

Project Report



Empowering Women in Intelligence

October 2025

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The Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers (AIPIO) is committed to empowering women in intelligence.

The AIPIO 'Women in Intelligence' project – conducted during 2025 – included four lines of effort:

- One-on-one interviews – conducted during June 2025 – to capture their lived experiences of eight leading female intelligence professionals across multiple domains of intelligence practice in Australia.
- Primary and secondary research undertaken by Kearney – in support of its Women in Aerospace, Defense, and Security (WADS) initiative – to add an international perspective.
- A workshop of female intelligence professionals in Sydney on 19 August 2025, sponsored by Kearney, and held in conjunction with Intelligence 2025.
- An academic review of broader research on gender issues.

This report curates research, findings, and insights gathered during the 'Women in Intelligence' project. The intent is to inform and inspire future female leaders by outlining the core qualities and strategic approaches that empower women to professional success in the field of intelligence.

The *Introduction* by the President of AIPIO – Dr Phil Kowalick – outlines the background to the 'Women in Intelligence' project, the collaboration with Kearney, and the rationale for the establishment of the Emerging Female Leaders in Intelligence (EFLI) Community of Practice (CoP).

The first paper – *Australian Women in Intelligence: Stories from the Field* – draws from the professional experiences of several leading women in the Australian intelligence, security, and related fields. The professional experiences, captured during several one-on-one interviews, identify critical common themes such as the importance of non-linear career trajectories, service-oriented motivations, and adaptability in navigating the profession. The interviews consistently highlight the challenges related to gender-based biases – including systemic and cultural issues – and the diverse strategies women employ to achieve a sustainable work-life balance in demanding environments. The interview insights aim to inform and inspire future female leaders in intelligence by outlining the core qualities and strategic approaches that drove these professionals' success.

The second paper – *Success of Women in Intelligence can help Aerospace, Defense, and Security Sectors Boost Inclusion* – explores how women have 'hacked the system' in intelligence by addressing bias, demonstrating resilience, and shaping the field in crucial ways. Understanding the factors that have enabled their rise leads to actionable lessons for accelerating women's inclusion across aerospace, defense, and security (ADS). From creating a rich professional track for all to redefining what tradecraft looks like, the intelligence field provides a pathway for positive systemic change.

The third paper – *Findings from the Women in Intelligence seminar* – summarises key insights from a joint Kearney-AIPIO seminar held in Sydney on 19 August 2025. The key insights were distilled by the Kearney Women in Aerospace, Defense, and Security (WADS) Team from a survey of seminar participants, presentations by several distinguished speakers, analysis of the seminar workshop sessions, and the debrief with speakers and facilitators.

The final paper – *Women in Leadership: Current and Emerging Challenges Across Sectors* – explores structural, cultural, and individual factors limiting women's access to top leadership roles, such as gender stereotypes, unconscious bias, organisational policies, and work-life balance pressures. The paper also considers the impact of recent global trends such as digital transformation, hybrid work, and shifting societal expectations on women's leadership paths. It emphasises the need for systemic change, highlighting the vital role of organisations, policymakers, and communities in helping women achieve their full leadership potential across all areas of society.

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AIPIO



INTRODUCTION

“ The Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers (AIPIO) is committed to advancing professionalism, diversity, and leadership within the intelligence sector. ”

“ The purpose of the EFLI CoP is clear: it provides women in the intelligence sector with a structured platform for connection, networking, mentorship, and leadership development. ”

The Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers (AIPIO) is committed to advancing professionalism, diversity, and leadership within the intelligence sector. As President of the AIPIO, I have observed the remarkable contributions of women in intelligence. Still, I have also seen the systemic barriers that often obstruct women's progress in the field. The Emerging Female Leaders in Intelligence (EFLI) Community of Practice (CoP) originated from a joint initiative between the AIPIO and Kearney to bring together a group of emerging female leaders in intelligence for a one-day workshop, exploring issues and experiences in the delegates' leadership journeys. The workshop, jointly developed through 2025, drew on AIPIO's experience and Kearney's Women in Aerospace, Defense and Security (WADS) program, tailored to the Australian intelligence ecosystem.

The EFLI CoP was established as an AIPIO mechanism to directly address these challenges, amplify women's voices in our sector, and lay a foundation for a more inclusive and resilient intelligence community. Providing context by explaining the purpose, development, implementation, and future steps of the EFLI initiative highlights its significance as a key milestone in AIPIO's ongoing mission to support women in intelligence.

The purpose of the EFLI CoP is clear: it provides women in the intelligence sector with a structured platform for connection, networking, mentorship, and leadership development. Although women have always played vital roles in intelligence, they remain underrepresented in decision-making and senior leadership positions. The AIPIO recognises that representation alone isn't sufficient; empowerment also involves visibility, advocacy, and access to opportunities that influence the future of intelligence.

The EFLI CoP is actively working towards three main goals. It will build networks of support and collaboration that enable women to share experiences and strengthen their collective resilience. It offers structured mentoring and sponsorship pathways, ensuring women have professional guidance and active advocates. Lastly, the EFLI will nurture future leaders, equipping women with the skills, confidence, and recognition needed to take up senior roles in intelligence organisations across government, academia, private industry, and the broader security ecosystem.

The EFLI initiative was developed based on extensive international evidence indicating that diverse leadership provides more thorough analysis, greater strategic flexibility, and improved operational results. Drawing on global models from Australia's Office of National Intelligence, the CIA's gender integration reforms, and the OSCE's Gender Integration Toolkit, the AIPIO Board determined that a dedicated community of practice was the most effective approach to adapting these lessons to the Australian and regional intelligence contexts. Consultation with members and stakeholders confirmed a strong desire for a space where emerging female leaders could connect with peers, mentors, and sponsors. The CoP was deliberately created as a sustainable platform within AIPIO's broader professional ecosystem to ensure continuity, credibility, and alignment with AIPIO's strategic pillars of Professionalism, Partnerships, and Diversity.

The EFLI CoP has been developed through a staged and collaborative process, focusing on five key elements. The network was created to provide a dedicated forum within AIPIO, bringing together women from diverse sectors, disciplines, and locations. It offers mentoring and sponsorship schemes, connecting experienced leaders with emerging female professionals to provide guidance and advocacy. The AIPIO offers professional development programs that run in conjunction with workshops, webinars, and regional events, focusing on skill improvement, confidence building, and leadership readiness.



By including the voices of women leaders in AIPIO's events, publications, and governance, the organisation ensures that their influence reflects their representation, increasing visibility and recognition. Lastly, by incorporating ongoing assessment tools, such as pulse surveys, member feedback, and post-event reviews, the AIPIO promotes feedback and learning to keep the initiative flexible. Through these efforts, the CoP has already begun to shape the conversation around leadership in intelligence, offering real opportunities for women to connect, learn, and lead.

Our work is ongoing; the EFLI CoP has only just begun, and the next phase will focus on increasing impact and embedding change. To achieve this, we have identified five priorities for the CoP, including expanding its reach to boost participation across Australia and internationally, as well as ensuring that women in regional and underrepresented sectors are included. With a strong focus on sustainability, the EFLI CoP aligns with the AIPIO's transition to a Company Limited by Guarantee, ensuring continuity and governance support. Clearly, measuring impact is vital for any initiative. Developing transparent success metrics, including tracking the leadership pipeline, member outcomes, and evidence of organisational culture change, is essential. Building partnerships and collaborating with government agencies, universities, and international professional bodies to share best practices and expand opportunities is crucial to the EFLI's success. Shaping future research, supporting evidence-based policies, and academic inquiry into women's experiences in intelligence will ensure our initiatives are data-driven and adaptable.

The EFLI CoP is more than just a program; it symbolises a commitment to cultural change within the intelligence sector. By fostering women's empowerment through structured connection, development, and advocacy, the AIPIO aims to significantly enhance a profession that reflects the diversity of the communities it serves and is reinforced by it.

As President of AIPIO, I am proud to see this initiative gain momentum and become established. The path ahead will be demanding, but it is crucial. Empowering women in intelligence is not only a matter of fairness; it is vital for securing the strategic, analytical, and operational future of our field.

Dr Phil Kowalick MAIPIO
President, AIPIO

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Paper 1

Australian Women in Intelligence: Stories from the Field

“The primary aim of this analysis is to distil common themes, core qualities, and strategic approaches to inform and inspire the next generation of female leaders.”

Abstract

This paper draws from the professional experiences of several leading women in the Australian intelligence, security, and related fields. The professional experiences, captured during several one-on-one interviews, identify critical common themes such as the importance of non-linear career trajectories, service-oriented motivations, and adaptability in navigating the profession. A significant focus is placed on the role of mentorship and robust professional networking as vital strategies for success and advancement in the field. Furthermore, the interviews consistently highlight the challenges related to gender-based biases – including systemic and cultural issues – and the diverse strategies women employ to achieve a sustainable work-life balance in demanding environments. Collectively, the interview insights aim to inform and inspire future female leaders in intelligence by outlining the core qualities and strategic approaches that drove these professionals' success.

Keywords: Pathways, Mindset, Networks, Biases

Introduction

During June 2025, the career journeys of several successful women in the intelligence, security, and law enforcement fields were explored through one-on-one interviews undertaken by Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers (AIPIO) interns. While each interview subject's story is unique, their collective experiences reveal a distinct convergence of professional heuristics, adaptive strategies, and foundational leadership philosophies that have enabled them to thrive in demanding, high-stakes environments.

The primary aim of this analysis is to distil common themes, core qualities, and strategic approaches to inform and inspire the next generation of female leaders. The article explores four key thematic areas that define these journeys: the embrace of diverse and often unconventional career pathways; the cultivation of a strategic professional mindset; the navigation of systemic challenges and gender bias; and the deliberate architecture of personal resilience as a foundation for sustained performance.

Pathways into intelligence

It is a strategic imperative to understand that a career in intelligence is rarely linear. The professional origins of the leaders profiled demonstrate that there is no single prescribed pathway into the field; on the contrary, diverse professional backgrounds enrich the intelligence community by introducing a breadth of perspectives, analytical frameworks, and specialised skills. This diversity is not merely a demographic asset but a functional one, enhancing the collective capability to understand and address complex national security challenges.

Diverse origins

The varied career starting points of the interviewed women powerfully illustrate that aptitude for intelligence work is cultivated across a wide spectrum of disciplines. Subject A, for instance, began her professional life as a botanist, a field that hones crucial skills in systematic observation, pattern recognition, and empirical analysis. Subject D transitioned into intelligence after a decade dedicated to scientific research in medicinal chemistry, bringing with her not just subject matter expertise but a rigorous, evidence-based methodology essential for high-stakes analysis. Subject E's career began in insurance and statistics, grounding her in the core intelligence principles of risk assessment, predictive modelling, and data-driven decision-making. In a similar vein, Subject F's entry was shaped by strong family ties to law enforcement, which provided a foundation in operational realities and systemic structures. These unconventional trajectories stand in contrast to the more direct path of Subject G, whose career was driven by an early and focused interest in politics and national security, demonstrating that both deliberate and serendipitous routes can lead to a successful career in the field.



Commitment to service

Regardless of their entry point, a profound and unifying commitment to service emerges as the core motivator for these women. This dedication transcended specific job titles or organisational affiliations, manifesting as a desire to contribute to a larger purpose. Subject G articulated this drive as a need to "be part of the infrastructure that makes the changes" and to "contribute meaningfully rather than comment from the sidelines." This same impetus is visible in Subject F's ambition to "influence and change" policing systems by introducing new intelligence models. Subject A's decision to oversee immigration detention was similarly rooted in a desire to do something "hands-on and real," where she could feel a tangible impact. This service-oriented ethos was also a formative influence for Subject H, whose decision to join the Australian Federal Police (AFP) was guided by her father, a long-serving officer in the NSW Police Force (NSWPF).

Adopting a strategic mindset

Beyond their foundational motivations, the success of these leaders was propelled by a consistently proactive and strategic mindset. This was not a passive approach to career progression but an active, deliberate cultivation of skills, relationships, and opportunities. There are three key pillars of this mindset: a profound capacity for adaptability and calculated risk-taking; the methodical cultivation of professional networks; and the disciplined practice of self-advocacy and proactive influence.

Adaptability and calculated risk-taking

A career-defining competency evident across these leadership trajectories was a willingness to embrace uncertainty and step into unfamiliar territory. This adaptability was not simply a reaction to changing circumstances but a strategic choice that consistently unlocked new avenues for growth and impact.

- **Pivoting into new domains.** Subject F's transition from law enforcement to the intelligence profession was a foundational career shift that reshaped her entire trajectory. Similarly, Subject H embraced a significant challenge by moving into the Protection command, a role she acknowledged she had "no background in," demonstrating a confidence in her ability to learn and adapt.
- **Geographical and sectoral relocation.** Career growth often demanded brave personal and professional moves. Subject G made the "bold decision" to move from the non-profit sector to the private sector in the United States, a transition that expanded her influence. Subject A demonstrated similar courage by relocating to Canberra for a graduate program, a pivotal turning point that launched her career in the intelligence community.
- **Seizing unconventional opportunities.** Success often came from recognising the potential in roles that others might overlook. Subject B recounted her decision to accept an intelligence manager position in metropolitan police - an area not seen as a traditional intelligence stream - because it was an "opportunity that didn't necessarily look like the path you would take." This willingness to diverge from the expected path proved to be a groundbreaking move in her career.

The power of connection

The interviewees unanimously emphasised that building and maintaining professional networks is not an ancillary activity but a critical and central strategy for career success. This involved more than simple contact management; it was about cultivating genuine, reciprocal relationships that provided guidance, support, and opportunity. These connections took multiple forms, from formal mentorship to informal peer support.

Subject F powerfully summarised the outcome of this sustained effort, emphasising that through her global network, she could find answers to any question at any time. This network was not built by chance; it was the result of deliberate and consistent engagement, a practice echoed in the advice from Subject C, who stressed the importance of getting involved in organisations like AIPIO and actively maintaining contact with connections over many years. She noted, "you have to share, and that's sharing time together not just information."

“ A career-defining competency evident across these leadership trajectories was a willingness to embrace uncertainty and step into unfamiliar territory. ”

“ ...building and maintaining professional networks is not an ancillary activity but a critical and central strategy for career success. ”



“ Professional success in intelligence, as in many demanding fields, requires not only strategic acumen but also the resilience to navigate formidable systemic barriers, particularly those rooted in gender-based bias. ”

Further refining this strategy, Subject E advised seeking mentors who actively "challenge you and help you grow, rather than just people who are like you," underscoring that the most valuable relationships are those that foster development, not just comfort.

Self-advocacy and proactive influence

A final pillar of the strategic mindset was the learned ability to advocate for oneself, one's ideas, and one's career trajectory. Subject E exemplified this when she applied for an executive role despite her immediate boss's objections, grounding her decision in the firm belief that "you should always be your own strongest advocate." This principle extends beyond personal advancement to creating systemic change.

After being removed from a training opportunity upon announcing her pregnancy, Subject A developed a strategy to "support other women stand up," transforming a personal setback into a commitment to collective advocacy. Even when facing internal doubts, these leaders found ways to project confidence and grow into their roles.

Subject H spoke of experiencing "imposter syndrome" and adopting a strategy of "faking it till I made it." This approach, a practical application of the 'act-as-if' principle common in leadership development, demonstrates a conscious strategy to bridge the gap between perceived and required competence by actively leveraging network expertise to accelerate growth.

Overcoming systemic challenges and gender bias

Professional success in intelligence, as in many demanding fields, requires not only strategic acumen but also the resilience to navigate formidable systemic barriers, particularly those rooted in gender-based bias. Analysis of the participants' narratives reveals a persistent undercurrent of systemic bias that required a sophisticated and diverse toolkit of responses to overcome. This section explores their shared experiences of these challenges and the strategies they developed to confront, manage, and ultimately transcend them.

Acknowledging the bias

The forms of gender bias recounted by the interviewees were varied, ranging from subtle slights to significant professional impediments, yet they paint a clear and consistent picture of the challenges faced. These experiences included the "casual sexism" of being asked to take minutes or fetch coffee, and intrusive personal questions early in one's career, such as Subject A being asked, "When are you planning to have children?"

The bias also manifested in professional settings, where women's contributions were devalued. Subject B described the experience of being perceived as someone "there to take the minutes as opposed to actually contribute as a decision maker," while Subject D faced the implicit bias of having her ideas "ignored until repeated by men."

More severe challenges were also present, including Subject H's observation that her male counterparts "advanced faster" in their careers and Subject C's experience with "quite severe" bullying and harassment. These accounts, spanning different generations and organisations, confirm that gender bias remains a tangible obstacle.

Developing a toolkit of responses

In response to these biases, the women developed and deployed a range of sophisticated strategies. Their approaches were not monolithic but tailored to the situation and their position, demonstrating a blend of direct confrontation, quiet competence, and internal fortitude.

- **Direct confrontation.** Subject F adopted an assertive, zero-tolerance approach, particularly once she reached leadership roles. She made it clear she would not tolerate any "bullshit" and made a practice of "calling it out" directly, establishing a culture of respect for herself and for the junior women on her team.



- **Competence and professionalism.** Subject B chose a strategy of demonstrating undeniable competence. Instead of reacting emotionally to being underestimated, she focused on proving through her work that "I know my stuff, and I do know what I'm talking about," letting her expertise dismantle preconceived notions.
- **Internal resilience and self-belief.** Subject G cultivated a mindset of internal resilience by "acknowledging that others may hold biases, yet choosing not to let it affect their confidence or performance." This approach centres on controlling one's own self-perception rather than being defined by the prejudice of others.
- **Strategic perseverance.** When faced with promotion setbacks, Subject H responded not with resentment but with strategic perseverance. Instead of sulking, she chose to take "the opportunity to learn and grow," consciously using the experience to expand her capabilities and better position herself for future advancement.

Sustaining high performance

A career in the high-stakes environment of intelligence demands more than professional acumen and strategic skill; it requires a deliberate and sustained focus on personal well-being to ensure longevity and prevent exhaustion. The leaders interviewed understood that managing work-life responsibilities and preventing burnout were not signs of weakness but essential components of long-term effectiveness. The subjects outlined their strategies for building a personal posture of resilience, framing these practices as a core competency for leadership.

Defining non-negotiables

A common thread in managing the intense demands of their careers was the establishment of clear, "non-negotiable" personal priorities. These were not aspirational goals but firm boundaries and routines that served as the bedrock of their well-being.

- **Family-centric boundaries.** For Subject H, family was the clear non-negotiable. She structured her work life to ensure she was present for school drop-offs and pick-ups, demonstrating that personal commitments can be successfully integrated with senior leadership responsibilities.
- **Structured self-care.** Subject E approached self-care with discipline and structure. Sleep was identified as a non-negotiable, supported by a strict bedtime. She also set a monthly reading goal as an intentional strategy to reduce screen time and facilitate mental rest.
- **Intentional well-being practices.** Subject D built a routine centred on meditation, journaling, and exercise. Critically, she emphasised a shift in mindset from "pushing through exhaustion" to actively listening to her body's needs and prioritising rest.
- **Equitable partnership.** Subject G offered a foundational perspective, stating that achieving balance "comes down to the partner you choose." Her emphasis on equality at home enabling equality at work highlights the critical role of a supportive and equitable domestic partnership in sustaining a demanding career.

Confronting burnout

Recognising and managing professional exhaustion was acknowledged as a significant and near-universal occupational risk. These experiences ranged from acute periods of burnout that prompted the development of preventative 'red flag' recognition to ongoing struggles in managing the profession's relentless demands. All interview subjects reported that they had experienced it to some degree, underscoring the importance of both preventative and recovery-oriented strategies.

Key among these strategies were the practices of actively taking leave to decompress, using exercise and hobbies as a form of mental reprieve, and leaning on the support of trusted colleagues and managers. These strategies were not seen as luxuries but as necessary maintenance for sustaining high performance over the long term.

“...managing work-life responsibilities and preventing burnout were not signs of weakness but essential components of long-term effectiveness.”



Counsel for the next generation of leaders

The following counsel - distilled from the collective wisdom of the interview subjects - serves as an actionable guide for the next generation of women aspiring to lead in the fields of intelligence and national security:

- **Embrace every opportunity.** Be open to taking on roles that may seem undesirable or do not fit a preconceived career plan. As the experiences of Subject B and Subject G demonstrate, these unconventional assignments often lead to the most unexpected and significant career shifts, exposing you to new skills, networks, and perspectives.
- **Build your network deliberately.** Heed the universal counsel to actively cultivate your professional relationships. Participate in industry organisations, seek out mentors who will challenge you, maintain contact with former colleagues, and remember that networking is a reciprocal act of sharing time and insight, not just information. Never sever connections, as their value may become apparent years later.
- **Know your worth and advocate for it.** Cultivate the confidence to back yourself, especially when facing bias, negotiating for a promotion, or pursuing a new opportunity. Understand your value, articulate it clearly, and be your own strongest advocate. Your belief in your capabilities is the foundation for convincing others.
- **Stay curious and commit to lifelong learning.** The challenges facing the intelligence community are constantly evolving, and so must your preparedness for change. As advised by Subject A and Subject D, ask questions, seek to understand the broader context beyond your immediate role, and never stop learning. Curiosity is the engine of effective analysis and leadership.
- **Be confident to take up space.** Do not wait to be asked or to feel 100 percent ready before stepping up. True leadership involves taking initiative and contributing your perspective. As one participant advised, "speak up because your voice matters even if you feel inexperienced." Your presence and your contributions are essential.

Conclusion

The professional journeys of these women, while unique in their details, converge on a core set of qualities and strategies that collectively form a powerful blueprint for leadership in the field of intelligence. Their experiences affirm that there is no single, linear path to success in the intelligence community; rather, it is a field that benefits from diverse origins and is navigated through resilience and adaptability. The analysis reiterates the critical importance of cultivating a strategic mindset - one that embraces calculated risks, deliberately builds supportive networks, and confidently advocates for one's value. Finally, their experiences provide a pragmatic guide to navigating systemic challenges with a combination of assertiveness and perseverance, while underscoring that a sustainable career must be built upon a robust architecture of personal well-being.

“...there is no single, linear path to success in the intelligence community; rather, it is a field that benefits from diverse origins and is navigated through resilience and adaptability.”

Author

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Abstract

In an era of intensifying strategic competition and complexity, the need for diverse talent has never been more urgent. The intelligence community, long seen as opaque and high stakes, has emerged as a surprisingly successful example of female integration in the aerospace, defense, and security (ADS) world, including law enforcement. Women in intelligence have made invaluable contributions over the decades and risen through the ranks by mastering not only technical skills, but also the nuanced tradecraft of strategic insight, adaptability, and leadership under pressure.

This paper explores how women have “hacked the system* in intelligence by addressing bias, demonstrating resilience, and shaping the field in crucial ways. Understanding the factors that have enabled their rise leads to actionable lessons for accelerating women’s inclusion across ADS. From creating a rich professional track for all to redefining what tradecraft looks like, the intelligence field provides a pathway for positive systemic change.

Keywords: Intelligence, Aerospace, Defense, Security, Law Enforcement

Hacking the system is a strategic imperative

Strategic competition is reshaping the global security order like never before. Great power rivalries, hybrid threats, and technological disruption test the agility and cohesion of ADS institutions. In this environment, diverse teams are a strategic necessity.

Many ADS sectors use legacy structures where women remain underrepresented, particularly in operational and leadership roles. Sustainable inclusion is often elusive.

The intelligence community stands in marked contrast. Though historically male-dominated, pioneering women have successfully shaped national security outcomes over several generations. As team members, women in intelligence have provided alternative perspectives to better understand complex environments and shape strategy to influence them.

Their career arc has been remarkable. Early on, women became signals-intelligence experts during World War II at the renowned Bletchley Park. Today, they are found throughout intelligence agencies, including at the very top. Two of the three major agencies in the United Kingdom are led by women:

Anne Keast-Butler is director of Government Communications Headquarters and Blaise Florence Metreweli will be promoted to chief of Mi6 in October 2025. In Australia, Lieutenant General Michelle McGuinness is national cyber security coordinator, and Air Vice-Marshal Di Turton is the country’s first female military representative to the North Atlantic Trade Organization and the European Union. In the United States, Avril Haines was the first woman to serve as director of national intelligence (2021 to 2025), where she oversaw the nation’s 17 intelligence agencies.

The career trajectories of women in intelligence offer a unique way to assess how integration can work well, even under high-pressure, classified, and highly sensitive conditions. To that end, Kearney and the Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers (AIPIO) have explored women’s rise in intelligence and their impact on the field for this white paper. We include highlights from interviews AIPIO and Kearney conducted with women who have had rewarding careers in the field. We’ll look at the elements of intelligence’s culture, structure, and mission that have allowed women to thrive. Overall, we’ll look at women’s impact, not just as an exception but a powerful exemplar, whose approaches other ADS sectors can adapt and scale for more advantageous ways of operating in the future.

Paper 2

Success of Women in Intelligence can help Aerospace, Defense, and Security Sectors Boost Inclusion

“Many ADS sectors use legacy structures where women remain underrepresented, particularly in operational and leadership roles.”



Why intelligence has succeeded where other ADS sectors have struggled

The highly sensitive, classified, and covert world of intelligence has worked to the advantage of women in unexpected ways. With public visibility and recognition absent, and the success of missions paramount, the trappings of traditional work environments fall away and who a person is, in terms of their skills, intellect, and ability to contribute, is what counts above all else. Under such conditions, the intelligence community has recognized the value of women and their full scope of strengths.

Women's integration into intelligence work has not been accidental. Several conditions have made this sector more fertile ground for their inclusion than others:

- **The need for critical skills during major conflicts and high-stakes times.** In World War II, the Cold War, and with post-9/11 expansion of intelligence services, women have joined the intelligence workforce in important roles. More than 7,000 women were recruited at *Bletchley Park*, the chief locale for British codebreaking during the Second World War. Eventually outnumbering men three to one, they were instrumental in intercepting, decoding, and analyzing enemy communications and helped shorten the war and shape its outcome. From this early large-scale integration to today, where all Western intelligence agencies have programs to support women and many have been led by them, their contributions have become vital to security work.
- **Multidisciplinary entry points.** By its nature, intelligence now draws from diverse academic and professional disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and computer science. Women with these qualifications and skills have seen greater opportunity and access to meaningful roles without being forced into narrow technical pipelines, such as imagery intelligence.¹
- **Performance-first culture.** Intelligence strives to be objective and bias-free, ideally valuing output over profile. When accurate assessments and operational insight can shape national decisions, demonstrating results builds credibility. Women who have delivered true impact under these conditions have advanced.
- **Supportive leaders and internal networks.** Forward-thinking supervisors have championed rising women.² A landmark moment came in 1992 when the UK's Home Office appointed Dame Stella Rimington director general, a position she held to 1996. She was the first woman to lead a major UK intelligence agency, challenging long-held assumptions about leadership in national security. Such moves reverberate, including the evolution of informal support into mentorships and peer networks for women. The US's *Central Intelligence Agency* has supported formal sponsorship initiatives for women as part of its Diversity in Leadership program.

But integration has not been without obstacles. Women in intelligence have faced structural penalties, from opaque promotion systems to inflexible deployment models. Their progress reveals not the absence of barriers, but the ability of certain intelligence organizations to adapt in response to talent imperatives and harness the benefit of diverse approaches. In reference to intelligence collection, for example, Kirsten Baker, a retired US Army colonel, told US: "The conversations we have as intelligence gatherers change depending on our gender. Men, as assets or informants, have different conversations with female intelligence professionals than they do with males. So the talent imperative relies on the notion we can utilize all abilities to gain the full picture."

The experiences of the women we spoke to reflect the need for the enabling conditions we described above. Baker suggests it is the performance-first culture that will be the turning point—regardless of the sector or industry—instead of women being hired because of their gender. "The chief of public affairs in the intelligence organization I worked for told me that as the first female hired, it was my responsibility to represent women throughout my career. I said, 'No, sir, my job is to be the best second lieutenant I possibly can.'"

“...intelligence now draws from diverse academic and professional disciplines...”

“Women who have delivered true impact under these conditions have advanced.”

“Women have been conditioned since childhood to be good at networking...”



One intelligence professional believed she was more influential when placed near decision-makers or when serving as a staff officer to key superiors. Another, Louise Green, a colonel in the British Army, said “I believe my success in intelligence came partly from my serving alongside combat personnel. I was seen as credible because of it.” Others told us their success came from their own decisions to try new things, challenge traditional methods, and actively collaborate to solve problems.³

Women contribute to the full scope of intelligence tradecraft

Intelligence is often misunderstood as a purely technical function, an arena of encryption, surveillance systems, and cyber operations. But successful intelligence officers understand the essence of their profession lies in curiosity: the drive to explore uncertainty, uncover hidden patterns, and ask the right questions. Women have made vital contributions in these areas, due largely to the cognitive diversity they bring to the table. Creative thinking and high emotional intelligence-skills essential for assessing human-driven threats, addressing cultural nuance, and crafting messages that guide policy-often shape their perspectives. These are not secondary competencies; they are core to intelligence effectiveness.

Their creative thinking and imagination have turned attention to more types of risk. While traditional risk analysis often focuses on operational failure, women have emphasized reputational risk, political fallout, and the long-term implications of policy missteps. For example, former MI5 Director General Eliza Manningham-Buller warned of political ramifications from flawed intelligence on Iraq, and former CIA Deputy Director Carmen Medina challenged groupthink to prevent long-term policy errors. This kind of expanded view improves organizational strength and enhances the credibility of intelligence outputs.

Research shows that women have also excelled at adaptability, a prized trait in intelligence settings that operate in real time, across multiple theaters, and with high degrees of uncertainty. Whether briefing senior officials or coordinating covert operations, leaders’ success depends on the ability to shift gears quickly, respond precisely, and maintain clarity under pressure. Research on leadership agility found that women demonstrate strong adaptability, an attribute deeply linked to emotional intelligence. This agility supports intelligence functions where flexibility, resilience, and rapid decision-making are required.

Furthermore, women have helped redefine success in intelligence through collaboration rather than hierarchy. Many have spearheaded team-based problem-solving approaches, enhanced interdisciplinary coordination, and championed inclusive decision-making models. For instance, the former head of the Australian Cyber Security Centre and now director-general of the Australian Signals Directorate, Abigail Bradshaw, has been instrumental in shaping her country’s cybersecurity strategies. In her speech, “*Cyber Security in Australia-A Team Sport*,” at the Institute of Public Administration Australia, she highlighted the collaborative nature of cybersecurity efforts, emphasizing the need for adaptability in rapidly changing technological landscapes.

Ultimately, the success of women in intelligence is not due to fitting into pre-existing frameworks, but in reshaping them to better serve today’s complex security needs. According to Baker, women are conditioned to not only identify, but use and ultimately take apart, the networks that emerge in their work. They have made the profession more inclusive and effective in the process. “Women have been conditioned since childhood to be good at networking,” she believes, noting that this skill, which male intelligence officers often possess as well, is practiced more broadly and deeply by women.

“Networks can reference mean girls, which equals conditioning,” she continued. In childhood, females tend to join friendship groups or cliques, investing in these networks even if they don’t see them that way.

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“...the success of women in intelligence is not due to fitting into pre-existing frameworks, but in reshaping them to better serve today’s complex security needs.”



This skill later helps them as women find a place in society they may not normally be able to access due to traditional gender roles. "It allows us to enter places where we don't hold power or are seen as not having strength," she said. "This becomes critical when we are involved in intelligence. It prepares us to understand people, be empathetic, get in the minds of others."

Baker believes diversity of thought is one of the most important factors women offer when the goal is to reach targeted recipients. Decades ago, the male-dominated advertising world realized women held the purchasing power in most US households, so they revised their campaigns to appeal to them and their corporate clients thrived. Applied to intelligence, the analogy takes on even more gravity. "Take Afghanistan as an example," she said. "When you think about the country's complex nature and the role of its men and women, I think you miss 50 percent of the challenge of operating there if you don't have female officers trying to understand the women in that society."

Balancing trade-offs and breaking through biases

As holds true for women pursuing a range of traditionally male-dominated careers, success in intelligence can come at a price. Behind their achievements are trade-offs: delayed family plans, career stagnation during caregiving years, and the psychological toll of others' persistent underestimation. Yet despite the personal cost, these women have helped shift intelligence from exclusion to evolution, leveraging performance, persistence, and peer support to quietly dismantle outdated norms.

Balancing life with mission

High-tempo operations, irregular hours, and classified environments are often at odds with caregiving responsibilities. The Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) has implemented job-sharing and hybrid work policies to enable more women to stay in demanding jobs during caregiving years. These initiatives have helped balance operational demands with personal responsibilities, reducing mid-career drop-off. While such progress is recent, it reflects a growing institutional recognition that caregiving and classified work can be compatible. This shift has coincided with a historic change: in February 2020, Rachel Noble became the first woman to both lead ASD and head a major Australian intelligence agency, demonstrating how females can shape and thrive in intelligence at the highest levels. Her appointment was a powerful precedent, showing that women can lead in classified, operational environments supported by inclusive practices.

Similarly, the UK Intelligence and Security Committee noted in its official report that MI5 had seen an increase in female applications following the adoption of more innovative and flexible approaches to recruitment and working patterns, suggesting they weren't just supportive but essential for the hiring and retention of talent.

Challenging stereotypes and bias

Many women have faced entrenched assumptions that leadership equals linear careers or masculine command styles. By consistently delivering results and advocating for peers, they reshaped what credibility looks like. Some, like former Canadian intelligence officer Huda Mukbil, also challenged institutional racism and gender bias, sparking national discussions on equity in intelligence work. Others quietly rose through ranks, redefining command through emotional intelligence, coalition-building, and discretion. Women hacked biased assumptions not through protest alone, but by performing with precision and redefining norms, broadening leadership archetypes for those who have followed.

“...in February 2020, Rachel Noble became the first woman to both lead ASD and head a major Australian intelligence agency, demonstrating how females can shape and thrive in intelligence at the highest levels.”

“Women hacked biased assumptions not through protest alone, but by performing with precision and redefining norms.”



A global shift

Across NATO and the Five Eyes alliance, intelligence agencies increasingly benchmark gender inclusion, sharing practices, measuring progress, and collaborating on systemic fixes.

Exposure to diverse models through international cooperation has helped drive reform, even in more conservative institutions. In 2021, the UK's Government Communications Headquarters and the ASD participated in a cyber resilience initiative aimed at enhancing gender diversity within cybersecurity teams. This collaboration emphasized the importance of building inclusive teams across the industrial cybersecurity field, advocating for the empowerment of women and the integration of diverse perspectives to strengthen cybersecurity efforts.

The intelligence profession's gender progress didn't emerge from perfect policy. It came from persistence, institutional pragmatism, and the steady hacking of legacy systems. The result is not a flawless environment, but a functional one, where inclusion is visible and viable. At times, progress is felt at the individual level but contributes to a much larger picture when colleagues make new connections.

"At one point, my 'client counterpart' was a chief of police in the Middle East," said a woman we spoke with who worked in US intelligence. "He was one of two key stakeholders providing significant material for an assessment my team was compiling. In conversations with him, he told me about his family, his grandchildren, the flowers on his front porch. I doubt he ever told the men he worked with about these things. That's when I knew I was finally making headway."

Through many such individual successes and breakthroughs, the collective respect and confidence placed in women's role in intelligence comes through.

Our interviews also revealed women are approaching career advancement and discrimination differently now. "The biggest challenge was realizing I had been the system to letting others dictate my career path," said Rebecca Broad, an academic researcher at AIPiO. "I decided to take control and make decisions for myself. My ambitions evolved."⁴

While previous generations pursued aspirations discreetly, those now in mid-career are more assertive – taking charge and advocating for their own and other women's latent potential. They illustrate how success is within reach for women who back themselves and embrace uncertainty, that breaking barriers requires confidence and action.⁵

Women are also backing women. Although it has been some time since Louise Green went through recruit school, she noted that half of the cadets in her junior officer course were women. "We continue to get together to provide one another with connection, advice, and mentoring, whether or not each of us is still serving," she said.

A strategy for hacking the system to accelerate inclusion

To apply intelligence's lessons to other ADS sectors, organizations should move from ad hoc fixes to deliberate, new ways of working systemwide. To hack gender barriers means reprogramming assumptions made about recruitment, development, and advancement.

First, recruitment must target diverse talent pools to find mission-critical talent. Operational roles should be framed as intellectually rich and ethically grounded, not just technically rigorous.

Retention efforts need to go deeper than policies. Inclusive team cultures, psychologically safe environments, and flexible advancement pathways are essential to help all employees thrive. Employees should have the ability to step in and out of the workforce during different life stages without prejudice or disadvantage. Institutions should reward output over constant availability, especially during periods involving caregiving or health demands.

“Exposure to diverse models through international cooperation has helped drive reform...”

“While previous generations pursued aspirations discreetly, those now in mid-career are more assertive...”



“Women have done more than integrate the intelligence field – they have reshaped it.”

Retention also depends on recognizing the full spectrum of performance, where strategic curiosity, emotional intelligence, and team cohesion count as much as technical delivery. These attributes, while critical to success, are often overlooked in rigid metrics.

Mentorship and sponsorship must be formalized and tracked so programs can evolve. Retired US Army Colonel Baker told us she never had a formal mentor in her career. “There was one person who probably didn’t think of me as his mentee, but I considered him a mentor because he taught me so much in a couple of years.” Programs that offer visibility, stretch roles, and structure support for replication are essential to avoid reliance on informal access or the luck of finding an individual champion. Leadership development should begin earlier, before women become overqualified for the roles they’re being prepared for, ensuring they’re given opportunities to grow, lead, and advance at the same pace as their peers.

To sustain progress, organizations should understand their workforce and continuously assess recruitment, attrition, promotion, and job satisfaction, and commit to acting on the insights of such data. The intelligence sector made progress not because it eliminated bias, but because it prioritized mission and allowed new models of leadership to emerge. That’s the essence of hacking the system: change the code that governs opportunity.

Reshaping intelligence and ADS for the greater good

The journey of women in intelligence reveals a compelling truth: progress is possible even in the most rigid environments, when performance, persistence, and institutional adaptability align.

Women have done more than integrate the intelligence field – they have reshaped it. As the aerospace, defense, and security sectors confront increasingly formidable challenges, they cannot afford to overlook half of human talent. By applying the lessons from intelligence-expanding tradecraft, investing in retention, and hacking legacy systems – we can improve inclusion of all employees and strengthen national security. The future of mission success depends not just on who serves, but on how systems are designed to let them lead.

Endnotes

- 1 Ally Stodart – AIPIO Women in Intelligence Project – AIPIO interviews.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 AIPIO interviews dated June 2025.
- 4 Rebecca Broad – interview with Sam Rush – AIPIO interviews.
- 5 AIPIO interviews dated June 2025

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Context

This paper summarises key insights from a joint Kearney-AIPIO seminar held in Sydney on 19 August 2025. The key insights were distilled by the Kearney Women in Aerospace, Defense, and Security (WADS) Team from a survey of seminar participants, presentations by several distinguished speakers, analysis of the seminar workshop sessions, and the debrief with speakers and facilitators.

Leadership is shifting toward collaboration and empowerment

Leadership is moving away from directive, command-driven approaches toward collaborative styles built on empowerment, trust, and shared responsibility. Leaders today are judged not only by results but by the atmosphere they create and their ability to inspire commitment.

Integrity, resilience, and empathy anchor credibility

Integrity, resilience, and empathy were perceived by participants as the most critical traits for leadership growth. In intelligence roles, they are indispensable for sustaining credibility under pressure, making tough calls, and ensuring people feel valued in high-stakes environments.

Confidence, moral courage, and conflict management are key growth priorities

Workshop participants highlighted challenges around confidence, imposter syndrome, and conflict avoidance. Developing moral courage to address difficult issues, delegate effectively, and project authority is essential for stepping fully into leadership.

Balancing determination and flexibility defines effective leadership

Effective leaders balance willpower and resilience with flexibility and openness to advice. Increasingly, workshop participants also pointed to the importance of leveraging technologies like AI and analytics to strengthen decision-making without undermining human judgment.

Analytical rigor and stewardship safeguard professional standards

The workshop emphasized that excellence requires structured analysis, peer review, and continuous learning to guard against bias. In intelligence, this rigor ensures outputs remain credible, while stewardship means creating the right conditions and vision for others to succeed.

Paper 3

Key insights: Women in Intelligence

100% of survey respondents¹ believe that fostering a culture of psychological safety is either critical or very important for team effectiveness.

94% of survey respondents¹ believe inter-agency or cross-organizational collaboration is either crucial or very important for achieving comprehensive intelligence outcomes.

71% of survey respondents¹ either very frequently or frequently encounter significant challenges related to information overload in their intelligence work.

Only **18%** of survey respondents¹ feel adequately equipped to identify and address emerging cyber threats in their intelligence role.

¹ N=17.

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Paper 4

Women in Leadership: Current and Emerging Challenges Across Sectors

“ There is considerable evidence that women from culturally, racially, and economically marginalised backgrounds often experience double discrimination... ”

Abstract

The evolving landscape for women in leadership across various sectors highlights both ongoing barriers and emerging challenges that influence their progress. This paper explores structural, cultural, and individual factors limiting women's access to top leadership roles, such as gender stereotypes, unconscious bias, organisational policies, and work-life balance pressures. The paper also considers the impact of recent global trends such as digital transformation, hybrid work, and shifting societal expectations on women's leadership paths. Based on current research and sector analysis, the paper suggests practical strategies and policy recommendations for creating more inclusive and fair leadership environments. The paper emphasises the need for systemic change, highlighting the vital role of organisations, policymakers, and communities in helping women achieve their full leadership potential across all areas of society.

Keywords: Women, Leadership, Structural Barriers, Trends, Interventions

Introduction

This paper examines current and emerging challenges faced by women in leadership across various sectors. Despite widespread global efforts to promote gender equity, systemic inequalities persist and continue to impede women's advancement into senior roles. Using academic, industry, and government sources, the paper analyses structural barriers, organisational interventions, and broader socio-cultural forces that influence women's leadership paths.

The paper employs an intersectional approach to examine how race, class, ethnicity, and other identity factors compound barriers to leadership. There is considerable evidence that women from culturally, racially, and economically marginalised backgrounds often experience double discrimination, which further limits their career advancement and decreases their representation in senior leadership.¹ Within this context, sector-specific disparities are driven by organisational biases, limited access to development opportunities, and enduring phenomena such as the 'glass ceiling' and 'broken rung,' which describe the stalled progression of women at critical promotion points.²

Structural barriers and the burden of emotional labour are significant challenges, as gender stereotypes, unconscious bias, and entrenched societal expectations impede women's professional progression and can negatively influence their leadership styles and decision-making effectiveness.³ The workplace changes spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a complex landscape: the pandemic intensified specific disparities, but also acted as a catalyst for positive change by increasing advocacy for flexible working arrangements, enhancing recognition of emotional labour, and, in some cases, elevating the visibility of women in key leadership roles.⁴

Despite growing awareness and the implementation of targeted interventions, women continue to be underrepresented in senior and executive positions. This underrepresentation is partly attributable to a broken promotion pipeline, the lack of sponsorship, and insufficient access to career development pathways.⁵

Inclusive leadership pipelines remain elusive, even as organisations acknowledge the need for more comprehensive and sustained talent management strategies.⁶

By synthesising scholarly research and practical insights, this paper makes recommendations for strengthening organisational cultures and supporting institutional reforms to improve outcomes for women in leadership roles now and into the future. These recommendations emphasise the importance of intersectional approaches to diversity initiatives, the embedding of inclusive practices across talent development programmes, and the addressing of sector-specific challenges through targeted policy actions and meaningful cultural change.⁷



Structural barriers and the 'broken rung'

The 'broken rung' describes the disproportionately low rate at which women are promoted into their first management roles, marking a significant obstacle in women's leadership progression. This bottleneck at the start of the management pathway has far-reaching consequences, sharply reducing the pool of women who become eligible for senior leadership positions later in their careers. Industry studies, such as McKinsey's influential 'Women in the Workplace' report, reveal that for every 100 men promoted to manager, far fewer women are elevated to that level. This early disparity cascades upward, resulting in far fewer women available to progress into more senior ranks and helps explain the persistent underrepresentation of women at the C-suite level.⁸

Promotion processes commonly rely on opaque selection criteria and informal networks that tend to favour men, reinforcing unconscious bias at critical moments of career advancement.⁹ Scholarly research and industry analysis suggest that talented women are often undervalued or overlooked in these early stages, resulting in early attrition.¹⁰ Patterns of bias not only inhibit women's progression but also systematically favour those with existing social capital such as networks and relationships, which are often less accessible to women.¹¹ The lack of transparency in promotion criteria and the overreliance on subjective recommendations perpetuate these disparities.¹²

Intersecting disadvantages, such as race, class, caregiving responsibilities, or disability, compound these hurdles for women.¹³ These women report fewer mentorship opportunities and more disrupted career trajectories, with the leadership pipeline leaking talent at every level.¹⁴

For example, in Australia and the United States, women of colour hold only about 7 percent of C-suite roles, despite making up a far greater share of the early-career workforce.¹⁵ Women of colour are disproportionately represented in middle management, receive less pay, and frequently face penalties related to caregiving or cultural identity.¹⁶ These outcomes reflect systemic barriers firmly embedded in organisational structures and culture.

Even when women do succeed in being promoted, many are channelled into positions with limited visibility and influence and little route to executive-level advancement.¹⁷

Such assignments, often administrative or support-oriented rather than profit- or strategy-focused, rarely offer the exposure or opportunities needed for progression to senior leadership. While many organisations publicly support gender equity, entrenched behaviours and cultural biases in recruitment and promotion maintain the status quo.¹⁸ A radical rethink of how organisations design and manage leadership pipelines is needed for material progress.

Evidence from peer-reviewed literature and leading industry reports indicates that breaking the cycle of the 'broken rung' requires transparent, equitable promotion practices, sustained mentorship and sponsorship for women, including systematic review of role allocation at every level.¹⁹ Only by addressing these persistent issues at the systemic level can organisations hope to achieve gender parity in senior leadership.

“ The 'broken rung' describes the disproportionately low rate at which women are promoted into their first management roles... ”

“ A radical rethink of how organisations design and manage leadership pipelines is needed for material progress. ”

“ Empirical and qualitative studies indicate that women with access to mentoring develop greater leadership confidence and resilience. ”

Intersectionality and sector-specific challenges

In academic and industry literature, intersectionality is increasingly cited as a key conceptual tool for interpreting how overlapping systems of oppression jointly influence the opportunities, constraints, and leadership trajectories of CARM women.²⁰ Intersectionality recognises that gender operates in conjunction with other identity factors such as race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic background, and this perspective is essential for understanding the nuanced leadership experiences of women from culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) groups.²¹

CARM women often shoulder an additional burden of emotional labour, diversity advocacy, and representational expectations. Notably, research reveals that the exclusion of these women from both formal and informal support systems within organisations intensifies their burden of emotional labour, diversity advocacy, and representational expectations; these additional demands are linked to higher rates of burnout and disconnection.²² Sectoral dynamics further exacerbate exclusion. Industries with entrenched male dominance or strong patriarchal cultures tend to resist change, maintaining traditional norms and informal gatekeeping practices that prevent meaningful access for CARM women to leadership pipelines.²³

Evidence shows that many so-called equity initiatives in these contexts are superficial, with organisations failing to translate policy commitments into real opportunity or to dismantle structural barriers affecting women from marginalised backgrounds.²⁴ In such settings, the persistence of institutional bias and the valorisation of masculine leadership norms reinforce cultures in which CARM women either do not advance or must significantly adapt their behaviour and leadership style to survive.²⁵

Existing empirical data from studies in Australia and comparable jurisdictions show that CARM women are more likely to report feeling undervalued, facing pressure to assimilate into dominant workplace cultures, and having to work ‘twice as hard’ for the same recognition as their peers.²⁶

These challenges are often compounded by their exclusion from vital career networks and a lack of genuine mentorship or sponsorship within their sectors.²⁷ However, much of this research is qualitative, prompting a growing scholarly consensus that more robust, longitudinal, and cross-sectoral quantitative studies are needed to fully capture the systemic effects of intersectional disadvantage, particularly regarding career progression, burnout risks, and leadership satisfaction.²⁸

Mentorship, sponsorship, and informal networks

Early influences, such as access to mentors and visible role models, are instrumental in shaping women’s leadership pathways. During formative years, the presence of mentors and relatable role models fosters confidence, hones advocacy skills, and equips women to better navigate hierarchical and political structures in their careers. Empirical and qualitative studies indicate that women with access to mentoring develop greater leadership confidence and resilience.²⁹ However, such formative support remains unevenly distributed, especially among women from marginalised backgrounds, which inhibits their ability to envision themselves in, or ultimately achieve, leadership positions.³⁰

Research distinguishes passive mentorship – primarily guidance and advice – from sponsorship, which often involves proactive public career advocacy by senior leaders and a deliberate effort to secure high-impact assignments.³¹

Scholarship and case studies across industry report that when emerging female leaders are paired with influential advocates, the effects are tangible: isolation is reduced, women are more readily integrated into influential informal networks, and their visibility increases in decision-making spaces.³²

Sponsors, regardless of gender, are most effective when they explicitly champion women’s interests in promotional and strategic conversations within their organisations.³³ Sponsorship, mainly, is found to be more effective than mentorship alone in securing promotions and access to top leadership roles.³⁴



Mentorship and sponsorship, when designed with intersectionality and adaptability in mind, can be transformative. Programs that pair emerging female leaders with senior advocates of either gender help reduce isolation and integrate women into informal power networks. Sponsorship, in particular, which involves public career advocacy, is typically more effective than passive mentorship.

Despite increased awareness and organisational investment in such programs, access remains inequitable. Informal networks continue to dominate the leadership development landscape, channelling crucial career information, stretch assignments, and sponsorship opportunities.³⁵ These unspoken systems of power and opportunity provide men with more frequent and profound development opportunities.³⁶ Exclusion from these informal networks perpetuates inequalities and compounds pressures on women, particularly those from underrepresented or intersectional groups, contributing to performance scrutiny, heightened emotional labour, and burnout.³⁷ Marginalised women are thus doubly disadvantaged: deprived not only of mentors and sponsors but also of the informal social capital critical to career advancement.³⁸

Increasing equity requires interventions that bridge this gap. This includes robust, intersectional program design for mentorship and sponsorship, committed organisational advocacy from talent management and leadership, and structural reforms to dismantle reliance on informal, exclusionary power networks.

Organisational culture and emotional labour

Leadership cultures that uphold 24/7 availability, rapid decision-making, and personal sacrifice often exclude individuals who manage caregiving duties or community responsibilities. These outdated leadership ideals disproportionately impact women, causing elevated stress and burnout. Research shows that cultures prioritising constant accessibility favour those able to forgo personal obligations. Women, due to their disproportionate caregiving roles at home and in the workplace, are especially affected by such demands.³⁹

This strain is compounded by social and organisational expectations for women to balance work, family, and other duties, producing higher observed burnout rates among women compared to men.⁴⁰ The pressure to remain perpetually available, sometimes described as ‘work creep,’ has also been linked to poor mental and physical health outcomes for women professionals.⁴¹

Additionally, CARM women are disproportionately expected to act as mentors, advocates, and ‘diversity champions’ in their organisations.⁴² These roles often carry significant emotional labour yet little tangible support or reward, further increasing stress and limiting leadership capacity.⁴³ Such responsibilities, when assigned predominantly to women or distributed inequitably, reinforce systemic inequities and perpetuate uneven advancement towards senior leadership.⁴⁴ Academic and industry literature both suggest that compartmentalising diversity and inclusion work or placing its burden predominantly on women not only exacerbates burnout but marginalises the work itself and those who do it.⁴⁵

In response, many progressive organisations are actively embedding flexible schedules, self-care, and boundary-setting as legitimate facets of effective leadership. Normalising these as standard leadership behaviours has been identified as essential for retaining women and supporting their long-term sustainability in leadership roles.⁴⁶ Flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, job sharing, and results-based metrics instead of rigid hours, are shown to mitigate burnout and allow women with caregiving responsibilities to sustain their career development.⁴⁷ Evidence indicates that gender-diverse workplaces embracing flexibility see improved retention of female leadership and enhanced organisational performance.⁴⁸

Moreover, addressing these deep-seated challenges requires a collective reframing of leadership values within organisations. This shifts the responsibility for equity and inclusivity away from individuals and select offices and distributes it across all organisational levels. Structural interventions, such as transparent accountability for equity outcomes and collaborative, organisation-wide approaches to inclusion, have been recognised as necessary to disrupt exclusionary cultures and enable lasting change.⁴⁹

“Mentorship and sponsorship, when designed with intersectionality and adaptability in mind, can be transformative.”

“...many progressive organisations are actively embedding flexible schedules, self-care, and boundary-setting as legitimate facets of effective leadership.”



“ To achieve and sustain genuine progress, organisations must ensure that gender equity is fully integrated into leadership pipelines, policy frameworks, and evaluation systems. ”

“ Engaging men as active and visible participants in equity work is crucial. ”

Effective interventions: what works

Leadership cultures that demand constant availability, rapid decision-making, and personal sacrifice often exclude those balancing caregiving obligations or community responsibilities. These traditional expectations, deeply embedded in many organisations, constrain participation and disproportionately heighten stress and burnout for women, particularly those assuming dual roles in and out of work.⁵⁰ Academic and industry research demonstrates that cultures prioritising around-the-clock accessibility tend to advantage individuals without significant personal responsibilities, maintaining gendered disparities and reinforcing barriers to women's advancement.⁵¹

Progressive organisations are gradually redefining what leadership looks like by embracing flexible schedules, recognising self-care as an essential leadership trait, and normalising boundary-setting practices. Such shifts not only mitigate the risk of burnout but also improve retention and sustainability of women in senior positions.⁵² Studies have found that implementing policies such as flexible work arrangements and valuing results over presenteeism helps women remain and thrive in leadership pipelines.⁵³ These reforms represent a crucial step toward dismantling outdated ideals that equate effectiveness with self-sacrifice.

Added responsibilities, such as mentors, advocates, and 'diversity champions,' are often unrecognised in formal performance metrics or compensation structures, place a significant emotional and logistical burden on women leaders.⁵⁴ The expectation that women should automatically take on the work of advancing organisational equity further restricts their leadership capacity by diverting time and resources away from core strategic roles.⁵⁵

Scholarly work suggests that when the burden of diversity advocacy falls predominantly on women, particularly women of colour, existing inequities are perpetuated rather than resolved.⁵⁶ Only by distributing the responsibility for inclusion, equity, and cultural change across all levels of an organisation can progress toward true equality be made.⁵⁷ Systemic, transparent accountability for inclusive practices and a shared imperative for reshaping culture are essential for removing the barriers that have long held women back from realising their full leadership potential.

Policy, practice, and accountability

To achieve and sustain genuine progress, organisations must ensure that gender equity is fully integrated into leadership pipelines, policy frameworks, and evaluation systems. Scholarly and industry research highlights that best practice requires embedding gender equity as a foundational principle across business strategy and people policies, rather than treating it as a side initiative.⁵⁸ Consistently monitoring promotion rates from entry level through to senior leadership is vital for detecting bottlenecks and addressing points where women's advancement stalls, thus maintaining strong and diverse pipelines.⁵⁹

The development of accessible and transparent career pathways is another critical step for building trust and providing clarity regarding opportunities for progression. By setting out structured and visible growth opportunities, organisations help ensure women are not held back by opaque or arbitrary promotion systems and are empowered to envision advancement.⁶⁰ These measures should be reinforced by evidence-based anti-bias training, which is demonstrated to be most effective when it targets both awareness and behavioural change in order to achieve shifts in decision-making and reduce the influence of unconscious bias on selection processes.⁶¹

Engaging men as active and visible participants in equity work is crucial. Research strongly supports that when men are positioned as shared advocates, accountability is enhanced and organisational change is more likely to succeed.⁶² This helps to reposition gender equity as a core business issue, not simply a 'women's issue,' and redistributes the responsibility for progressing equity across the full organisation, including its leadership.⁶³



Organisations demonstrating measurable progress are typically characterised by high-level leadership accountability. Public reporting of gender equity metrics, reward systems linked to diversity outcomes, and transparent discussions of successes and setbacks foster a culture of learning and continual improvement.⁶⁴ In such settings, leaders are incentivised not simply for compliance but for active advancement of equity, further entrenching gender equity as everyone's responsibility.

However, persistent gaps in data about intersectionality, for example, constrain meaningful change. Without collecting and analysing disaggregated, inclusive metrics (that reflect not just gender but also race, ethnicity, disability and other identity factors), policy responses remain superficial and detached from lived realities.⁶⁵ Institutional commitment to gathering intersectional data is essential for anchoring policy and practice in evidence and ensuring that strategies reflect the diversity of women's experiences.⁶⁶

Future directions and research needs

While an increasing number of evidence-based strategies exist to promote women's leadership, significant gaps still need to be bridged to achieve more equitable and sustainable change. Future research in this field should broaden the use of quantitative, intersectional methodologies across various sectors and geographic areas, with scholars emphasising the ongoing underrepresentation of culturally and CARM women and the importance of capturing their experiences on a larger scale.⁶⁷ Such studies are particularly vital as they can demonstrate how intersecting systems of gender, ethnicity, race, and class influence the barriers and opportunities faced by women leaders, providing a flexible framework for understanding both progress and setbacks.⁶⁸

Furthermore, cross-sector and cross-regional knowledge sharing should be enhanced to better adapt best practices to local settings. The dominant sector perspective must shift from fragmented, one-size-fits-all methods towards comprehensive, system-wide reform.

Tracking the long-term impacts of leadership development programs is also vital, with recent reviews highlighting the need for systematic follow-up to evaluate organisational and individual outcomes over time.⁶⁹ While there is clear evidence that interventions can lead to increased confidence, better performance, and stronger leadership pipelines, insufficient attention has been given to whether these effects are equally distributed and lasting, especially for CARM women.⁷⁰

Furthermore, research and intervention should shift focus from individual outcomes to systemic ones. Moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach, leaders and scholars now support prioritising systemic, organisation-wide, and sectoral reforms that tackle contextual and structural factors.⁷¹ This involves analysing how organisational practices, norms, and power dynamics either facilitate or hinder equitable leadership outcomes and identifying mechanisms that can drive wide-scale transformation.⁷²

Central to advancing equity is prioritising the lived experiences of CARM women. Both qualitative and quantitative research show that focusing on lived experience reveals unique and compounded barriers such as racism, cultural marginalisation, and exclusion from networks. These barriers build up over time and across different settings.⁷³ Effective reform relies on capturing these realities and designing policies that are responsive and targeted, rather than broad and superficial.⁷⁴

Additionally, cross-sector and cross-regional knowledge sharing must be strengthened to support the adaptation of best practices into diverse local settings. Industry toolkits and academic reviews increasingly recommend robust sharing of lessons, innovations, and data across institutions, sectors, and borders, which can accelerate progress and inform more relevant, context-sensitive reforms.⁷⁵ The shift from fragmented initiatives to holistic, system-level change is now recognised as essential by practitioners and researchers alike.⁷⁶

“Central to advancing equity is prioritising the lived experiences of CARM women.”



“ The ongoing existence of phenomena such as the ‘glass ceiling’ and the ‘broken rung’ underscores the inadequacy of superficial diversity initiatives and the urgent need for systemic change. ”

“ True gender equity in leadership will only be achieved when organisations normalise flexible work, redefine leadership to reflect diverse experiences, and embed accountability for progress at every level, including leadership and boards. ”

Conclusion

Despite decades of advocacy and policy progress, significant barriers still hinder women’s advancement into and within leadership roles across all sectors. As this paper has demonstrated, these challenges are deeply rooted in organisational cultures, promotion processes, and broader socio-cultural expectations, and are intensified for women facing intersecting forms of marginalisation. The ongoing existence of phenomena such as the ‘glass ceiling’ and the ‘broken rung’ underscores the inadequacy of superficial diversity initiatives and the urgent need for systemic change.

Meaningful progress demands sustained, intersectional strategies that consider the diverse realities of women’s lives, recognising and addressing the compounded impacts of race, class, ethnicity, caregiving roles, and other identity factors. Opportunities for promotion and advancement must be actively reconstructed through transparency, targeted development programs, and strong mentorship and sponsorship, especially for women from under-represented backgrounds. Additionally, emotional labour and the often-invisible burdens of advocating for equity must be recognised and shared more fairly across the workforce: cultural change cannot be the sole responsibility of women.

True gender equity in leadership will only be achieved when organisations normalise flexible work, redefine leadership to reflect diverse experiences, and embed accountability for progress at every level, including leadership and boards. Importantly, men must participate as committed allies to share the burden of reform and accelerate meaningful change.

The way forward requires a decisive shift from individual “fixes” to a systemic overhaul. By intentionally redesigning organisational systems, genuinely investing in inclusive cultures, and collectively challenging entrenched power structures, we can dismantle longstanding barriers and unlock the full potential of women leaders across all sectors. The work will be complex and ongoing, but the social, economic, and cultural benefits of equitable leadership are too important to overlook.

Endnotes

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