norms. Dr. Kumar also highlighted the unique needs of single women in the workforce, often overlooked in DEI efforts. She emphasized that DEI is not homogeneous; everyone has different needs, and organizations must be dynamic in their approach.

Addressing Future DEI Challenges: Caregiving and Support Policies

One of the most pressing DEI challenges on the horizon is the need for comprehensive caregiving and support policies that benefit both women and men. As workforce dynamics evolve, caregiving responsibilities are no longer confined to traditional gender roles—they affect both parents and individuals caring for elderly family members. Recognizing caregiving as a shared responsibility not only promotes a more equitable workplace culture but also ensures that employees are not forced to choose between their careers and personal obligations.

In conclusion, DEI requires continuous reflection, commitment, and adaptability. By focusing on employee experiences, addressing biases, fostering inclusivity, and being willing to evolve, organizations can create workplaces where everyone feels valued and empowered to contribute their best. The real question is whether organizations are ready to embrace this dynamic approach.

Dr. Saundarya Rajesh

Founder 7 President
Avtar Group



Dr. Saundarya Rajesh is an award-winning social entrepreneur and a respected workplace culture strategist. Founder of Avtar, she empowers women in the workforce and promotes inclusivity. With over 100,000 second-career women employed, she is a sought-after speaker and best-selling author, committed to fostering gender equality in workplaces.

Breaking Barriers: Challenges and Proactive Interventions

For years, women have faced systemic challenges in accessing leadership roles. As someone who has worked extensively in the field of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), I have witnessed how workplace biases and structural barriers continue to limit women's career growth. The key to breaking these barriers is proactive intervention-mentorship, second-career programs, and policies that actively support women's professional journeys.

One of the biggest myths is that women take career breaks and never return to leadership roles. This is simply not true. Through Avtar's second-career programs, we've seen thousands of women successfully reintegrate into the workforce. The reality is that organizations need to actively support women during transitions, rather than viewing career breaks as liabilities.

Beyond Hiring: The Importance of True Inclusion

Diversity hiring is not enough-true inclusion ensures that women feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive. Workplace policies should focus on flexibility, mentorship, and skill-building. Companies that prioritize gender inclusion see tangible benefits in innovation and profitability. There's an unconscious bias that leadership traits are inherently masculine. Women leaders bring empathy, collaboration, and resilience-qualities that drive businesses forward. At Avtar, we emphasize non-conscious bias training to reshape perceptions of leadership. The more organizations embrace diverse leadership styles, the stronger they become.

Mentorship, Sponsorship, and Supportive Policies: Keys to Women's Career Growth

Women often struggle with balancing work and personal responsibilities, largely due to societal expectations. Avtar's research shows that flexible work policies and supportive leadership make a significant difference in retention. Women should not feel the need to "overcompensate" - Organizations must create environments where balance is not just possible but encouraged. Mentorship and sponsorship play a crucial role in career growth. Women need networks that uplift and support them. Contrary to the myth that women don't support each other, I've seen first-hand how powerful women-led communities can help in fostering growth and career success. The future of work demands inclusive policies, diverse hiring, and a shift in workplace culture. Businesses must move beyond tokenism and commit to real, systemic change. Women are not just participants in the workforce they are key drivers of economic growth and innovation.

Key Insights

And Emerging Patterns

Challenges

Let us take a closer look at the challenges highlighted through these submissions. These challenges shed light on the systemic barriers, societal expectations, and personal hurdles that women continue to face in corporate environments. Exploring these challenges will provide a clearer perspective on the lived experiences of women professionals and the structural reforms needed to ensure a more inclusive and equitable workplace.



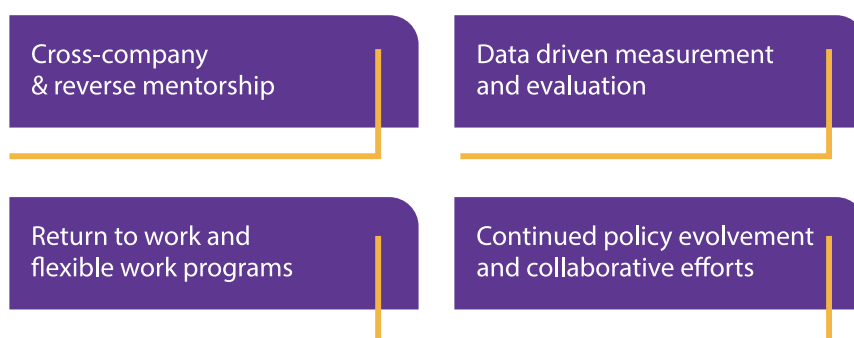
A combination of these interconnected challenges work together to significantly limit the professional growth of women. At mid-management levels, this impact is especially pronounced, as women face a heightened confluence of barriers, including the demands of marriage and maternity,

compounded by the dual burden of managing both professional and domestic responsibilities.

This overwhelming pressure often leads to increased burnout and, in many cases, higher attrition rates at this stage of their careers.

Solutions

One of the fundamental objectives of *womenAccelerate: Voices of Emerging Leaders* has been to focus on identifying creative pathways and solutions that can gradually diminish and eliminate barriers to women's progression. We received numerous insightful entries that spotlight innovative strategies, which have the potential to be implemented and scaled across organizations and the broader community, divided into proven interventions and new innovative solutions.



What real inclusion looks like across India

Success Signals

The results of consistent commitment are now visible across leading workplaces.



- 30–40% women in workforce is now achievable with sustained leadership intent.
- CXOs are co-owning DEI through KPIs and business-linked goals.
- Menopause benefits, caregiving leave, returnship policies are becoming standard practice.

What's helping companies shift from intent to action



- Reverse mentoring and allyship programs are shifting mindsets at the top.
- Pay audits and feedback loops are being used to flag and fix bias.
- Flexible work and inclusive spaces are improving retention for working mothers.

Key Gaps

The areas where progress still needs a push.



- Mid-career attrition persists — leadership pipelines remain thin.
- DEI remains urban-skewed; rural and non-HQ teams see minimal impact.
- Inclusion is still seen as “extra,” not integral to business success.

Call To Action ♦♦♦♦



This compendium through its holistic and all-encompassing efforts, aimed to highlight the strategies, insights, and nuanced perspectives

The compendium brings together all necessary stakeholders to a common platform not only to unpack the existing best practices in the ecosystem but also to highlight the gaps which continue to exist as barrier for women to reach leadership positions on a more regular basis.

Building on the challenges we identified, we put forward a set of actionable recommendations designed to bridge the gaps and create a more enabling environment for women to rise to leadership positions.

Recommendations For Corporate Organisations

Mandating **RETURN TO WORK** Programmes and Provision of Child Care Facilities

A significant number of women step away from their professional careers, especially after childbirth, often due to a lack of structural support in the workplace. To address this, private sector companies must implement mandated Return to Work programs that facilitate a smooth transition back into the workforce. These programs can be designed to offer:



Childcare Support

Offering on-site creche facilities or financial assistance for childcare.

Mentorship and Guidance

Pairing returning women professionals with a senior "buddy" to provide support and ease the transition.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Providing options such as adaptable work hours and hybrid work models to accommodate new mothers.

Caregiving support across genders

Promoting equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities by giving equitable benefits.



Encouraging Male Allyship for Empowering Women

DEI initiatives will only be truly successful if we have the full and equal participation of male allies. Organizations must embed male allyship initiatives within their DEI strategies. Conducting sensitization workshops, leadership training, and structured sponsorship programs where senior male leaders actively mentor and advocate for women professionals can help in creating an environment where both men and women come together to enable women's professional growth.



Reverse Mentorship

Reverse mentorship is an innovative approach where senior male leaders can actively learn from junior female professionals enabling them to gain insights into their challenges, aspirations, and perspectives. This initiative will foster a more inclusive leadership mindset and help senior executives understand the systemic and unconscious barriers that women face in the workplace.

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) for Women

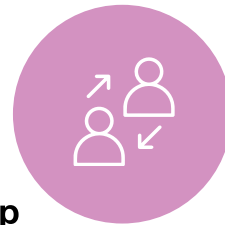
Formation of ERGs can provide a safe and supportive space for women employees, enabling them to thrive in a more inclusive and professionally conducive environment. By participating in ERGs, women employees can benefit from:



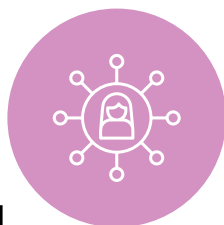
Access to Professional Development



Career Growth and Advancement



Mentorship and Sponsorship



Expanded Networking Opportunities



Enhanced Skill Development

Regular Surveys to Measure Outcome

To measure the efficacy and effectiveness of initiatives, corporates should also focus on:

Surveys & Employee Feedback Mechanisms

Regular organization-wide surveys to understand workplace culture, career barriers, and leadership aspirations of women employees.

Delphi Analysis

Engaging a panel of internal and external experts to identify systemic challenges, forecast trends, and recommend policy shifts.

Peer Benchmarking

Analyzing gender diversity progress across industry peers to identify best practices and set realistic yet ambitious goals.

Policy Recommendations

Subsidization and tax benefit on Childcare & Caregiving Support

Recognizing caregiving as a legitimate financial responsibility, governments can allow childcare expenses to be deducted from taxable income for both individuals and employers. This policy would encourage greater workforce participation among women by alleviating one of the key financial burdens associated with childcare. Furthermore, businesses that invest in on-site childcare facilities or offer financial assistance for caregiving support should be eligible for additional tax benefits, promoting a more inclusive and family-friendly work environment.

Release of Gender Equity Index

The government could mandate annual gender equity reporting for private sector organizations, requiring them to disclose key gender metrics across all levels. This reporting can include: Board & C-Suite Representation, Gender Pay Gap Data, Leadership & Management Diversity & Workplace Equity Measures. To enhance accountability, the government should publish an annual or biennial Gender Equity Index, ranking companies based on their performance in these metrics. This will help build credibility within the ecosystem and provide corporates of a worthy goal.

Precedence of such rankings exist in the form of NIRF rankings released annually which spans across public and private sector institutions



Incentives for Employers

The Government can consider developing tailored frameworks to incentivize companies to hire, retain, and advance women in the workforce. These frameworks should be formulated in a manner that it can be customized to the specific needs and challenges of each industry or sector while also aligning with broader economic considerations. Having a government mandated framework will surely act as an encouragement for corporates to incorporate gender-inclusive policies and initiatives.

Comprehensive Policy on Parental Leave

Recognizing that childcare is not solely a woman's responsibility, the government could go a step further by mandating equitable parental leave policies that encourage shared caregiving responsibilities between both parents. Key measures that can be suggested include equal paid parental leave for both parents, non-transferable paternity leave, and **flexible work options post-leave for both parents.**



Awareness and Sensitization Programmes on Equitable Distribution of Domestic Responsibilities

Similar to successful campaigns on financial literacy, reproductive health, and menstrual hygiene, awareness programmes can leverage mass communication strategies to challenge ingrained gender norms and promote behavioral change. Encouraging conversations around equitable domestic labor through media, workplace discussions, and community programs will be crucial in creating a cultural shift that enables more women to thrive in their careers.

Unfinished Business

The Ongoing Journey to Equality ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦



The Stree-Leads initiative is a transformative effort to uncover, understand, and address the systemic challenges preventing women from rising to leadership roles. By convening diverse stakeholders—from industry leaders and DEI experts to corporate organizations and working professionals—we have not only identified best practices but also illuminated persistent gaps that continue to hinder women’s advancement. The insights gathered through this initiative have reinforced a crucial truth: achieving gender equity in leadership requires a multi-stakeholder, multi-dimensional approach that reshapes corporate structures, shifts societal norms, and strengthens policy frameworks.

The recommendations put forth—ranging from **return-to-work programs, male allyship, and ERGs to government-led policy reforms**—are not just aspirations but practical interventions that, when implemented, can drive real change. Organizations and institutions must now take collective responsibility to translate these insights into action, ensuring that gender diversity is not just a metric but a lived reality in workplaces.



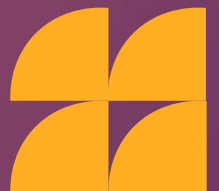
The Stree-Leads initiative has laid the groundwork for gender equity in leadership but real change will come only through **consistent action, shared responsibility, and unwavering commitment** from all stakeholders. It is time to move beyond discussion and drive tangible, measurable progress—ensuring that women are not just present in leadership but are empowered to thrive, lead, and shape the future.



“

Gender equity isn't a diversity metric. It's a strategy for better decisions, stronger teams, and sustainable growth.

”





“

*Innovation demands
collaboration, not division.
May we be more equal,
more united and create a
landscape that has a seat
for everyone, and faith on
everyone on the decision
making table.*



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