

nma

NOIDA MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

(Affiliated to All India Management Association)



2nd NMA Women

Development Conference 20 January 2026

*“From Pipeline
to Leadership Position -
Accelerate Action”*



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About NMA

Noida Management Association (NMA) is an autonomous non-profit professional body registered under the Society Registration Act, 1860 and is affiliated to All India Management Association. NMA was founded on 22nd April 1989 it is a Management Think tank, devoted to the cause of promoting excellence in management through application of essentials of modern management principles and practices.

OUR MISSION

- a) To promote and develop management science education.
- b) To promote amongst members exchange of knowledge, experience and ideas on sound management principles and practices.
- c) To make available benefits of its activities and facilities to the public at large.
- d) To promote education in theory and practice of management and related subjects through meetings, discussions, lectures, research projects, seminars, conferences, programmes of studies, dissemination and exchange of information, experience and ideas, libraries, publication of booklets, abstracts, journals and periodicals.
- e) To collaborate and cooperate with other management associations or similar institutions in India and abroad in the task of advancing the aims and objects of the Association and also getting itself affiliated to any similar National and International body, if considered necessary.
- f) To take up case studies and projects works in any field of management including those specially required to meet the need and requirement of small scale industries which have mushrooming presence in Noida.
- g) To provide professional service/consultancy to its members or non-members. The activities of the Association shall be mainly confined to NOIDA & GREATER NOIDA area. It can arrange its activities at any other places or place as may be required.

MESSAGE CONFERENCE CHAIR



MS VEENA SWARUP

Conference Chair & Former Director
HR Engineers India Ltd

As Organisations move forward towards building a competitive edge through Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Aspiring Women Professionals need to step forward, focusing on strengthening their mindset, challenging themselves, navigating through stereotypes to achieve their dreams.

This Conference is a step towards preparing Women Professionals " From Pipeline to Leadership Positions-- Accelerate Action" and preparing Organisations through learning experiences & best practices in India & Overseas. Diversity, Equity & Inclusion is considered a Competitive edge today as Organisations focus on this as a mainstream Agenda.

The Conference Sessions are:

- Learnings from Leaders-- Their Journey to Success
- Diversity, Equity, Inclusion--A Competitive Edge-- Global Scenario
- Be Your Best Version-- Accelerate Action
- Gender Equity today for a Sustainable Tomorrow-- Accelerate Action
- Leveraging AI for Accelerating DEI

The Conference includes Panel Discussions, Plenary Talks, and Presentations where through discussions & deliberations the perspectives, thoughts, practices and experiences will highlight the issues and challenges and show case the Best Practices. An array of Eminent Speakers from India & Overseas, from Government, Public & Private Sector, Academia & International Organisations will share their thoughts & experiences. A lot of effort has gone into preparing for the Conference. The rich experience of the Committee Members and the untiring hard work by Team NMA has gone a long way in weaving the fabric of the Conference. I'm sure the Participants will benefit and have rich takeaways as practices and future solutions. I wish the Conference All Success.



Ms Veena Swarup



REKHA SETHI
Director General
All India Management Association

I would like to congratulate the Noida Management Association (NMA) on the organisation of its 2nd Women Development Conference. Over the years, NMA has played an important role in advancing management thought and encouraging meaningful dialogue on leadership and workplace priorities in the region.

The theme, “From Pipeline to Leadership Positions – Accelerate Action,” addresses a timely and critical concern. As organisations commit to greater inclusion, ensuring that more women move into decision-making roles requires not only intent but sustained, systemic action. By positioning Diversity, Equity and Inclusion as a competitive advantage – and anchoring the conversation in wider global perspectives – this conference adds depth and clarity to the larger leadership discourse.

AIMA has long maintained that leadership development must be inclusive and forward-looking, and our network of Local Management Associations has been an important partner in advancing this view. Conferences such as this help translate national and international conversations into practical approaches at the ground level, giving professionals the space to exchange ideas, share experiences, and explore context-specific solutions.

I commend the efforts of NMA in curating a focused and purposeful programme, and I am confident the conference will offer valuable insights to all participants.

My best wishes to the organisers and delegates for a successful and enriching Conference.

Rekha Sethi
Director General
All India Management Association

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



DR. YOGENDRA SINGH

President

Noida Management Association

It gives me immense pleasure to extend my warm greetings to all delegates, speakers, partners, and organizers on the occasion of the 2nd Women Development Conference, being held on 20th January 2026.

The theme of this conference, “From Pipeline to Leadership Position Accelerate Action”, is both timely and compelling. Across industries and institutions, women today form a strong and capable talent pipeline. Yet, the transition from potential to position, from participation to leadership, continues to face structural, cultural, and unconscious barriers. This conference is a powerful call to move beyond intent and dialogue, towards decisive and accelerated action.

At Noida Management Association, we firmly believe that empowering women to take on leadership roles strengthens organizations and society at large. Creating enabling ecosystems, mentoring future leaders, redesigning policies, and fostering inclusive mindsets are essential steps in ensuring that women not only enter the leadership pipeline but also rise, lead, and influence with confidence and authority.

I commend the organizing team for curating a platform that brings together thought leaders, professionals, academicians, and change-makers to deliberate, share best practices, and inspire collective responsibility. Such forums play a vital role in shaping mindsets and translating ideas into impactful outcomes.

I am confident that the deliberations and insights emerging from this conference will contribute meaningfully to advancing women's leadership and embedding DEI principles into our institutions.

I wish the 2nd Women Development Conference every success and hope it serves as a catalyst for meaningful change-transforming aspiration into action, and potential into leadership.

With Best Wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dr. Singh', written over a white background.

Dr. Yogendra Singh



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From Readiness to Responibility: Accelerating Women into Leadership Roles

Ms. Seema Bangia

For over two decades, organisations across the world have invested consciously in building a strong pipeline of women professionals. Entry- and mid-level roles in many sectors today show healthy representation of women, often matching or even exceeding that of men. Yet, as one scans leadership corridors, boardrooms, and executive committees, the numbers thin dramatically. The promise of the "pipeline" has not translated into proportional leadership presence.

This persistent gap forces us to ask an uncomfortable but necessary question: Is the problem really about the pipeline - or about what happens after?

The theme "Accelerate Action" urges us to move beyond intent, beyond incremental change, and beyond comforting narratives of "it will happen over time." Time alone has not solved this problem. What is required is decisive, systemic, and courageous action - from organisations and from women themselves.

The Leaky Pipeline: Why Progress Slows at the Leadership Threshold

The metaphor of the "leaky pipeline" is frequently used to explain women's under representation in leadership. While the metaphor is accurate, it often oversimplifies the issue. Women do not exit the pipeline en masse due to lack of ambition or competence. Instead, they encounter invisible barriers at transition points - from individual contributor to manager, from manager to leader, and from leader to enterprise decision-maker.

Research consistently highlights several contributing factors: unconscious bias, lack of sponsorship, skewed definitions of leadership readiness, and disproportionate caregiving responsibilities. However, what is less openly discussed is how organizational systems themselves perpetuate these barriers. Leadership frameworks, performance metrics, succession planning processes, and informal networks were largely designed in a different era - one where leadership followed linear, uninterrupted, and full-time career paths. In practice, women are often assessed on proof - what they have already done - while men are assessed on potential - what they could do. Women are encouraged to be "fully ready" before stepping up, while men are encouraged to "learn on the job." These subtle yet powerful differences slow progression and reinforce risk-averse talent decisions when it comes to women.

If acceleration is the goal, then organisations must stop treating stalled progression as an individual issue and recognize it as a systemic design challenge.

Systemic Support: Moving Beyond Policy to Culture

Over the years, organisations have introduced a wide range of policies to support women at work-flexible working arrangements, maternity and parental benefits, return-to-work programs, diversity statements, and inclusion charters. These are important and necessary. Yet, policy presence has not automatically translated into leadership parity.

The reason is simple but often overlooked: policies create permission, culture determines behaviour.

In my experience as a senior HR leader and coach, the most critical career-defining decisions rarely sit neatly within policy documents. They emerge in informal conversations - who is nominated for a stretch role, who is

“ready” for a leadership position, who is given the benefit of doubt after a failure, and who is quietly passed over. These decisions reflect organisational culture far more than formal policy. Culture shows up in talent reviews where women are described as “reliable” or “hard-working” while men are labelled “strategic” or “future-ready.” It shows up when flexibility is interpreted as lack of ambition, or when assertiveness in women is seen as aggression. It shows up when sponsorship is extended selectively rather than systematically. Accelerating women into leadership requires a deliberate shift from policy compliance to culture-driven inclusion - where everyday decisions actively reinforce equity rather than erode it.

Why Acceleration Must Be Top-Down

One of the most common reasons diversity initiatives fail to gain traction is the assumption that cultural change can be driven bottom-up or delegated entirely to HR. While HR can design frameworks and facilitate conversations, culture does not change unless leadership owns it visibly and consistently. A top-down approach is not about control; it is about clarity and commitment. When CEOs and senior leadership teams openly champion gender-balanced leadership, ask uncomfortable questions in talent discussions, and role-model sponsorship, the organisation receives a powerful signal: this matters.

Top-down acceleration means:

Diversity outcomes are reviewed with the same rigour as financial outcomes Leadership teams are held accountable for the strength and diversity of their succession pipelines Gender representation is discussed not as a “women’s issue” but as a business and leadership imperative
When senior leaders personally sponsor high-potential women, challenge biased assessments, and insist on fair exposure to critical roles, progress accelerates organically. Without this visible ownership, diversity efforts remain fragmented, optional, and slow.

Line Managers: The Real Gatekeepers of Leadership

While strategy and intent may be set at the top, careers are shaped at the line manager level. The immediate manager is often the single biggest accelerator or blocker in a woman’s leadership journey. Yet, in many organisations, grooming women leaders remains an unspoken expectation rather than a formal responsibility.

Line managers decide:

- Who gets visibility with senior leadership
 - Who is nominated for high-impact assignments
 - Who receives honest developmental feedback
 - Who is protected during setbacks
- Despite this influence, people managers are rarely evaluated on who they develop - only on what they deliver. As a result, talent development, particularly of women, becomes discretionary. If organisations are serious about accelerating action, grooming women leaders must become mandatory, measurable, and rewarded. This requires:
- Making talent development a core leadership competency
 - Holding managers accountable for developing diverse successors
 - Linking leadership effectiveness to people outcomes, not just business results
 - When line managers understand that developing women leaders is not optional but expected, behaviour shifts.
 - Stretch opportunities become more evenly distributed, sponsorship becomes more intentional, and leadership readiness is viewed through a broader, fairer lens.



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From Mentorship to Sponsorship: Shifting the Equation

Over the years, women have been generously offered mentorship - advice, guidance, and support. While mentoring has value, it does not, by itself, move women into leadership roles. What accelerates careers is sponsorship - advocacy by those in positions of power.

Sponsors do not just advise; they:

Speak up for talent in closed-room discussions

Put their reputation behind a candidate

Create access to critical opportunities

In many organisations, sponsorship operates informally and unevenly, often benefiting those who already resemble existing leadership. Accelerating action requires making sponsorship visible, intentional, and equitable.

Organisations must move from relying on informal networks to building systems of sponsorship, where senior leaders are encouraged - and expected - to back high-potential women actively.

What Women Must Do Differently: From Excellence to Influence

While systemic change is essential, acceleration also requires women to exercise agency within the system. Many women professionals operate from a belief that excellence will eventually be noticed and rewarded. Unfortunately, leadership progression does not always work that way.

From my coaching experience, the transition to leadership often requires women to shift:

From doing to deciding

From being reliable to being visible

From waiting to be asked to stating aspiration clearly

Women must learn to claim ambition unapologetically, take strategic risks, and build networks of influence - not just support. This is not about changing who they are, but about expanding how they operate within power structures.

Confidence gaps are frequently discussed, but the real issue is often a credibility gap - not in capability, but in perception. Owning one's narrative, articulating readiness, and seeking sponsorship are critical accelerators.

Coaching and Ecosystems as Accelerators

Coaching plays a powerful role in helping women navigate the transition from pipeline to leadership. Not as a tool to "fix" women, but as a space to support identity shifts - from expert to leader, from contributor to influencer.

Equally important are ecosystems - peer networks, communities, and role models - that normalise women's leadership journeys and provide perspective, encouragement, and challenge.

Acceleration does not happen in isolation. It happens when women are supported by systems, leaders, managers, coaches, and communities working in alignment.

From Intent to Impact: A Call to Accelerate Action

The journey from pipeline to leadership is not a matter of time; it is a matter of choice. Organisations must choose to redesign systems, shift culture, and hold leaders accountable. Line managers must choose to groom and sponsor talent deliberately. Women must choose to step into influence with clarity and courage.

Accelerating action means moving beyond good intentions to measurable outcomes. It means recognising that leadership parity is not only a moral or social imperative, but a strategic one.

When systemic support replaces symbolic gestures, when culture reinforces policy, and when leadership accountability becomes non-negotiable, the pipeline will finally fulfil its promise.

Women will not just be present - they will lead.

From Pipeline to Leadership Position- Leadership is an Ongoing Process of Learning

Anita Y. Tang

Managing Director, Royal Roots Global Inc. Fellow
World Academy of Productivity Science

Leaders are not only born, but they are also made.

Leadership is often characterized as being 30 percent innate and 70 percent developed. Regardless of whether you are a leader at home, in an educational setting, or in a professional environment, there are typically pathways or various avenues that can lead you to that position. In the workplace, specifically, it requires significant learning, experience, dedication, opportunities, and much more to enter the realm of leadership.

Leadership, I contend, is an ongoing process of learning.

Different Leaders Have Different Leadership Styles

Many of us began our careers in entry-level positions and progressed to more advanced roles. Some individuals are generous enough to share their knowledge and offer guidance that can enhance our work. However, rather than solely relying on the goodwill of others, we should be proactive in observing and learning independently whenever feasible. The positive aspect is that there is an endless supply of information available online that we can utilize; the important caveat is to ensure that we verify the reliability of the information we encounter.

When there is a leader, there are followers. Within a professional environment, a leader typically oversees a team. Leadership styles vary among individuals. Some adopt an autocratic approach, exercising absolute authority and merely requiring the team to execute assigned tasks; others may employ a *laissez-faire* style, allowing freedom with minimal guidance or intervention; while some leaders prefer a democratic style, fostering teamwork through clearly defined task ownership and responsibilities.

I have consistently preferred the democratic leadership style since the beginning of my career and continue to do so to this day.

This leadership style emphasizes teamwork, shared responsibility, and open communication. Instead of making decisions on their own, democratic leaders involve team members in discussions, encourage them to share ideas, and consider different viewpoints before deciding what to do. Although the leader still guides the group and makes final decisions, when necessary, each member has a clear role and feels valued. As a result, this approach builds trust, increases motivation, and creates a strong sense of ownership, since team members understand how their contributions support the group's success.

I firmly believe that this approach to leadership can enhance the leader's effectiveness and equip team members for their future leadership roles. I have personally benefited from this leadership style since the beginning of my career, which has contributed to my current position.

Impacts of My Leadership Approach

I am sharing a case I experienced in Mainland China in the early 2000s. I was then the head of the U.S. office of a startup consulting firm in China. During its inaugural year, the China headquarters successfully recruited over 40 individuals, a significant number of whom possessed prior experience rather than being recent graduates. I received an invitation to participate in a marketing strategy meeting. I entered the room midway through the session. After hearing several discussions, I was requested to provide some input. As soon as I finished speaking, the meeting was adjourned, and everyone departed. Unaware of the preceding discussions, I inquired with the head of marketing about it. The response was straightforward: "The boss spoke, so that was the decision."



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I asked the head of marketing to call everyone back into the room and explain to them what I expected: Everyone shared their inputs,

My position could be with points 1, 2, and 3, while there could be others with points a, b, c, or more,

We narrowed down areas to focus on and build a strategy from there,

We might conclude with options 1, a, and b, which will form our strategy. Everyone needs to commit fully to our objective rather than voicing complaints and not dedicating their full effort to the project, because any reluctance from a team member could affect the project's success.

Everyone appeared to be in sync.

The project went well. The team was happy.

I came back to the United States. One day, I received a call from the head of operations at headquarters inquiring about what I had done to his team. I was taken aback and requested further details. He explained that his team had stopped following his directives and began to express their own opinions. I recounted to him how I managed the marketing strategy meeting and the project during my time in China.

What I have Learned from this Case

I gained significant insights from this case, encompassing not only the success of a project but also aspects such as work culture, communication, and relationship management, among others.

Had I been aware of the decision-making hierarchy, I could have shared my 1, 2, 3 and a, b, c theory with the team during the initial discussion, rather than needing to reconvene them later.

I should have informed them that I adopt a democratic leadership style, although this may not align with the approach of every leader within the organization. Would I convey this leadership style to my colleagues in the firm to prevent the need for a follow-up call? It may be either, given that each leader possesses his/her own effective leadership style.

You are A Leader – Not a Female or a Male Leader

In her article, "The Double Standard for Women at Work," Sara Yahia noted: "Women in leadership live this reality every day. No matter how competent, intelligent, or accomplished we are, we are constantly measured against impossible, contradictory standards. We are told to be confident, but not intimidating. To be warm, but not weak. To be ambitious, but not aggressive. And while men are judged primarily on their skills, we are judged on everything: from the way we speak to the way we dress to whether we smile 'enough'."

Regardless of your actions, there will always be individuals who commend you, while others may not. To me, being a fair or just leader is of utmost importance.

I refrain from showing favoritism. I focus on fostering teamwork and offer individuals the chance to contribute, excel, and stand out. As a leader, my effectiveness is directly tied to that of my team. I take responsibility for both successes and failures, rather than claiming success for myself and attributing failure to my team.

My leadership is defined by merit, not by gender.

Communication is a Two-way Street Communication is a two-way process that requires both clear delivery and active understanding. Giving instructions alone is not enough – true communication occurs only when the message is understood, acknowledged, and acted upon. It depends on active listening, asking questions, providing feedback, and remaining open to different perspectives. In leadership, particularly within a democratic framework, two-way communication fosters trust and clarity, minimizes misunderstandings, and guarantees that all individuals feel

acknowledged and valued. When leaders and team members participate in open dialogue, collaboration is enhanced, and the likelihood of achieving goals increases.

Throughout my over 40 years of professional experience in various roles, I have discovered that effective two-way communication is a crucial element in both leadership and teamwork. While it is not an oversimplification, active listening, understanding your position, and articulating your questions clearly are fundamental components of effective communication.

Active Listening

“Hearing is a passive physiological process of perceiving sound, while listening is an active, intentional process that involves understanding and interpreting those sounds.”

We need to first cultivate the ability to listen with an open mind without confining our focus to a specific context.

For instance, when a colleague remarked, “he did not arrive early to work.” Many might interpret this as “he was late arriving at work.” Correct? But what if he was actually on time — neither early nor late?

By engaging in active listening, we can more effectively assess and interpret the message, leading to a more informed conclusion or course of action.

Understand Your Position

In both team environments and various other business or social contexts, understanding our roles and responsibilities is crucial. It is essential to recognize the limits — knowing when to take the initiative and when to provide support or step back.

Women with high potential typically exhibit confidence. Nevertheless, there are occasions when their confidence may lead them to overstep boundaries and openly confront others, potentially jeopardizing relationships. Various environments possess distinct dynamics; thus, there is no universal strategy for success in every situation. While it is essential to assert ourselves, it is equally important to cultivate respect.

Cross culture Academy put forward a short article, “Saving Face, Giving Face, Losing Face,” where it asserted that “To respect somebody else’s face is as important as to save face. Anyone who once has lost face can’t gain it back that easily.” This is extremely true in many Asian cultures.

Articulate Your Questions Clearly

We all have demanding schedules. Time spent on one activity reduces the time available for others. Optimizing our time and that of others requires us to pose clear, precise questions.

Well-defined questions result in precise answers. A well-phrased question reduces the likelihood of misinterpretation, thereby conserving time for all parties involved by eliminating the need for repeated clarifications regarding the information sought. This practice enhances communication.

This is especially important in contexts that involve different languages and cultures.

Here is a story from approximately 20 years ago. A friend of mine from Asia visited Chicago, and I presented him with a Kellogg sweatshirt. He was so fond of the sweatshirt that he decided to wear it right away to an afternoon tea gathering with one of my Kellogg classmates. Upon seeing my friend, my American classmate asked, “Did you go to Kellogg?” My friend replied, “Yes.” In fact, my classmate was asking whether my friend had attended the Kellogg School, whereas my friend interpreted the question as confirming his visit to the Kellogg campus. Neither party was at fault; the meaning and interpretation of a term widely accepted in one culture can differ in another.

This event prompted me to be more conscious of the language and word selection, as well as the importance of considering individuals’ backgrounds, to prevent avoidable misunderstandings.



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Finding “Balance”

The same question frequently arises during events centered on women – “What about Work-Life Balance?”

In one of the panel discussions held in the United States, when this inquiry was posed, a fellow panelist directed this question to all of us on the panel: “How many of us here have children?” Only one out of the four panelists had children.

In another panel discussion, also in the United States, one of the panelists expressed her pursuit of work-work balance rather than work-life balance. She attempted to assimilate with her male colleagues by exclusively donning pantsuits.

These are personal choices on “balance.”

The response from a senior female leader at Kraft regarding the work-life balance question resonated with me, and I always enjoy sharing it with others. She indicated that there are numerous aspirations we wish to fulfill in life. Instead of attempting to fit them all into a brief time frame, we might consider laying them out and deciding at which points in our lives we wish to pursue them. This way, we can achieve a balance.

Don't let general definitions of work-life balance dictate your choices; define your own.

Finding balance is even more important in a leadership role, as it allows you to help your team establish a balance that works for each of them.

"Diversity, Equity, Inclusion - Competitive Edge - Global perspective"

Gender equality and women's participation are human rights and an economic imperative

Iiris Määttä

Second Secretary

Embassy of Finland in New Delhi

Finland's success as a country is largely based on equal participation in all societal activities. From pioneering women's political rights to ensuring equal opportunities in education and the workforce, Finland has consistently taken steps to improve policies and legislation that advance gender equality.

Family leave and daycare have been central building blocks of this long journey. When Finland got independent in 1917, a regulation specified a minimum of four weeks of maternity leave. Its length gradually increased, and an allowance was added in the 1960s, but the introduction of parental leave, which either parent could use, didn't occur until 1982. A "daddy month" was first introduced in 2003, giving fathers dedicated non-transferable time, and this lengthened to 9 weeks in 2013.

Today, there is a pregnancy leave for the birthing mother totaling about 6.5 weeks. Parental leave for each parent is about 6.5 months, and one recipient may transfer 10.5 weeks to another. Adoptive families, one-parent families and multiparent families receive the same total parental leave of about 13 months.

Bringing parents at an equal footing on parental leave was meant to balance the family care responsibilities. After the most recent reform in 2022, the use of parental leave days by fathers has clearly increased. Before the reform, fathers used an average of 1.3 months of parental leave at a different time than the mother; after the reform, the said time has been an average of 2.7 months. Of course, this is far from a balance, and mothers still use most of the parental leave days overall. But the trend is positive.

Another essential service allowing women with children to participate in the workforce is the day care system. In Finland, universal day care services started in the 1970s. The Child Day Care Act of 1973 established municipal childcare as a universal public service. This marked a shift toward organized early childhood care alongside parental leave. In the past decades, Finland has emphasized freedom of choice: parents could choose municipal care, subsidized private care, or home care with an allowance. Later policy adjustments added provisions for before- and after-school care for children in the first two school years.

Supporting women's economic participation by legislation and public services is based on gender equality, a key value in the Finnish society. Investing in gender equality is a strategic economic decision. When more women participate in the workforce, economies become more diversified and productive, leading to shared prosperity. This is true for Finland but also globally. Equal pay and opportunities for women can significantly decrease poverty rates, fostering economic growth and improving social cohesion and stability.

Women's full participation in the workforce has been a central factor in the development of Finland's economy, particularly as the country transformed from an agrarian society into an industrial and later knowledge-based economy. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women's work was already essential in agriculture, forestry-related household production, and small-scale industry. As industrialisation accelerated and urban labour markets expanded, women entered factories, services, and public-sector jobs in growing numbers. This broad labour participation increased the available workforce in a small country with limited population growth, helping Finland to raise productivity and sustain economic development during periods of rapid structural change.



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Women's participation has also contributed significantly to Finland's human capital and productivity growth. High levels of education among women, including strong representation in universities and professional training, have ensured skilled workforce for many sectors. Women have been particularly important in education, healthcare, research, administration, and increasingly in business and technology. By making full use of women's skills and talents, Finland has been able to raise overall productivity, support innovation, and remain competitive in international markets despite demographic constraints.

Finally, women's full participation in the workforce has strengthened the resilience and sustainability of Finland's economy. High female employment has broadened the tax base and helped finance the welfare state, including pensions and public services, which are crucial in an ageing society with high social and healthcare costs. Dual-earner households have reduced poverty risks and smoothed economic shocks during recessions. In this way, women's work has not only supported economic growth but also underpinned social cohesion and long-term economic stability, making it a foundational element of Finland's economic development.

On individual level, societal support for women and families has also meant that more and more women have been able to pursue the career paths that they wish or combine work and family even in demanding sectors and jobs. This is important for women's leadership so that women don't feel forced to say no to promotions or new work opportunities. According to ILO data, in Finland, the percentage of women in leadership positions in working life was 37.7% in 2024, somewhat down from 38.4% in 2023. A report by the Finland Chamber of Commerce (2025) showed that in management teams of Finland's listed companies, the proportion of women rose to 31% in 2025, a new record. But when it comes to CEOs of listed companies, only 8% were women.

As for the largest listed companies, the proportion of women in management boards in Finland has risen to 40%. This is also an EU-wide goal. The EU requires large listed companies to achieve a 40% gender balance on non-executive boards by June 2026. A goal set at the EU level has likely speeded up company actions in EU member states.

As described above, progress in gender equality is possible but not self-evident. Continuous efforts are needed to improve gender equality in working life. Although Finland ranks second in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (2025), there is still work to do. For example, according to Statistics Finland, the average wage gap between women and men has narrowed from 19.4 percent to 16.5 percent in the period 1995–2023. The gap has narrowed only slightly, even though women in Finland are in general more highly educated than men.

Finland is a steadfast supporter of gender equality, and Finland's foreign policy systematically promotes the rights of women and girls and gender equality. Finland also supports gender equality through organizations like UN Women and UNFPA. In development policy, Finland is committed to the EU goal of ensuring that 85% of development cooperation funding progressively supports gender equality.

Gender equality is anchored in human rights, and advancing it boosts economic growth, reduces poverty, fosters social justice, and enhances peace and stability, ultimately benefiting the whole society. Gender equality is not an ideology. It is fundamental for achieving all the

Sustainable Development Goals; they can only be fully realized when women and girls have equal access to opportunities, resources, and decision-making.

Beyond the Pipeline: Confidence, Presence, and the Making of Women Leaders

Veenu Jaichand

Partner, EY LLP

In many workplaces today, women's leadership journeys do not stall because of a lack of ability, ambition or effort. They stall in quieter, less visible spaces - between a thought and whether it is voiced, between an opportunity and whether it is accepted, between being recognised as capable and being seen as ready.

These moments rarely announce themselves. They do not show up in appraisal systems or talent dashboards. They live in everyday decisions: whether to volunteer for a high-visibility role, whether to speak early in a meeting, whether to say yes to a stretch assignment without first feeling completely prepared.

Over time, these small decisions shape careers far more than any single promotion or title.

When confidence and executive presence are discussed in organisational contexts, they are often framed as personal gaps - qualities women must somehow "build" or "demonstrate." But for many women, these are not missing traits. They are shaped - and often constrained - by long years of social conditioning that has rewarded being careful, accommodating, and dependable far more than being visible, vocal or openly ambitious.

What is often labelled hesitation is not a lack of talent. It is usually, conditioning.

Where the Leadership Drop-Off Happens

- Women constitute ~32–35% of India's formal workforce yet hold **less than 20% of senior leadership roles.**
- In corporate India, women occupy **under 10% of executive leadership positions.**
- Women's representation declines most sharply **between mid-management and senior leadership**, not at entry levels.

The pipeline exists. The friction lies within it.

The Long Shadow of Social Conditioning

In the Indian context, social conditioning begins early and persists quietly. Many women grow up internalising the idea that stability is safer than stretch, that responsibility is more valuable than risk and that success is best expressed without drawing too much attention.

Across cultures and contexts, many girls grow up receiving consistent messages about how they should behave. They are encouraged to be responsible, well-mannered, considerate and diligent. Risk-taking is often moderated; assertiveness is sometimes softened. Boys, in contrast, are more frequently permitted to experiment, to be bold and to learn publicly through trial and error.

Over time, these patterns leave an imprint. They shape how women assess themselves, how they interpret readiness, and how they relate to authority. The same woman who manages complex projects, stakeholders, and crises with composure may still hesitate to highlight her own contribution or advocate for a larger role. It is not because she doubts her competence; it is because she has learnt, often subtly, that standing out can carry a cost.

This underlying doubt becomes visible in familiar workplace moments. A role opens up and a woman studies the job description carefully, measuring herself against every requirement. If she finds a gap, even a small one, she tells herself she will wait - gain more experience, build more certainty, apply next year. Confidence, in this sense, is not simply an individual trait. It reflects a lifetime of signals about when it is safe to assert oneself, and when it is wiserto hold back.



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Another common example plays out in meetings. A woman presents a well-thought-out idea, grounded in data and experience. Yet she concludes by saying, “This is just a suggestion—we can completely rethink it if needed.” The intention is often to appear collaborative, open, and non-threatening. But that final disclaimer can unintentionally dilute the authority of everything she has just said. This instinct - to soften one's own position, does not come from insecurity alone; it is the residue of years spent ensuring that confidence does not cross into perceived arrogance. These messages reappear—subtly, in how women assess readiness, interpret feedback and decide when to step forward.

A woman may manage complex programmes, clients or teams with ease, yet hesitate to articulate her own impact. Another may wait for repeated validation before expressing interest in a leadership role. A third may over-prepare relentlessly, not because she doubts her thinking, but because being publicly wrong feels disproportionately costly. One senior professional once reflected that she felt the need to arrive at leadership meetings with fully formed answers, while others were comfortable thinking aloud. The difference was not competence. It was comfort – with visibility before certainty.

Leadership, however, rarely waits for perfect readiness.

Confidence Is Not a Switch

Confidence is often described as a mindset—something one chooses to adopt. In reality, confidence is a social outcome. It is built slowly, through repeated experiences of being encouraged to take space or discouraged from doing so.

This is why many women encounter their deepest self-doubt not at the beginning of their careers, but at transition points. When the conversation shifts from ‘Can you deliver?’ to ‘Can you lead at the next level?’ internal negotiations surface.

‘Am I ready? Will I be judged more harshly? What if I fail visibly?’

These are not abstract fears. They are informed by lived experience.

Confidence does not grow by instruction alone. It grows when women experience - again and again - that stepping forward does not result in disproportionate consequences and that their voice carries weight even when it is not perfect.

Executive Presence: Beyond Style and Performance

Executive presence is often reduced to appearance, articulation, or assertiveness. In reality, it is about ease - with authority, ambiguity, and attention. For many women, that ease is complicated by contradictory expectations. Be decisive but not intimidating. Be warm, but not emotional. Be ambitious, but not self-promoting. Managing these invisible rules requires constant calibration, and over time, it can dilute presence. Consider a mid-career manager with deep technical and organisational knowledge. When discussions become tense, she may instinctively soften her tone, smile more, or frame her points cautiously to avoid appearing confrontational. Observers might interpret this as a lack of gravitas, without recognising the underlying reality: she has learnt that maintaining harmony often feels safer than exercising authority, and that being liked can feel more protective than being decisive.

Or take the example of a senior woman leader invited to join a panel or represent the organisation externally. Her first response is not excitement, but self-questioning: ‘Do I really have something new to say?’ She might suggest a colleague instead. While this can appear as humility, it also reflects a long-standing habit of limiting one's visibility of ensuring that one does not occupy more space than feels socially permissible.

Executive presence, therefore, is not a simple skill gap. It is deeply tied to how women have been taught to manage attention, power, and judgement. It is not something a woman may lack, it is something many have been trained to ration.

Awareness: The Real Inflection Point

The most meaningful shift often begins with self-awareness. When a woman recognises that her hesitation is not an objective assessment of readiness, but a familiar response shaped by experience, something changes.

The internal dialogue moves from 'I am not ready' to 'I feel hesitant - and I can still choose to step forward'.

This distinction matters. It creates room for choice.

What follows is rarely dramatic. It shows up as small, intentional acts:

- Saying yes to presenting the team's work instead of quietly letting someone else do it.
- Speaking once early in a meeting, rather than waiting until decisions are already taking shape.
- Ending a contribution with a recommendation – "I suggest we proceed with this approach", instead of stopping at analysis.

These are not dramatic gestures - they are modest acts of courage. Each moment provides new evidence. Evidence that the room does not collapse when one takes space. That disagreement does not equal rejection. That authority can coexist with authenticity.

Over time, confidence becomes less about courage and more about familiarity.

Where Upskilling and Reskilling Fit In

In an economy reshaped by digitalisation, AI and new operating models, continuous learning has become essential for all professionals. Experience alone no longer guarantees relevance.

The most meaningful progress occurs when self-awareness and development work together. As women recognise and gently challenge their own conditioning, they begin to take small risks - volunteering for visible projects, leading key discussions or nominating themselves for new opportunities. These experiences, in turn, create demand for further learning, which strengthens credibility and presence. For women, however, upskilling plays a particular role. It does not replace the deeper work of confidence and presence, but it can strongly reinforce it. New skills provide tangible anchors: language, frameworks and credibility that make participation feel less risky. For women already navigating internal doubt shaped by conditioning, learning often strengthens internal permission.

A woman who consciously upskills, reskills may find her voice carrying greater weight in cross-functional conversations. Not because her personality has changed, but because enhanced and updated knowledge and competency reduces the perceived 'risk of being visible'.

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Learning and Career Mobility

- Roles most impacted by automation and AI require **continuous reskilling every 3-5 years**.
- Professionals who proactively upskill are significantly more likely to move into strategic and leadership roles than those who rely on tenure alone



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Learning accelerates relevance-but relevance must still be claimed.

Reskilling also matters deeply in the Indian context, where many women experience career breaks or transitions. When approached strategically, reskilling allows women to return not as they were, but as they are becoming aligned with future roles, not past ones.

Learning, then, is not the centre of the leadership journey. It is a powerful enabler within it.

The Interplay That Sustains Leadership

The most durable leadership journeys emerge from the interplay between inner shifts and outer growth.

As women become more aware of how conditioning shapes behaviour, they take small risks. Those risks create exposure to new challenges, which require new skills. Learning builds credibility - Credibility strengthens presence - Presence reinforces confidence.

This cycle is gradual, cumulative and deeply personal.

Importantly, it does not require women to become louder, more aggressive or fundamentally different. What changes is clarity - about value, voice and readiness.

The Organisational Lens

While this journey is personal, it is not solitary. Organisations play a decisive role in whether confidence and presence are allowed to surface.

Leaders who name readiness explicitly, who encourage women to step forward before they feel perfect, and who back them when they do, remove unnecessary friction. Cultures that normalise learning, experimentation and visible growth create safer conditions for stretch.

Colleagues matter too - by passing the mic, crediting ideas accurately and challenging assumptions about who wants responsibility.

None of these actions "create" confidence. They create space for it to emerge.

Closing Reflection

Moving from pipeline to leadership is not only about breaking barriers. It is about recognising the quiet forces that shape who steps forward and who holds back.

Confidence and executive presence are not quick fixes. They are outcomes of long social histories, reshaped through awareness and experience. Upskilling and reskilling offer important, visible levers - but they work best when integrated into a broader journey of self-belief and intentional presence.

For women leaders in India today, progress does not lie in becoming someone else. It lies in becoming more fully visible versions of who they already are - capable, credible and ready.

That is the quiet work behind most leadership journeys. And it is work worth naming.

Leadership does not begin when doubt disappears. It begins when experience, learning and self-belief finally speak louder than it.

The Pipeline Revolution: Bridging the Gap from Aspiration to Action

Ritu Mathur

As global markets undergo unprecedented transformation, the quest for agile leadership is becoming more critical. Building a robust leadership pipeline is an urgent business necessity that reinforces an organization's stability and is a strategic foundation that serves as the primary driver of organizational resilience and sustained long-term success.

A well-structured leadership pipeline requires strategic planning, consistent investment, and a deep understanding of your organization's future needs. Companies that master the art of developing leadership pipeline capabilities consistently outperform their competitors, maintain stability during transitions, and create cultures where talent thrives.

The Business Case for Gender Diversity—Organizations that embrace gender diversity in leadership not only enhance their financial performance but also position themselves for long-term success in an increasingly competitive landscape. By prioritizing women in leadership roles, companies can unlock significant economic benefits while fostering a culture of inclusivity and resilience.

The Reality Check: A Leaky Pipeline—The last few years have seen significant strides made by employers to promote gender diversity and equality in the workplace, most with the goal of increasing the representation of women at senior levels. For over two decades, organizations across the world have invested consciously in building a strong pipeline of women professionals. Yet, as one scans leadership corridors, boardrooms, and executive committees, the numbers thin dramatically. The promise of the "pipeline" has not translated into proportional leadership presence.

Globally, progress has been uneven and far slower than expected. Women hold about 23–24% of the world's board seats. And only 8.4% of the world's boards are chaired by women and only 6% of CEOs are women. At the rate things are progressing, achieving worldwide gender equality for Chairs and CEOs won't happen until 2073 and 2111 respectively.

The Indian Context—Women business leaders have strengths that have proven valuable in times of crisis and uncertainty. Recognizing the value of diverse leadership, India's Companies Act 2013 has been instrumental in enhancing gender diversity within Indian corporations, achieving a threefold increase in women's representation on boards over the past decade.

Despite ongoing initiatives by Indian Inc and regulatory frameworks aimed at enhancing gender diversity, women still hold a mere 19% of C-suite positions within the country, as reported by Avtar, a consulting firm specializing in workplace culture. This figure is significantly lower than the global average of 30%, emphasizing the urgent need for focused talent acquisition strategies.

The Dual Approach: Individual and Systemic—Accelerating women into leadership demands a dual approach. Often exceptionally capable women hesitate to raise their hands, not for lack of talent, but because the system rarely made space for their ambition.

- **Individual Empowerment:** Women must take strategic risks, and build networks that open doors rather than merely observe them.
- **Systemic Change:** Real progress requires cultures that genuinely value diverse leadership styles, removal of bias, flexible policies and sponsorship reinforced by accountability.



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When we build a real support system, we help women bridge the gap between having potential and actually leading at the top. Addressing these realities is how we move from intention to impact, creating ecosystems of support and development that enable women to move from untapped potential to proven, visible leadership.

The Invisible Barriers: Aspiration versus Confidence- High-potential women rarely fall short because of a lack of capability. Instead, they are often held back by two invisible, socially-conditioned barriers- the Aspiration Deficit and the Confidence Deficit.

The aspiration deficit isn't about lack of ambition; it's about years of social conditioning that teaches women to aim for what is 'appropriate' rather than what is possible. So, they hesitate to put themselves forward for stretch roles, board positions, or P&L responsibilities, even when they are absolutely ready.

The confidence deficit shows up when women wait for perfect readiness. Men often step up at 60%. Women aim for 100% before they feel legitimate. This internal hesitation delays visibility and slows down their leadership trajectory.

In reality, these women don't lack competence. When the aspiration and confidence gaps close, their rise is exponential. In practice, women are often assessed on performance- what they have already done while men are assessed on potential - what they could do. Women are encouraged to be "fully ready" before stepping up, while men are encouraged to "learn on the job." These subtle yet powerful differences slow progression and reinforce risk-averse talent decisions when it comes to women.

Intent is no longer enough. The theme "Accelerate Action" calls for a decisive shift in how leadership progress is pursued. It challenges organizations to move beyond intent, incremental change, and the reassuring narrative that equity will emerge over time. Experience shows that time alone does not correct imbalance. What is required is deliberate, systemic, and courageous leadership action that redesigns structures, resets accountability, and actively advances women into positions of influence. Acceleration is not optional; it is a leadership imperative.

The Key Strategies for Meaningful Change- Accelerating action for women in the workplace requires a comprehensive and strategic approach that focuses on addressing systemic barriers, creating inclusive environments, and promoting gender equity across every stage of the employee lifecycle. Progress is not achieved through isolated initiatives, but through sustained leadership commitment and structural accountability.

Top-Down Accountability: At the core of meaningful change is evident top-down leadership. Senior leaders must move beyond symbolic support and commit to gender equality, setting clear, measurable targets for representation. Senior leaders need to be accountable for gender equality and should actively promote women's career advancement. When progress toward these goals is tracked and tied to leadership performance, gender equity becomes a shared responsibility rather than an aspirational value.

Equitable recruitment: Organizations must review job descriptions to ensure they are inclusive and avoid language that may unintentionally discourage women from applying. Leveraging blind recruitment or AI tools to reduce unconscious bias during hiring. Ensure a gender-balanced interview panels. These measures help widen talent pools and create fairer entry points into organizations, ensuring women are evaluated on capability rather than perception.

Sponsorship vs. Mentorship: Curated sponsorship and Mentorship play a pivotal role in closing the leadership gap. Structured mentorship programs provide guidance and confidence, while sponsorship ensures women gain visibility, advocacy, and access to high-impact opportunities. Without sponsorship, talent often remains unseen and with it, potential translates into progression.

Inclusion and Development: A culture of inclusion must be actively cultivated and protected. Zero tolerance for harassment, strong reporting mechanisms, and psychological safety are foundational. Career development and advancement opportunities must be equally accessible. Organizations should invest in leadership training, skill development, and clearly defined progression pathways for women. Prioritizing internal promotions over external hiring ensures that women's potential is developed, retained, and rewarded within the system.

The Power of Role Models: Role models are the heartbeat of progress. It is hard to be what you cannot see, and when women see others leading at the top, it transforms 'maybe' into 'I can.' Role model is a powerful catalyst. It builds the confidence and momentum needed to turn a spark of ambition into a seat at the table.

Data-Driven Action: To move the needle, we must let data lead the way. By tracking gender metrics across hiring, pay, and promotions, organizations uncover the hidden biases that hold women back. Data is the ultimate tool for accountability—it transforms vague intentions into a clear, measurable roadmap for change. True progress happens when leadership, culture, and accountability finally align. By moving beyond words and committing to real, systemic change, we build stronger, more resilient organizations. It is time to stop talking about potential and start creating the workplaces where every woman can lead, thrive, and leave a lasting impact on the world of business. Investing in women isn't just the right thing to do; it is the most effective way to drive performance, ensure resilience, and secure long-term success in an evolving market.

The Era of the New Women Leader

The shift from being capable to being influential begins the moment you decide that your voice belongs at the table. We are witnessing a historic moment where the world needs empathy, ethical AI, sustainable growth, and inclusive governance and all this perfectly aligns with the strengths that women bring to leadership.

Do not wait for perfect readiness. The future is not built by those who wait to feel complete, but by those who act with courage. The world is changing faster than ever where technology, data, and AI are reshaping how we make decisions, influence systems, and lead people. To lead in this era, commit to continuous learning, unlearning and relearning.

Combine technological fluency with human wisdom: The future will belong to those who can combine technological fluency with human wisdom. Embrace emerging technologies, understand global trends, and cultivate data literacy. Ethics, empathy, and purpose should be your anchors and your integrity will be your greatest differentiator.

Develop a global perspective with local sensitivity: Every leadership decision now carries cross-border implications. Stay curious about global challenges, but learn to interpret them through the lens of your own country's needs and values.

Lead with clarity and courage: Leadership is not about having all the answers; it is about asking better questions, creating space for diverse voices, and standing firm on principles when compromise feels easier. The leaders who will endure are those who use innovation not only to accelerate progress, but to build trust.

We have the data, we have the talent, and we have the roadmap. Now, it is simply a matter of courage—the courage for organizations to fix their systems and the courage for women to claim their space. Let us not just witness the future; let us be the ones brave enough to write it.



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Breaking Barriers: Accelerate Your Career

Ms. Aanchal S Gupta

In an era where the corporate landscape is experiencing a transformation, the emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has become a focus area. Organizations are increasingly recognizing that a diverse workforce not only enhances innovation but also drives performance and creativity. This shift reflects a broader commitment to creating environments where all individuals, regardless of gender, can thrive and contribute their unique perspectives. While women still face challenges at every stage of their careers, there is a growing recognition of their potential and the value they bring to leadership roles.

At the outset of their professional journeys, women often face systemic barriers that can hinder their progress. These include implicit biases in hiring practices and the challenge of balancing professional aspirations with societal expectations. As they strive to establish themselves, many women face self-doubt and the pressure to conform to traditional roles, which can restrain their ambition and limit their opportunities for advancement. As women progress in their careers, the obstacles become even more pronounced. The journey to leadership comes with its own challenges.

However, the landscape of a woman's professional journey is gradually changing for the better. The path to leadership, while still challenging, is becoming more accessible as organizations recognize the importance of diverse leadership teams. Moreover, the growing focus on work-life balance and flexible work arrangements is enabling women to manage their professional responsibilities alongside personal commitments, fostering a healthier and more sustainable career path. The question has shifted from whether women should be in leadership roles to how quickly and effectively they can attain them.

In today's environment, career acceleration extends beyond technical competence; it requires courage, clarity, and connection. It calls for a mindset shift, an understanding of soft skills, and access to enabling structures like mentorship and inclusive environments. By prioritizing DEI initiatives, organizations can help dismantle the barriers that hinder women's progress, creating a brighter future where diverse voices lead the way. However, despite these advancements, women continue to face distinct challenges in their career progression.

Develop a growth mindset - Take the next step

A growth mindset is the foundation of career acceleration. It is about believing that abilities can be developed through dedication and effort. This mindset transforms challenges into opportunities and setbacks into stepping stones.

The first step toward career acceleration is reframing fear as a catalyst for growth. The pressure to “get it right” can lead to hesitation in taking risks. However, every decision that you make – whether to travel, to attend an event, to accept an assignment that requires you to stretch or speaking up in a public forum – leads to growth in your career path. Such decisions give you a direction and courage to take on the next one.

Practical tips to overcome fear:

Start small: Take incremental risks that build confidence over time. Begin with low-stakes opportunities like volunteering for a small project, attending a meeting etc.

Seek feedback: Constructive input helps identify strengths objectively.

Manifest success and growth: Replace “What if I fail?” with “What if I succeed?” Manifest positive attitude and positive outcomes.

Reframe failures: Treat unfavourable situations as learning opportunities and turn them in your favour.

Change your room occasionally: Surround yourself with people who encourage risk-taking and celebrate progress.

Practice adaptability: Learn to accept changes and pivot when plans change or things do not go as per plans.

Prepare: A well-prepared thought always brings in courage. Be it your meetings, events, career discussions etc – always be prepared. Know your subject and prepare talking points / script in advance. This helps boost confidence.

Courage is a choice - every time you choose courage over comfort, you expand your potential. Taking a small step may feel challenging, but it's the only way to discover what lies ahead for you.

Overcoming self-limiting beliefs

Another factor that supports in professional journey is self-awareness. It is important to recognise the traits and behaviours that hold you back. Challenge these shortcomings and re-write your professional journey.

The most significant hindrances come from within – the ones you create within your mind basis your closed surroundings. There is a need to overcome self-limiting beliefs such as “I'm not ready,” “I'm not good enough,” or “I can't balance it all”. These thoughts reflect in your actions and make your everyday growth restrictive. Challenging these beliefs is essential for growth.

Practical tips to challenge your inner self:

Practice self-reflection: Journaling and introspection help uncover patterns that hold you back.

Commit to continuous learning: Invest in upskilling-technical expertise, leadership programs and emotional intelligence.

Embrace discomfort: Volunteer for projects that stretch your capabilities, step by step.

Set goals: Create measurable weekly / monthly goals and reflect on them on a regular basis.

Peer learning: Experience sharing always brings in learning. Engage in peer learning / experience sharing to share the roadblocks and the learnings they brought.

Your inner dialogue shapes your outer personality. Change the narrative, and you change your journey.

Prioritize yourself:

Women often carry the weight of societal expectations—being selfless, prioritizing others, and avoiding assertiveness. While empathy and collaboration are strengths, neglecting self-interest can stall career progress.

Self-care and self-advocacy are not acts of self-obsession; they are strategic choices. It is not only acceptable but essential to prioritize your personal growth, advocate for what you deserve, and establish boundaries that safeguard your well-being. By investing in yourself, you enhance your capacity to make meaningful contributions to your organization and community.

Practical tips to focus on “you”:

Do not hesitate – discuss and seek: Be it leading a project, getting recognised for your contributions, seeking opportunities etc.

Set boundaries to take time off: To balance your life and focus on personal well being and self-care. Block time for personal development.

Celebrate achievements: Own your success without downplaying it. Be proud of it.



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Focus on your “inner” strength: Build emotional resilience to handle high-pressure situations. Putting yourself first is not about exclusion or being unaware of your surroundings; it is about empowerment. Prioritizing yourself ensures you have the energy and clarity to lead effectively.

The role of soft skills in career acceleration

Soft skills such as emotional intelligence, negotiation, influencing without authority and adaptability play a crucial role in career acceleration. These interpersonal abilities enhance collaboration and foster strong professional relationships, empowering individuals to navigate challenges effectively. As organizations increasingly value these skills alongside technical expertise, developing them becomes essential for women aspiring to leadership roles.

Practical tips to enhance your soft skills:

- Practice empathy in team interactions.
- Learn to manage difficult conversations with tact.
- Develop storytelling skills to make your ideas compelling.
- Build collaboration skills to work effectively across diverse teams.
- Strengthen adaptability and problem-solving under pressure.

Career acceleration often comes with challenges-tight deadlines, high expectations, and organizational landscape. Emotional resilience helps you maintain your original self and hence, being effective in different situations. To foster this resilience, practicing mindfulness and stress-reduction techniques may help you stay grounded and focused. Additionally, developing coping strategies for setbacks allows you to navigate challenges more effectively. Building a support system of peers and mentors further enhances your emotional resilience, providing you with the encouragement and guidance needed to thrive in both personal and professional contexts.

Leveraging mentorship and supportive environments

Another factor that helps in professional growth is guidance. Mentorship serves as the bridge between potential and performance. A mentor provides guidance, expands networks, brings in years of experience to help navigate organizational dynamics. However, it is imperative to find the right mentor at the right time by taking initiatives.

Practical tips to find the right mentor:

- Identify leaders / seniors you admire and whose career journeys resonates with you.
- Seek a mentor who can challenge you and empathise with you and your environment.
- Embrace diversity in perspectives – mentors outside your immediate domain can offer fresh insights and unbiased guidance.
- Build relationships based on trust and reciprocity.
- Engage in an open, regular two-way communication to have focussed and actionable conversations.
- Expand your professional circle beyond your organization and join other professional networks suitable to your field.
- Participating in leadership development programs that include coaching sessions.

Pro tip: Use digital platforms like LinkedIn to build a professional network & being visible amongst them.

Organisation role in career acceleration

Equally important is the organizational environment. Companies that foster inclusion, sponsorship, and psychological safety enable women to thrive. Organisations must introduce policies that support flexibility, equal opportunities, and transparent career paths. Sponsorship programs also play an influential role where senior leaders actively advocate for women in critical roles. This reflects influence and visibility.

Coaching as a catalyst for growth

Coaching serves as a powerful catalyst for growth, providing individuals with personalized guidance and support to navigate their career paths. Through tailored feedback and encouragement, coaching helps women identify their strengths, overcome obstacles, and build confidence in their leadership abilities. By fostering a growth mindset and equipping women with the tools to excel, coaching not only enhances individual performance but also contributes to a more inclusive and equitable workplace. Unlike mentoring, coaching focuses on performance improvement and behavioural change.

Practical tips for adopting coaching:

- Engage with certified coaches for leadership development.
- Use coaching to refine executive presence and decision-making skills.
- Combine coaching with regular feedback for continuous improvement.
- Explore group coaching sessions for shared learning experiences.

Harnessing technology for growth

Technology is a powerful enabler for career acceleration. We are truly blessed to be part of this technology driven eco-system, where access to a myriad of digital tools, AI-driven platforms, and virtual learning environments empowers us to take charge of our professional development. These resources provide abundant opportunities to upskill and stay relevant in an ever-evolving landscape. There are multiple online learning platforms which provide certification courses to learn about a new skill or enhance existing skill set. Moreover, leveraging AI tools can significantly boost efficiency in our day-to-day work, facilitating data-driven decision-making and allowing us to focus on strategic initiatives. Embracing these technological advancements not only enhances our capabilities but also positions us for success in our careers.

As focus on technology grows, building a strong digital presence through professional networking sites and staying updated on emerging technologies is quintessential.

Creating Impact Beyond the Workplace

Leveraging skills and experiences to contribute positively to the community and society at large is a powerful way to accelerate meaningful change. Women leaders can inspire others by engaging in mentorship programs, volunteering, and advocating for social causes that resonate with their values. By extending their influence beyond organizational boundaries, they empower individuals and cultivate a culture of inclusivity and social responsibility. This broader impact enhances personal fulfilment and reinforces the importance of leadership that prioritizes community engagement and social change.

Engage in social impact initiatives by volunteering for projects that make a difference in the community. Additionally, share your expertise by speaking at industry conferences, mentoring young professionals outside your organization, and contributing thought leadership through blogs and articles.

Career acceleration is a series of deliberate steps. The above are some practical tips to achieve one step towards the same by focusing on the following areas:

Building your personal brand: Showcase expertise through thought leadership, speaking engagements, working with empathy as well as emotional resilience and taking charge of your own career.

Investing in continuous learning: Stay ahead of industry trends and emerging skills. Use both online and offline platforms regularly to enhance your skills.

Networking intentionally: Develop relationships that are not transactional but the ones that are built on your personal brand. Attend events / meetings / group meetings with clear goals and identified next steps.



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The overall increase in women's participation in the labour force is driven by more rural women joining the workforce. The PLFS 2022-23 data shows that the LFPR increased by 5% for urban women and 14% for rural women. This could partly be linked to a more accurate measurement of women's work, according to several analyses. Women in India, and many developing countries, are widely engaged in unpaid economic work—different from care work or domestic work, like working on farms or family enterprises for instance—for which they are neither paid nor recognised as workers. The data being collected now is more cognisant of the historical mismeasurement of women's work and might be the reason for the increase in FLFPR. Women unpaid workers rose from 31.7% of total women workers to 37% from 2017-18 to 2022-23.

gender parity in secondary education enrolment, ranked 65th globally in political empowerment of women and 10th in parity of years with female/male heads of state over the past 50 years. However, women's representation in ministerial positions (6.9%), and in Parliament (17.2%) remains very low.

Over the last decade, the Government of India has introduced a number of initiatives aimed at reducing the gender gap across social, economic and political spheres, namely, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Andolan, establishment of Mahila Shakti Kendras, Mahila Police Volunteers, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalyayas. 33% of the seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions are reserved for women. Similarly, the Constitution has also reserved one third of all seats in Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies for women. In order to promote female entrepreneurship, the Government has initiated Programmes like 'Stand-Up India' and 'Mahila-e-Haat' (an online marketing platform to support women entrepreneurs/SHGs/NGOs) and the 'Entrepreneurship and Skill Development Programme' (ESSDP).

Female participation in the labour force and access to decent and appropriately paid work is essential for inclusive and sustainable development. With rural India driving the trend, the Economic Survey (2023-24) observes that the female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) rose to 37% in 2022-2023 from 23.3% in 2017-2018, although it is well below the global average of 47%. As of May, 2024, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) has facilitated the opening of 52.3 crore bank accounts, of which 55.6% of account holders are women. The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - NRLM, the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) programme covering more than 89 million women under 8.3 million SHGs, has been empirically associated with women empowerment, enhancement of self-esteem, personality development, reduced social evils, and medium impacts in terms of better education, higher participation in village institutions and better access to Government schemes. Secondly, the encouraging wave of women entrepreneurship fueled by 'Start-up' and 'Stand-up' India have ensured that around 68% of the loans have been sanctioned to women entrepreneurs under Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY), and 77.7% of the beneficiaries under Stand-Up India are women, as of May 2024. Thirdly, under the aegis of Digital India, as of July 2023, more than 53% per cent of the Prime Minister's Rural Digital Literacy Campaign (PMGDISHA) beneficiaries are women. In order to increase the participation of women in leadership roles, the Companies Act, 2013 mandates that all listed companies and all unlisted companies with paid up share capital of 100 crore or a turnover of 300 crore must have at least one women director on their Boards.

The gender gap in India's labour force, attributed largely to conservative social norms and due to both 'demand' side (work opportunities) and 'supply' side (availability of women for work) factors, remains the most persistent paradox of recent decades. This is despite increased economic growth, a decrease in fertility rates and increased enrolment of women in higher education over decades. The exclusion of women from paid work has resulted in perpetual gender inequality in the economy. Traditionally, women in India have largely been employed in labour



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Being Visible: Make deliberate effort to speak-up – in meetings, in decision making, when seeking feedback etc. Accelerating women's careers is not merely a personal ambition—it is a collective agenda. When women rise, organizations prosper, and societies advance. The journey demands courage, clarity, commitment and connection. It calls for challenging norms, embracing ambition, and leading the way for others.

By embracing a growth mindset, prioritizing self-advocacy, and leveraging mentorship, women can navigate the complexities of their professional paths with resilience and determination. Organizations play a crucial role in this transformation by fostering inclusive environments that empower diverse voices. As we move forward, let us champion the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion, ensuring that every woman has the opportunity to thrive and lead.

The time to act is now-take that first step, challenge the status quo, and pave the way for a future where all can succeed. Break barriers, build bridges, and lead with confidence

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion-A Competitive Edge for Better Tomorrow

Rachana Singh Bhal, NTPC Ltd.

Global perspective

In an increasingly boundaryless world, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) are not mere buzzwords, but have become essential principles for fostering sustainable development, social cohesion, and organizational success. While DEI concepts are often discussed within organizational boundaries, adopting a global perspective reveals their broader significance and the need for culturally responsive approaches that reflect varied histories, requirements, and evolution across countries and states.

Diversity at the global level encompasses differences in culture, ethnicity, race, nationality, language, gender, religion, socioeconomic status. It recognizes that identities are shaped by historical, political and social contexts that differ widely across countries. For example, racial diversity may be central to DEI discussions in some regions, while caste, tribal affiliation or migration status may be more relevant in others. A global perspective on diversity requires moving beyond a one-size-fits-all model and appreciating the complexity and intersectionality of identities worldwide.

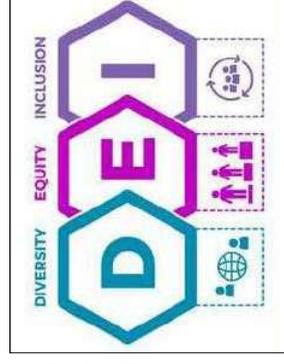
Equity focuses on fairness and justice by acknowledging systemic inequalities and providing resources and opportunities tailored to unique needs. Globally, inequities are often rooted in colonial legacies, economic disparities, conflict, and unequal access to education, healthcare, and employment. Equity-oriented approaches aim to address these grassroots level imbalances rather than treating all individuals the same. For instance, equitable global policies may involve supporting capacity-building in developing economies or expanding access to education and technology in underdeveloped regions. Equity from a global standpoint emphasizes redistribution, accountability, and long-term investment in marginalized communities.

Inclusion refers to creating environments where all individuals feel valued, respected and able to fully participate. On a global scale, inclusion requires cultural competence, inclusive leadership, and meaningful engagement with local communities. Multinational organizations and institutions must ensure that voices from different regions, particularly those historically marginalised are represented in decision-making processes. Inclusion also involves overcoming language barriers, respecting cultural norms, and fostering collaboration across time zones, belief systems, and working styles. True global inclusion goes beyond representation to ensure belongingness, and shared ownership.

A global DEI perspective also highlights the importance of contextual sensitivity. Practices considered inclusive in one country may not translate directly to another due to legal frameworks, cultural norms or social expectations. Therefore, effective global DEI strategies balance universal human rights principles with local adaptation. This approach encourages listening, learning, and partnership rather than imposing external models.

Impact of DEI on Organizational Culture and Productivity

Embracing DEI globally promotes innovation, strengthens institutions, reduces inequality, and contributes to social and economic resilience. By recognizing differences, addressing inequities, and fostering inclusive systems across borders, societies and organizations can work towards a more just, collaborative, and sustainable future. DEI initiatives, when strategically implemented do more than fulfil ethical or compliance goals. Growing businesses, studies and various surveys show that they strengthen workplace culture, increase employee engagement, reduce turnover, and boost productivity and performance.



Impact on Organizational Culture:

- **Sense of Belonging:** Creates a space where everyone feels accepted, boosting morale and emotional investment.
- **Psychological Safety:** Employees feel safe to contribute ideas, leading to better team cohesion and open communication.
- **Employee Engagement & Satisfaction:** Valued employees tend to be more motivated, engaged, and satisfied in their roles, which in turn lowers employee attrition.
- **Talent Attraction & Retention:** Draws in a broader talent pool and encourages employees to stay longer, helping reduce turnover-related costs.
- **Reputation:** Enhances brand image, attracting socially conscious consumers, investors, and top talent.

Impact on Productivity & Performance:

● **Improved collaboration and Creativity:** Inclusive cultures support problem solving, creativity, diverse idea generation and better adaptation to market changes, all core aspects of a positive organizational culture conducive to productivity.

● **Competitive Advantage:** Organizations with mature DEI programs outperform others in key business metrics.

Those with strategic DEI maturity levels reported:

- Faster time to market
- Higher innovation and agility
- Better brand reputation
- **Decision-Making:** Broader viewpoints result in more robust, well-rounded decisions.
- **Increased Productivity:** Engaged employees contribute more fully, leading to higher output.
- **Higher Revenue:** Diverse companies can see increased cash flow, with inclusive teams being significantly more productive.
- **Reduced Absenteeism:** Inclusive cultures can lead to fewer leaves.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Indian Context

India’s social, cultural, and economic landscape makes Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) both uniquely complex and critically important. As one of the world’s most diverse countries, India is characterized by multiple languages, religions, castes, ethnicities, regional identities, gender expressions, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In this context, DEI is not only a global best practice but a foundational requirement for inclusive sustainable growth, social justice, and innovation.

Diversity in India

Diversity in India extends far beyond commonly recognized global categories such as race and gender. It includes caste, tribe, religion, language, region, disability, age, gender identity, and socioeconomic status. With 22 official languages and hundreds of dialects, regional and linguistic diversity strongly influence access to education and employment. Additionally, caste and tribal identities continue to shape lived experiences, particularly in rural and historically marginalized communities.

In the corporate sector, diversity is reflected in increasingly multicultural and multigenerational workforces, especially in multinational companies and urban centres. However, representation gaps persist, particularly in leadership roles for women, persons with disabilities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.



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Equity and Social Justice

Equity in the Indian context is deeply rooted in the country's constitutional commitment to social justice. Affirmative action policies, such as **reservations in education and public employment**, were designed to address historical exclusion and systemic discrimination faced by marginalized groups. These measures recognize that equal treatment alone is insufficient in a society shaped by longstanding inequalities.

In corporate India, equity initiatives increasingly focus on **fair hiring practices, pay equity, access to career advancement, and inclusive policies**. Progressive organizations are investing in skill development programs, and targeted hiring for under-represented groups, including persons with disabilities and first-generation professionals. Equity also extends to supply chains, where fair wages, worker safety, and ethical labour practices remain critical issues.

Inclusion in Workplaces and Society

Inclusion in India involves creating environments where individuals from diverse backgrounds feel respected, safe, and empowered to contribute fully. In workplaces, this includes addressing unconscious bias, fostering inclusive leadership, and implementing policies such as flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and anti-harassment mechanisms.

The enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 & the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 reflects growing recognition of inclusion beyond traditional categories. Many organizations now support employee resource groups, accessibility initiatives, and mental health programs to build a culture of belonging.

Challenges and Considerations in DEI Implementation

While the evidence points to positive impact, organizations should be aware that:

- DEI investment without strategic execution can fail to realize productivity benefits if not linked to measurable goals.
- A robust DEI culture requires consistent leadership commitment, data tracking, and accountability structures.

Various challenges include-

- Resistance to change
- Lack of leadership commitment
- Insufficient Awareness and Training
- Unconscious Bias and Cultural Barriers
- Tokenism and Surface-Level Efforts
- Lack of Clear Metrics and Accountability
- Limited Resources and expertise
- Deep-Rooted Societal Biases

Overcoming DEI Challenges-

Despite these challenges, organizations can take initiatives to overcome them and create a more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible workplace.

- **Leadership commitment**
- **DEI strategy in place**
- **Enabling culture**
- **Recruitment & Hiring**
- **Positive marketplace & community impact**
- **Create Awareness, Understanding, and Support**
- **Deal with Micro aggressions**
- **Avoid Tokenism**
- **Address Unconscious Bias in the Workplace**



Creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace is not easy. However, it is essential for any organization that wants to be successful in today's global economy. By addressing the challenges of DEI and taking steps to create a more inclusive workplace, organizations can create a more productive, innovative and successful workforce.

Corporate DEI in India: Emerging Practices

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have become indispensable to the corporate fabric of India, fostering innovation, promoting employee well-being, and driving business excellence. Today, Indian companies are going beyond compliance, embedding DEI into their strategic core, framing policies to create more inclusive workplaces. By promoting diverse perspectives and equitable opportunities, these companies are setting new benchmarks.

Indian and multinational companies operating in India are increasingly embedding DEI into their business strategies. Leading organizations such as **Tata Group, Infosys, Wipro, and Mahindra Group and Public Sector Utilities** (PSUs) have introduced structured DEI frameworks focusing on gender diversity, accessibility, inclusive leadership, and community engagement. Initiatives such as women return ship programs, leadership development for women and under represented talent, and inclusive hiring of persons with disabilities are gaining momentum. Startups and MSMEs are also beginning to recognize the business value of DEI, particularly in attracting young talent and serving diverse consumer markets across India's regions.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Indian Context: top 7 companies as per Amazing Workplaces

2024 awards –

Below are the top 7 Indian companies making waves in the DEI space, selected based on their gender ratios, DEI policies, and measurable impact.

1. Tata Consultancy Services (TCS)
2. Lemon Tree Hotels
3. Infosys
4. Hindustan Unilever (HUL)
5. Wipro
6. Mahindra Group
7. Accenture India

Conclusion

Above 7 Indian companies are setting new standards in the realm of DEI, with their commitment to foster inclusive environments that drive innovation and enhance employee well-being. Through their focused initiatives, measurable impact, and a clear vision for the future, they serve as inspiring examples for other organizations looking to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION (DEI) at NTPC Ltd, a Maharatna PSU in Energy Sector

NTPC is committed to fostering a workplace that values diversity, ensures equity, & promotes inclusion and creates an environment where all individuals, regardless of their background, feel respected, valued, and empowered to contribute to the organization's success. NTPC has come out with integrated and comprehensive DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) Policy for embedding DEI in our culture and reinforcing DEI in the organization. Foundation Principles for fostering Equality, Embracing Diversity, and Promoting Inclusion



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1) Human Rights Policy: Respect for Human Rights (Right to Equality, Right to Freedom, Rights against Exploitation, Right to Freedom of Religion, Culture and Educational Rights, Right to Constitutional Remedies) is essential to the long-term sustainability of any business and the communities it serves. NTPC is committed to ensuring that all employees live with social and economic dignity and freedom, irrespective of nationality, gender, race, economic status, or religion.

2) Equal Opportunity Policy: At NTPC, we recognize the value of a diverse workforce. NTPC is committed to provide equal opportunities in employment and creating an inclusive workplace and work culture in which all employees are treated equally with respect and dignity.

3) WEPower: (Women in Power Sector Professional Network) Initiative: As an institutional partner with World Bank in the South Asia Women in Power Sector Professional Network, NTPC actively advances gender diversity, equity, and inclusion in the power sector through a structured action plan with clear goals and timelines, focusing on areas such as STEM (Science, technology, engineering & mathematics) education, recruitment, development, and retention. STEM etc.

Policies for Supporting Existing Employees

NTPC offers a range of progressive policies designed to support the diverse needs of its workforce:

1) Maternity Leave: Paid maternity leave of 26 weeks in accordance with statutory requirements. Further, paid maternity leave for up to 45 days is also provided in case of miscarriage/abortion.

2) Paternity Leave: Paid paternity leaves for male employees for a period of 15 days on delivery of a child.

3) Child Care Leave (CCL): Paid leave for up to 02 years, available in different spells, to support child-rearing responsibilities or to look after their children's needs like education, sickness, etc. This benefit is extended to single male employees as well.

4) Support for Adoptive and Surrogate Parents: Special paid childcare leave for employees who adopt children or become parents through surrogacy.

5) Infertility Treatment Facility: IVF treatment procedures are covered under the NTPC Medical Attendance and Treatment Rules for cases of infertility.

6) Child Care Facilities: Establishment of crèche facilities at workplaces to support working parents.

7) Flexible Work Arrangements: Implementation of flexi-leaves and flexi-timing for female employees to promote work-life balance.

8) Sabbatical Leave: Opportunities for employees to take sabbatical leave for up to 05 years in order to discharge various familial / social obligations; to take up entrepreneurial / employment / self-development ventures to fulfil their aspirations; with the assurance of job security.

9) Facilities and amenities are provided to Persons with Disabilities to help them effectively perform their duties. These include accessible infrastructure, post-recruitment and pre promotion training as outlined in the Equal Opportunity Policy, special leave for participation in conferences, seminars, training, and workshops on disability and development, leave for disability-specific needs, and reimbursement for assistive devices like artificial limbs/appliances/low vision aids/hearing aids for self and dependent family members.

10) Relief Measures for the families of deceased employees: Family Economic Rehabilitation, Death Relief Fund, Group Insurance, assistance for customary rituals, waiver of loans, Medical, Accommodation & Education facilities.

Policies to Foster Future Talent and Strengthen Community Engagement

NTPC is committed to promoting diversity and inclusion beyond its existing workforce by creating equitable opportunities for underrepresented communities.

1) **Affirmative Actions:** Initiatives aimed at empowering marginalized and socially, economically & educationally backward communities through targeted recruitment by giving preference/ relaxations/ concessions/ reservations to candidates belonging to scheduled castes/ scheduled tribes/ other backward classes/ persons with disabilities/ economically weaker sections/ ex-servicemen/ project affected persons/ land outsee, etc.

2) **Diversity Hiring:** Focusing on attracting & hiring individuals from diverse backgrounds, including women, marginalized communities, and persons with disabilities.

3) **Girl Empowerment Mission (GEM):** Community initiative aimed at providing holistic education (including Academics, Art and Culture, health awareness, personality development & self-defence) and empowering girl children in the age group of 10–12 years in the surrounding communities of our Projects. From 2018 onwards it has trained more than 10,000 girls. Workshop includes:

1. **Basic Academics:** Literacy, numeracy, and foundational knowledge enhancement.

2. **Life Skills:** Hygiene, sanitation, interpersonal relationships, effective communication, empathy, good touch/bad touch, cyber safety, and gender diversity awareness.

3. **Adolescent Preparedness:** Guidance on physical and emotional changes, menstrual hygiene, and self-care.

4. **Extracurricular Activities:** Yoga, self-defence, dance, drama, music, theatre, art & craft, and sports.

5. **Long-term Education Support:** Around 10% of participative girls from each project location are inducted into NTPC schools based on merit, with their education costs covered by NTPC.

Structured Platforms for Awareness, Collaboration and Bias Mitigation

To promote an inclusive culture, NTPC has established several platforms:

1) **Structured Meetings:** Interactions of Management with female employees, young employees and SC/ST/OBC/PwBD employees to foster inclusivity.

2) **Gender Sensitization Workshops & Prevention of Sexual Harassment/ Offensive Conduct:** Programs aimed at addressing gender biases and promoting gender-neutral behaviour among employees are held regularly. Internal Committees (ICs) have been constituted across all our Project locations and Corporate offices.

3) **NTPC Women Leaders Conclave:** An annual event celebrating women leadership and encouraging networking among women leaders from various fields including, Science, Art & culture, sports, armed forces, mountaineering etc

4) **Young Women Leaders Program:** A leadership development program for young female executives, focusing on problem-solving, decision-making, and creative thinking. Further female employees are regularly sponsored to external leadership programs by eminent organizations.

5) **Posting of female employees in night shifts:** as well as their male counterparts, where permissible under the law, thereby providing them equal opportunities.

6) **Steps towards Mental & Emotional Wellness:** NTPC integrates and inculcates values sensitive and empathetic to mental and emotional health in all spheres of activities. A comprehensive policy AHWAHAN has been introduced, which is a holistic wellness policy and includes physical, mental, social, financial, and spiritual aspects. Awareness sessions and webinars about different aspects of mental & emotional health are regularly organised.

7) **Counselling facility:** NTPC has 24*7 Employee Assistance Program called 'SNEHAL' which includes 1 to 1 Counselling facility from trained psychologists for NTPC employees/exemployees and their family members where they can discuss their personal/professional concerns). Employees are encouraged to undertake self-assessment through SNEHAL.

08) **Feedback and Surveys:** These are conducted regularly to bring any updates in our various activities & policies

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Sustainable Tomorrow: Inclusive Today: A Development Paradigm of DEI

Dr. Sapna Mathur

Abstract

The systematic inclusion of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in economic, social, and environmental governance systems is becoming more and more important in sustainable development in the twenty-first century. Modern studies prove that innovative, strong, and able to provide long-term sustainable results, inclusive societies and organizations are more adaptable (McKinsey and Company, 2023/2024; Sindhu et al., 2025). Although the world has pledged to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the implementation process has been unequal, mostly because of the unrelenting disparities based on gender, income, geography, and access to opportunity (United Nations, 2024; World Bank, 2024). This article serves as a synthesis of the recent scholarly and institutional literature in order to develop a DEI-oriented model of development, as the inclusion is not a marginal ethical issue but a strategic requirement to fulfil the sustainable future.

Keywords: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Sustainable Development; ESG; Inclusive Growth; SDGs

Introduction

The traditional understanding of sustainability has involved environmental management and economic development. Nevertheless, the modern literature is becoming more aware of the fact that social inclusion is one of the cornerstones of sustainability (Verma et al., 2025). An increase in inequality, polarization of the workforce, unequal distribution of resources are challenges to long term development and social cohesion. In the view of the United Nations (2024), little percentage of the SDG targets are currently being on track, and some of the goals related to inequality are most lagged behind. Constant marginalization will deter human capital development, lower productivity, and diminished strength of society in response to economic and environmental shocks (World Bank, 2024).

The practice of consulting and academic research reveals that organizations that have diverse and inclusive leadership perform better than their counterparts in a number of aspects such as innovation, resilience, and long-term value creation (McKinsey & Company, 2023/2024; Catalyst and NYU, 2025). Simultaneously, the changing regulatory and political demands have led to some companies refining the disclosures of DEI, despite the ongoing internal inclusion programmes (Conference Board, 2025). These dynamics underscore the necessity to integrate DEI in structural terms into the sustainability approaches, but not to think of it as a decorative or a short-term effort.

DEI and sustainable development theories: theoretical background

DEI is closely related to such social aspect of sustainable development as SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Inequality by itself suppresses economic productivity by lowering the right to education, decent jobs and decision-making authority as well as amplifying social instability and political disintegration (World Bank, 2024). Inclusive systems on the other hand allow a wider inclusion in markets and institutions, enhancing adaptive capacity and social trust. The current bibliometric and systematic reviews present the evidence of a rapid expansion in DEI scholarship, particularly, within the areas of management, education, and sustainability research, which indicates the growing awareness of inclusion as the development enabler (Suhara et al., 2024; Verma et al., 2025).

Researchers claim that a sustainable development process is impossible without focusing on structural exclusion that is incorporated into institutions, organizations, and markets (Sindhu et al., 2025). In this respect, DEI is a principle and a practical instrument to foster sustainability.

Organizational Evidence and ESG connexions

On the organizational level, DEI has become an element of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) strategies. Empirically, it has shown that there is a positive correlation between diversity, inclusion, and ESG performance, especially in the quality of governance and social outcomes (Tumewang et al., 2024). According to McKinsey & Company (2023/2024) companies that are in the first quartile in both gender and ethnic diversity in leadership have a high probability of performing better than their counterparts in the last quartile, indicating that inclusion is a contributor to value creation over time.

In spite of this evidence, corporate disclosure practices have changed in regard to legal, political, and reputational reasons. According to the Conference Board (2025), explicit DEI terminology in the public filings began to decrease, which is caused by the increased scrutiny and uncertainty in the field of regulation. Nevertheless, the same study reveals that the majority of big companies still invest in inclusive recruitment, leadership management, employee welfare, and pay equity programs. According to the analyses of the Harvard Law Forum (2025), although executive incentives associated with DEI have been moderated, inclusion is entrenched within the governance systems, which implies that the latter has not ceased to be a symbol of disclosure but an element of operation.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) Inputs

DEI inputs are at the institutional and organizational levels and entail inclusive policies at the public level, anti-discriminations laws, equitable access to education and healthcare, inclusive labor market rules, and organizational system of governance that is integrated with DEI (Garg & Chikara, 2025; McKinsey and Company, 2023/2024). These sources generate the conditions of participation and opportunity.

Mediating Mechanisms

The mediating mechanisms of DEI inputs that can affect sustainability outcomes include increased utilization of human capital, trust in the organization, and collaborative cultures, psychological safety, and adaptive leadership (Sindhu et al., 2025; Tumewang et al., 2024). Inclusive settings contribute to innovation, better decision making, and better stakeholder participation, which are essential in sustainable performance.

Sustainability Outcomes

Successful DEI application leads to faster SDG advancement, greater organizational strength, increased ESG, less inequality, and increased social cohesion (Verma et al., 2025; Catalyt and NYU, 2025). These results support the interconnection between inclusion and sustainability.

Policy Implications

Governments are very instrumental in ensuring that DEI is incorporated into national sustainability plans. The introduction of the DEI indicators into the SDG monitoring systems will allow the policymakers to monitor the progress with disaggregated data attributes in terms of gender, income, and region (United Nations, 2024). The investments in inclusive education, social protection, healthcare, and access to the labor market are especially critical in minimizing vulnerability and inequality (World Bank, 2024).

Equity should also be included in climate transition and digitalization policies in order to avoid unfair effects on marginalized groups. Inclusive governance increases the trust of the people, policy legitimacy and effectiveness in the long-term.



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Managerial Implications

For organizations, DEI must be a strategic sustainability investment as opposed to a mandatory one. DEI measures are to be incorporated by leaders in strategic planning, risk management, and performance evaluation systems (McKinsey & Company, 2023/2024; Catalyst and NYU, 2025). Accountability is enhanced by clear quantification of representation, pay equity, inclusion climate and well-being of employees.

Inclusive leadership and ethical governance promote organizational legitimacy, staff engagement and retention of talent, contributing to long-term value generation and sustainable competitive advantage.

Conclusion

Without inclusion in the present, a sustainable future will be impossible. Recent scholarly and institutional sources show that DEI increases resilience, innovation, and equitable growth. The paradigm of development promoted by the DEI through this article is focusing on the inclusion as an enabling factor of sustainability and not as a marginal issue. In order to have inclusive, resilient, and sustainable development, it is critical to embed DEI into policy frameworks and organizational systems.

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Artificial Intelligence as an Enabler of Gender-Inclusive Leadership Development in Indian Corporates: Evidence, Practices, and Policy Directions

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Abstract

Despite sustained efforts to improve gender diversity, women continue to remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions across industries in India. While participation at entry and mid-management levels has improved, the transition to decision-making and executive roles remains constrained by structural, cultural, and cognitive barriers. Recent advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) offer new possibilities to address these long-standing inequities by enabling data-driven, bias-aware, and scalable leadership development systems.

This paper examines how AI can act as a catalyst for gender-inclusive leadership development in Indian corporates. Drawing on secondary data, recent industry reports, and sector-specific caselets from IT, Banking and Financial Services (BFSI), and Manufacturing, the study analyses how AI-enabled talent analytics, career path personalization, and succession planning tools can help organizations move from intent to impact. Adopting a practitioner and policy-oriented lens, the paper proposes an AI-enabled framework for inclusive leadership development and outlines actionable recommendations for organizations and policymakers. The findings suggest that while AI is not inherently neutral, when governed ethically and aligned with inclusion objectives, it can significantly accelerate women's progression into leadership roles.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Gender-Inclusive Leadership, Women in Leadership, HR Analytics, Indian Corporates, Inclusive Talent Development

1. Introduction

The underrepresentation of women in leadership remains a persistent global and national challenge. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2023, it may take over 130 years to close global gender gaps if current progress rates continue. In India, the picture is similarly concerning. While women account for approximately 32–35% of the formal workforce, their representation sharply declines at senior leadership levels. The Grant Thornton Women in Business Report 2024 indicates that women hold only 18–19% of senior management roles in India, with even lower representation in traditional sectors such as manufacturing, infrastructure, and core engineering.

Over the past two decades, organizations have invested heavily in diversity initiatives, leadership development programs, and policy reforms. Yet, the leadership gap persists, indicating that the challenge is not merely one of pipeline creation but of systemic progression. Conventional leadership development mechanisms—often dependent on managerial discretion, informal sponsorship, and subjective assessments of “potential”—have inadvertently reinforced existing gender biases.

In this context, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a powerful tool capable of reshaping organizational decision-making. AI-driven systems are increasingly being deployed across human resource functions, including recruitment, performance management, learning and development, and succession planning. This paper argues that AI, when deployed responsibly, can help organizations reimagine leadership development through a gender-inclusive lens by reducing bias, improving visibility of women talent, and enabling evidence-based interventions.

The objective of this paper is threefold:

1. To examine the role of AI in addressing gender bias in leadership development systems.
2. To analyse Indian corporate practices across IT, BFSI, and Manufacturing sectors.
3. To propose practitioner and policy recommendations for responsible AI adoption in leadership development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender Bias and Leadership Progression

Scholarly research consistently highlights that leadership systems are embedded with implicit gender biases. Eagly and Carl (2007) describe women's leadership journeys as a "labyrinth," shaped by stereotypes, role incongruence, and unequal access to informal power networks. Women are often evaluated differently from men, particularly in assessments of leadership potential.

Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) observe that women are more likely to be judged on past performance, while men are assessed on perceived future potential. Bohnet (2016) further explains that even well-intentioned organizations often rely on "gut feel" and informal sponsorship, which disproportionately benefits those who resemble existing leadership profiles—typically male.

In the Indian context, socio-cultural norms, career interruptions due to caregiving responsibilities, and limited access to strategic roles further compound these challenges. As a result, leadership pipelines leak significantly at mid-management levels, particularly for women.

2.2 Artificial Intelligence in Human Resource Management

AI adoption in HR has expanded rapidly in recent years. Davenport and Ronanki (2018) identify talent analytics, predictive performance modelling, and personalized learning systems as some of the most impactful AI applications in people management. AI systems can process large volumes of structured and unstructured data to identify patterns that are often invisible to human decision-makers.

Research suggests that algorithmic tools, when designed carefully, can reduce bias by standardizing decision criteria and minimizing subjective judgment (Raghavan et al., 2020). In leadership development, AI can support objective identification of high-potential talent, recommend individualized development pathways, and enhance succession planning accuracy.

2.3 Ethical Risks and Governance Challenges

Despite its promise, AI is not inherently unbiased. O'Neil (2016) cautions that algorithms trained on historical data may reproduce existing inequalities. In HR contexts, biased training data, opaque algorithms, and lack of accountability can exacerbate discrimination rather than eliminate it.

Therefore, scholars emphasize the need for ethical AI governance frameworks that ensure transparency, fairness, and human oversight (Raghavan et al., 2020). For AI to serve as a tool for inclusion, organizations must consciously align technological design with equity objectives.

3. Research Approach and Conceptual Framework

This paper adopts a qualitative, practitioner-oriented approach based on secondary data analysis, industry reports, and illustrative corporate caselets. The intent is not to test hypotheses but to synthesize evidence and offer actionable insights.

Based on the literature and practice review, the paper proposes a Gender-Inclusive AI Leadership Development Framework, comprising four interrelated dimensions:

1. Bias-Aware Talent Identification
2. AI-Driven Career Path Personalization
3. Data-Enabled Sponsorship and Succession Planning
4. Ethical AI Governance and Oversight

This framework serves as an analytical lens for examining Indian corporate practices.

4. Indian Corporate Caselets

4.1 IT Sector: Infosys – AI-Enabled Leadership Identification

The Indian IT sector has been at the forefront of AI adoption in HR. Infosys has implemented AI-driven talent analytics platforms that integrate performance metrics, learning agility indicators, project complexity exposure, and leadership competencies. By moving beyond manager-driven nominations, the system enhances visibility of high-potential employees across levels.

Practitioner accounts indicate that this approach has helped surface women leaders who may otherwise have been overlooked due to lower visibility or fewer high-profile assignments. Internal diversity dashboards have enabled leadership teams to track gender representation in leadership pipelines and development programs more systematically. AI shifted leadership conversations from subjective visibility to evidence-based capability assessment.

4.2 BFSI Sector: ICICI Bank – Predictive Career Progression Analytics

The BFSI sector presents unique challenges due to regulatory intensity, long working hours, and career interruptions. ICICI Bank has leveraged AI-based analytics to monitor career velocity, role transitions, and skill development trajectories.

The system identifies stagnation risks and recommends targeted interventions such as role rotations, mentoring, or leadership training. This has been particularly beneficial for women returning from maternity or caregiving breaks. According to the ICICI Bank Sustainability Report 2023, women beneficiaries of data-driven reintegration programs demonstrated improved retention and promotion outcomes at middle-management levels. AI-enabled insights supported continuity and progression rather than penalizing career breaks.

4.3 Manufacturing Sector: Tata Steel – Inclusive Succession Planning

Manufacturing remains one of the most male-dominated sectors in India. Tata Steel has adopted AI-supported succession planning tools that map competencies, readiness levels, and leadership behaviors objectively across roles, including plant and operational leadership positions.

By decoupling leadership readiness from traditional role assumptions, the system identified women leaders for operational and cross-functional roles that were previously considered “non-traditional.” Leadership teams reported that data-driven insights helped challenge long-held biases about role suitability. AI enabled organizations to question gendered assumptions embedded in succession planning.



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5. Practitioner and Policy Implications

5.1 Implications for Organizations

Integrate AI with Leadership Strategy: AI should complement human judgment, not replace it. Audit Algorithms Regularly: Ensure datasets are diverse, current, and aligned with inclusion goals. Translate Insights into Action: Analytics must lead to sponsorship, stretch roles, and succession opportunities. Build AI Literacy: Equip leaders and women employees to engage meaningfully with AI-driven systems.

5.2 Implications for Policymakers and Institutions

Develop Ethical AI Guidelines for HR: Promote transparency and accountability in algorithmic decision-making. Encourage Public-Private Collaboration: Share best practices and benchmarks across sectors. Support Women's Digital Upskilling: AI literacy should be positioned as a leadership capability.

6. Discussion

The evidence suggests that AI's transformative potential lies in augmentation rather than automation. When aligned with gender-equity objectives, AI can democratize access to leadership opportunities, surface invisible talent, and enable proactive interventions. However, technology alone cannot dismantle deeply embedded cultural norms.

AI must therefore be embedded within a broader ecosystem of inclusive leadership, ethical governance, and organizational accountability. Without intentional design, AI risks reinforcing the very inequities it seeks to address.

7. Conclusion

Artificial Intelligence presents Indian corporates with a strategic opportunity to rethink leadership development through a gender-inclusive lens. By combining data-driven objectivity with ethical oversight and human empathy, AI can help bridge the gap between women's participation and representation in leadership roles. Accelerating progress requires moving beyond symbolic commitments toward systemic, technology-enabled transformation. For organizations and policymakers alike, the challenge is not whether to adopt AI, but how to do so responsibly to ensure that leadership of the future is inclusive, equitable, and representative.

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Learning Experiences in Leadership – A Practical Toolkit

Nina Chatrath

Multiple times when one is participating in conferences, or events, we hear a lot of people address us, people who have experience and wisdom. What are they attempting to do? Through their own life and work experiences, they distil stories and share with us. It is entirely up to us, whether we wish to imbibe these and learn from them, or just hear them and not pay any heed to them. These are learning experiences, especially in leadership – whether they are being shared by us or being heard by us. It is about being in the moment and imbibing it and putting it in our diary of Learning Experiences in Leadership.

If I were to give it a definition, it would be *“Learning experiences in leadership are the moments, situations, and practices through which people develop leadership capability, not just learn about leadership in theory.”*

These can fall into many categories, and the few powerful ones are listed below, to make it easier for you to recognize them and get the best out of them. A practical toolkit for you to use.

Experience-based learning

I have found experience-based learning as the most impactful, in life Leadership is learned largely by doing. As I do, it gets registered inside me. Some of the relevant examples of experience-based learning can be as described below:

Leading through ambiguity—managing teams without clear answers, shifting priorities, or incomplete information.

Decision-making under pressure—balancing speed, risk, and consequences.

Managing conflict—handling disagreement, resistance, or under performance constructively.

Change leadership—guiding people through restructuring, growth, or crisis.

Stakeholder management—aligning people with competing interests and power dynamics.

Unless I have been in situations where I have DONE it, I cannot say I know it. I have experienced these situations and therefore I have learnt it. These experiences build judgment, resilience, and credibility.

Reflection

Not necessarily in any order, most of these categories do work for us. Reflection is another category that makes us better understand what we are experiencing and whether it is being understood in the right frame! I personally find that 'Reflection' is a multiplier. I am experiencing something, and I need to convert the activity into insight! The insight is what remains with me, and I need to pull it out, as the situation demands, in the future.

What turns experience into learning.

After-action reviews – systematically examining successes and failures. Journaling leadership moments – tracking emotional reactions, and my growth in thinking.

Asking: What happened? What did I do? What would I do differently? To coach oneself

Peer reflection groups – learning through shared leadership stories.

Without reflection, experience does not become insight.

Feedback-driven learning

Many times, we remain averse to feedback. There is a mental armour that we wear if we see any kind of feedback coming our way! But it is supposedly a very good input, and it is known that Leadership growth accelerates when feedback is timely and honest. Personally, I have pushed the boundaries and tried my best to remain very open to feedback, and have worked on accepting it, and imbibing it. There are many forms of feedback, as detailed below:



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360-degree feedback from peers, reports, and managers
Failure and recovery – learning from mistakes and rebuilding trust
Coaching conversations – reflecting on behaviour and impact
Direct reports' reactions – noticing morale, engagement, and outcomes
As one takes in the feedback, it develops self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and adaptability. These are increasingly being recognized in leaders, for them to be impactful.

Structured learning

I call it learning through frameworks and models. As I encounter a good framework I try and use it in the real world. Let us take an example Maslow's Hierarchy or Self-Determination Theory which is a motivational framework, a structured model explaining why people act, focusing on drivers like needs, emotions, goals, rewards, and social influence, guiding behaviour towards objectives or change. Based on this, one can map people and design effective learning, work, or social interventions by aligning activities with human psychological drivers. It's an example of having a structured base, and applying your experience on top of it, calling it structured learning.
Formal learning works best when paired with real experience. These are examples where we can use structured learning.

- Leadership programs and workshops
- Case studies and simulations
- Executive education
- Reading and reflection
- These provide frameworks to make sense of lived experience.

Values and identity formation

Quite simply this is about defining who you are as a leader. Many situations test you beyond your limits. Those are the times when you are tested under fire, and you emerge stronger. Values and identity formation happens in those testing times. As you emerge, basics of leadership get defined in you, and you define to the world whether you are trustworthy.

Facing ethical dilemmas – making a choice between what is easy and what is right.

Value conflicts – balancing personal integrity with organizational pressure.

Unpopular decisions – standing firm despite resistance and criticism.

Finding your leadership voice – dealing with situations that test your courage, fairness and compassion.

This shapes authenticity and trust.

Social and relational learning

Social and relational learning refers to how people develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and identity through interactions with others. It sits at the intersection of learning, leadership, and human relationships—and is especially critical in today's collaborative, cross-cultural workplaces. Leadership is relational, not positional. If we get this truth, imbibing leadership tenets will be so much more possible.

Mentoring others – clarifying values and leadership identity

Being mentored – observing how experienced leaders think and act

Cross-functional collaboration – influencing without authority

Cultural exposure – leading across geographies, generations, or value systems

These experiences strengthen influence, empathy, and communication.

As we explore the above categories, a very simple leadership learning formula emerges which is along the following lines:

Challenging experience + feedback + reflection = leadership growth

And we can create our own toolbox to make it happen.

Reimagining Women's Leadership Pathways: From Pipeline to Power - Equity, Agency, and Accelerated Action

Prof (Dr) Tripti Bajpai Toor

Introduction: Visibility Without Power

Across classrooms, workplaces, laboratories, hospitals, start-ups, and public institutions, women today are increasingly visible, capable, and aspirational. Over the past few decades, women's educational attainment has risen steadily across the world, reshaping talent pools and redefining professional aspirations. In India, women now account for nearly half of all higher-education enrolments, and in several disciplines-including medicine, management, and the sciences-they outperform men in enrolment, academic performance, and completion rates (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2023). Globally, similar trends are visible, with women constituting a substantial proportion of skilled professionals across sectors such as healthcare, education, finance, technology, and entrepreneurship (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2024). This educational and professional visibility suggests that the foundational pipeline for leadership is not only intact but robust. Women are entering organisations with ambition, competence, and commitment, fully equipped to contribute at the highest levels. However, when leadership tables are examined-spaces where authority is exercised, resources are controlled, and strategic decisions are made-the gender balance shifts sharply. Despite decades of advocacy, affirmative policies, diversity programmes, and organisational initiatives, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership and decision-making roles across sectors and geographies (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2023).

“The leadership gap is not created at entry-it is produced at transition points where ambition meets institutional inertia.”

This disconnect between participation and power reveals a paradox at the heart of modern organisations: women are present, prepared, and ambitious, yet persistently absent from positions of influence. Understanding this paradox requires moving beyond simplistic explanations that locate the problem in women's choices or capabilities. Instead, it demands a systemic examination of how leadership pathways are designed, evaluated, and governed.

Understanding the Leadership Gap Through Data

Data provides a compelling lens through which to examine the leadership gap. Globally, women constitute approximately 43 per cent of the workforce, yet they occupy only about 28–30 per cent of senior leadership roles (WEF, 2024; McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2023). While incremental progress has been made over the past decade, it remains uneven and fragile, with advancement slowing dramatically at executive and board levels. These patterns demonstrate that time alone is insufficient to correct leadership imbalances.

In India, the contrast is even more pronounced. Women's labour force participation stands at approximately 26–27 per cent, reflecting deep-rooted social and structural barriers to workforce entry (MoSPI, 2023). More concerning, however, is the steep decline in representation as women move up organisational hierarchies. While women account for nearly 29 per cent of entry-level and individual contributor roles, their presence drops to around 20 per cent in senior management and further to 15–18 per cent at the C-suite level (LinkedIn & The Quantum Hub, 2024).

These figures reveal not a pipeline problem, but a filtration problem. Women are not disappearing from organisations due to lack of ambition or competence; rather, they are being filtered out by systems that



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disproportionately reward linear career paths, uninterrupted availability, and leadership styles historically associated with men.

“Women are not leaking out of the leadership pipeline; they are being filtered out by systems that reward sameness over potential.”

The Mid-Career Bottleneck

The mid-career stage represents the most fragile point in women’s leadership journeys. This phase, typically spanning the late thirties to mid-forties, coincides with a convergence of professional and personal pressures. At work, expectations intensify as individuals are assessed for leadership potential, assigned larger teams, and given strategic responsibilities. Simultaneously, personal responsibilities—particularly caregiving for children, elders, or extended family—often peak.

In India, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care work, a reality that significantly constrains professional mobility, availability, and visibility (MoSPI, 2023). Studies indicate that nearly 60 per cent of professional women identify work–life balance and caregiving responsibilities as major barriers to advancement (Business Standard, 2025). Importantly, these pressures rarely result in complete workforce exit. Instead, they manifest as reduced access to stretch assignments, exclusion from informal networks, and slower promotion trajectories.

Over time, these compounded disadvantages harden into leadership exclusion. Performance evaluations begin to reflect reduced visibility rather than reduced capability, reinforcing biased narratives that misinterpret structural constraints as lack of ambition. The mid-career bottleneck thus becomes a critical inflection point where organisational design, not individual choice, determines leadership outcomes.

“Mid-career is not where women lose ambition—it is where organisations lose women’s visibility.”

Aspirations Are Strong, Opportunities Are Not

Contrary to persistent stereotypes, women’s leadership ambition remains strong and resilient. The AIMA–KPMG Women Leadership in Corporate India 2024 report reveals that 87 per cent of women professionals in India aspire to leadership roles, compared to 78 per cent of men (AIMA & KPMG, 2024). These findings directly challenge assumptions that women opt out of leadership pathways voluntarily.

Yet aspiration does not translate proportionately into outcomes. More than half of Indian organisations report only 10–30 per cent women in leadership roles, while 9 per cent report no women leaders at all. Alarming, 63 per cent of organisations report having no women in key managerial positions—roles that directly influence strategy, budgets, and resource allocation (Economic Times, 2024).

This disconnect underscores that the leadership challenge is not one of motivation, but of access, evaluation, and advancement. Women aspire to lead, but leadership systems frequently fail to recognise, sponsor, and promote them equitably.

“Women’s aspirations are abundant; leadership opportunities are not.”

Representation Versus Real Authority

Policy interventions, including mandatory inclusion of women directors on corporate boards, have improved numerical representation in India. Women now occupy approximately 17 per cent of board seats, a significant improvement over the past decade (Deloitte, 2023). However, representation does not automatically translate into influence. Women account for only 3–4 per cent of board chairs, and are often underrepresented on powerful committees such as audit, nomination, and remuneration

Representation without authority risks reducing inclusion to symbolic compliance. When women are present but excluded from decision-making, their ability to shape organisational direction remains limited. Leadership equity therefore requires not only seats at the table, but voice, influence, and control over outcomes.

“A seat at the table matters only when it comes with voice, influence, and the power to shape outcomes.”

DEI as a Leadership Imperative

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are often framed as HR initiatives. In reality, DEI represents a leadership philosophy that shapes who is trusted to lead, whose voices are valued, and which leadership styles are legitimised. Organisations that treat DEI as a strategic priority rather than a compliance exercise are better positioned to unlock the full potential of their talent.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that organisations with strong DEI practices outperform peers, reporting higher profitability, stronger governance outcomes, and more resilient decision-making (Deloitte, 2023; Economic Times, 2024). Inclusive leadership is not only a moral imperative, but a strategic advantage in an increasingly complex and competitive global environment.

Conclusion: From Pipeline to Power

Behind every statistic on women's leadership lies a human story of ambition, effort, compromise, and resilience. When organisations humanise the data, the leadership question shifts from why women fall out of leadership pathways to how leadership systems can evolve to retain and empower real talent. Reimagining women's leadership is not about fixing women; it is about transforming how power works. Accelerating action in this space is not symbolic—it is a strategic, ethical, and societal imperative that will define the future of work and leadership.

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Gender Equity: A Foundation for a Sustainable Tomorrow

Lt Col Shemona Malhotra

Introduction

Gender equity has emerged as one of the most critical pillars of sustainable development in the twenty-first century. Across nations and cultures, persistent gender inequalities continue to limit human potential and hinder social, economic, and environmental progress. The United Nations recognizes gender equality as a fundamental human right and emphasizes that it is indispensable for building peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable societies. Gender equity ensures that individuals of all genders receive fair treatment, access to opportunities, and the support necessary to overcome historical disadvantages. When gender equity is embedded within social and economic systems, societies are better positioned to thrive, innovate, and respond effectively to global challenges.

Sustainable development is not solely about economic growth or environmental protection; it also requires social justice and inclusive participation. Gender equity enables individuals to contribute meaningfully to development processes, fostering resilience at both community and national levels. By addressing gender disparities in education, employment, healthcare, leadership, and environmental governance, societies can unlock untapped potential and create a more balanced and sustainable future. Thus, gender equity is not merely a social concern but a strategic necessity for long-term global progress.

Understanding Gender Equity and Its Importance

Gender equity refers to fairness in the treatment of individuals based on their specific needs, circumstances, and challenges. Unlike gender equality, which focuses on providing the same rights and opportunities to everyone, gender equity recognizes that historical and structural barriers often place women and marginalized genders at a disadvantage. Addressing these inequalities requires targeted measures that level the playing field and enable equal outcomes.

For decades, social norms, cultural practices, and institutional structures have reinforced gender disparities. These inequalities manifest in unequal access to education, limited economic participation, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work. Gender equity seeks to dismantle these barriers by promoting policies and practices that recognize diversity in experiences and ensure fairness. Achieving gender equity strengthens social cohesion, promotes justice, and enhances the effectiveness of development initiatives.

The Global State of Gender Equity

Despite progress in recent years, gender inequality remains widespread across the globe. Women and girls continue to face significant obstacles that limit their participation in social, economic, and political life. In many regions, access to education remains unequal, particularly at secondary and higher levels. Girls are often forced to leave school due to poverty, early marriage, household responsibilities, or lack of safety and sanitation facilities. Economic disparities are equally pronounced. Women are more likely to work in informal sectors, earn lower wages, and experience job insecurity. The gender pay gap persists across industries and regions, reflecting systemic discrimination and undervaluation of women's work. Additionally, women hold a disproportionately small share of managerial & leadership positions, limiting their influence over organizational & policy decisions.

Political representation also remains unequal. Although women constitute nearly half of the global population, they are underrepresented in legislative bodies, executive offices, and decision making institutions. This imbalance weakens democratic processes and limits the inclusion of diverse perspectives in governance. These persistent inequalities highlight the urgent need for comprehensive and sustained efforts to promote gender equity worldwide.

Education as a Catalyst for Gender Equity

Education is one of the most powerful tools for achieving gender equity and sustainable development. Access to quality education equips individuals with knowledge, skills, and confidence, enabling them to participate actively in society. For women and girls, education has transformative effects that extend beyond individual benefits to entire communities.

Educated women are more likely to secure stable employment, earn higher incomes, and contribute to economic growth. They are also more likely to make informed decisions about health, family planning, and child education, leading to improved outcomes for future generations. Furthermore, education empowers women to challenge discriminatory norms and advocate for their rights.

Despite these benefits, gender gaps persist in education, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. Cultural stereotypes, lack of role models, and limited access to resources often discourage girls from pursuing these disciplines. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, including scholarships, mentorship programs, and inclusive curricula that promote gender sensitive learning environments.

Economic Empowerment and Gender Equity

Economic empowerment is a cornerstone of gender equity and sustainable development. When women have equal access to employment opportunities, financial resources, and entrepreneurial support, economies become more dynamic and resilient. Women's economic participation increases household incomes, reduces poverty, and strengthens national economies.

Gender equitable workplaces benefit from diverse perspectives, improved decision making, and enhanced innovation. Research consistently shows that organizations with gender diverse teams perform better financially and demonstrate greater adaptability. At the macroeconomic level, increasing women's participation in the labor force can significantly boost productivity and economic output.

However, barriers to economic empowerment remain. Women often face discrimination in hiring, promotion, and compensation. Limited access to credit, land ownership, and financial services further restricts entrepreneurial opportunities. Addressing these challenges requires policies that promote equal pay, protect labor rights, and support women led enterprises through training, funding, and market access.

Health, Well Being, and Gender Equity

Health equity is an essential component of gender equity and sustainable development. Women and girls often face disparities in access to healthcare services, particularly in reproductive and maternal health. Limited access to quality care contributes to higher rates of maternal mortality and preventable illnesses in many regions.

Gender based violence is another critical issue that undermines health and well being. Physical, emotional, and sexual violence have profound impacts on individuals and communities, affecting mental health, economic participation, and social stability. Combating gender based violence requires comprehensive strategies, including legal protections, education, and support services.

Mental health is also an important yet often overlooked aspect of gender equity. Societal expectations and unequal



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Mental health is also an important yet often overlooked aspect of gender equity. Societal expectations and unequal

Societal expectations and unequal responsibilities place significant emotional burdens on women, contributing to stress and burnout. Promoting gender sensitive healthcare systems that address both physical and mental well being is essential for achieving holistic and sustainable development.

Unpaid Care Work and Social Structures

One of the most significant yet undervalued contributors to gender inequality is unpaid care and domestic work. Women perform the majority of unpaid labor related to childcare, elder care, and household responsibilities. This unequal distribution limits women's time and opportunities for education, employment, and leadership.

Recognizing and redistributing unpaid care work is critical for achieving gender equity. Policies such as parental leave, affordable childcare services, and flexible work arrangements can help balance responsibilities between genders. Encouraging men to actively participate in domestic work not only promotes equity but also strengthens family relationships and social cohesion.

By valuing unpaid care work and integrating it into economic and social policies, societies can create more inclusive systems that support both productivity and well being.

Leadership, Representation, and Decision Making

Leadership and representation are vital areas for advancing gender equity. Women's participation in leadership positions ensures that diverse perspectives are reflected in decision making processes. Inclusive leadership leads to more effective policies, improved governance, and greater accountability.

Despite progress, women remain under represented in political institutions, corporate boards, and senior management roles. Structural barriers, cultural biases, and lack of mentorship often limit advancement opportunities. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate efforts to promote inclusive leadership through quotas, leadership training, and supportive organizational cultures.

Increasing women's representation in leadership also serves as a powerful symbol of social change, inspiring future generations and challenging stereotypes about gender roles.

Gender Equity and Climate Change

Gender equity is closely linked to environmental sustainability and climate action. Women often play central roles in managing natural resources and supporting community resilience. However, climate change disproportionately affects women, particularly in developing regions, due to economic vulnerability and social responsibilities.

Integrating gender perspectives into climate policies enhances the effectiveness of mitigation and adaptation strategies. When women are included in environmental decision making, solutions are more responsive to local needs and sustainable in the long term. Promoting gender equity in climate action is therefore essential for achieving environmental sustainability and social justice simultaneously.

The Role of Men and Boys

Achieving gender equity requires the active involvement of men and boys. Gender inequality is deeply rooted in social norms and expectations that affect all members of society. Challenging harmful stereotypes and promoting positive models of masculinity are essential steps toward equitable change.

Men play a critical role in supporting women's leadership, sharing domestic responsibilities, and advocating for inclusive practices. When men actively engage in gender equity initiatives, social transformation becomes more sustainable and widespread. Education and awareness programs that involve men and boys help build understanding and foster mutual respect.



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Policy Frameworks and Collective Action

Governments, civil society, and the private sector must work together to advance gender equity. Effective policies include equal pay legislation, anti discrimination laws, access to education and healthcare, and social protection systems. Enforcement and accountability are crucial to ensuring that these policies translate into real change.

Civil society organizations play a vital role in advocacy, awareness raising, and grassroots mobilization. Community led initiatives address local challenges and promote cultural change from within. The private sector also contributes through inclusive employment practices, corporate social responsibility, and innovation.

Collective action across sectors strengthens efforts to achieve gender equity and ensures that progress is inclusive and sustainable.

The Way Forward

Achieving gender equity is a long term process that requires sustained commitment and collaboration. Education, economic empowerment, health equity, leadership representation, and environmental inclusion must be addressed simultaneously to create meaningful change. Monitoring progress and adapting strategies based on evidence and context are essential for success.

Investing in gender equity yields benefits that extend far beyond individual outcomes. It strengthens economies, improves health and education systems, and enhances environmental sustainability. Societies that prioritize equity are better equipped to face global challenges and build resilient futures.

Gender equity is both a moral imperative and a strategic foundation for a sustainable tomorrow. Persistent gender inequalities undermine development and limit human potential, while equitable systems foster inclusion, innovation, and resilience. By addressing disparities in education, economic participation, healthcare, leadership, and environmental governance, societies can unlock transformative change.

Achieving gender equity requires collective effort, inclusive policies, and cultural transformation. When individuals, institutions, and governments work together to promote fairness and opportunity, the benefits extend to all members of society. Investing in gender equity today is an investment in a more just, prosperous, and sustainable world for future generations.

Activating Leadership Potential into Action: Trust Pipeline Model and Trust Equation

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Trust is the initial attempt at unlocking leadership potential. By strengthening accountability, building credibility, and fostering teamwork, this approach enables leaders to move from intention to meaningful action. To create the conditions for collaborative impact and long-term organizational success, it is essential to lead with clarity and purpose.

In a leadership pipeline, trust is intentionally created, upheld, and transferred as individuals advance into leadership positions. The pipeline's ability to recognize future leaders and give them genuine responsibility depends on trust.

Trust can be enabled in an organisation by building a TRUST Pipeline Model or by constructing the Trust Equation.

Firstly, let's discuss the Trust Pipeline Model, which can be explained as:

A. The TRUST Pipeline Model

The TRUST Pipeline Model presents a clear, practical leadership framework that demonstrates how trust is constructed, strengthened, and sustained over time, rather than as a one-time behaviour. Previous studies have conceptualized trust as a pipeline, with each stage serving as input into the next. If one stage is disrupted, it leads to leakages and erosion of Trust.

Trust is built in the organisational system by maintaining Transparency

T - Transparency

What leaders do

- Maintain open communication about opportunities, constraints, decisions, and failures;
- Providing clear standards for advancement, growth, and selection.
- Everyone is conscious of hidden agendas, honest feedback, and logical leadership decisions
- Demonstrated competence in handling situations
- Maintaining consistency in words and actions
- Displaying empathy towards others and engaging with others

In case of any leakage in the transparency stage, the pipeline may be disrupted through speculation, misinformation, scepticism, and disassociation.

Thus, Trust is built in the organisational system through Responsible Action (Pitono & Fauzi, 2025)

R - Responsibility

What leaders do

- Provide presence and access for decision-making when necessary
- Provide advanced-level leadership opportunities
- Provide actual decision-making power and control, and not just assignments
- Providing role-level operating accountability
- Meet all kinds of insignificant and big-level commitments



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In the event of any leakage in the responsibility stage, the pipeline may be disrupted due to damage to credibility, erosion of certainty, and confidence.

Trust is built through demonstrated Skill and Capability

U - Upskilling

What leaders do

- Provide continuous coaching and constructive criticism;
- Skill improvement in line with leadership level; and
- Encouragement of learning from mistakes
- Showcasing empathy, understanding with 1:1 interviews and active listening
- Valuing different standpoints and perspectives

In the event of any leakage in the upskilling stage, the pipeline may be dislocated due to employees feeling unnoticed and unheard.

Trust is built across all levels by extending support

S-Support

What leaders do

- Emerging leaders are mentored and supported by senior leaders;
- Provide adequate resources and direction
- There is psychological safety to ask questions and acknowledge weaknesses;
- There is clear workload sharing and support during difficult times.

In the event of any leakage in the support stage, the pipeline may be interrupted due to feelings of burnout, motivational decline, passive disengagement, and quiet quitting.

Trust can be sustained over time through honest context-setting conversations, knowledge transfer, and regular team updates.

T-Transfer

- Knowledge, power, and connections are consciously transferred;
- Successors are prepared for the future and predictable changes before they happen;
- Trust changes with the know-how of the job, accountability, and empowerment
- Providing leadership empowerment and an ownership culture.

A robust leadership pipeline reinforces trust advancement with consistent communication, responsibility, skill development, and maintenance of deliberate transfer.

In the event of any leakage in the Trust transfer stage, the pipeline may be resolved by improving engagement levels, granting level-specific decision-making rights, and innovation.

Trust can be expanded through honest context-setting conversations, knowledge transfer, and steady team updates.

B. Trust can also be enabled with the help of The Trust Equation, which is a unique model that explains how trust is built and maintained in leadership and interpersonal relationships. The formula for the Trust Equation is stated as:

The Trust Equation Formula:

Trust = (Credibility + Reliability + Intimacy) / Self-Orientedness.

The definition of each element is maintained as follows:

Credibility: The individual's communication skills, integrity, and dependability.

Reliability: The capacity to demonstrate dependability and achieve outcomes consistently while keeping one's word.

Intimacy: This refers to the personal connection and feeling of security in another's presence, characterized by discretion, compassion, and emotional intelligence.

Self-orientation: This is the degree to which you prioritize your own interests over those of others, to build higher trust.

This equation helps individuals and leaders understand the dynamics of trust and how to enhance their trustworthiness in various relationships.

Demonstrating Leadership Accelerated Action Through Trust

1. Credibility

Do leaders see consistent action behind words?

- Recognize consistently applied leadership readiness and promotion
- Clearly articulate progression from development experiences into formal leadership roles
- Data-driven judgment decisions based on capability assessments

Accelerated Action:

Advance from promises to noticeable appointments and meaningful stretch roles

2. Reliability

Do we consistently deliver on what we promise to do?

- Assured commitments to sponsorship, inclusive development, and promotion are met
- Timelines for progressive development are honoured
- Leaders are held responsible for consequences, not purposes

Accelerated Action:

Advance development action plans into adaptable, problem-solving, proficient missions and transactions for refining reliability in projects (Perrone, 2022).

3. Intimacy

Do people feel appreciated, supported, and safe to develop and grow?

- Leaders actively capitalize on time to comprehend individual aspirations
- Psychological safety in feedback and readiness conversations
- Sponsorship that is particularly personal, not transactional

Accelerated Action:

Replace general agendas with individualized leadership expeditions.

4. Self-Orientation (Lower Is Better)

Are decisions made for long-term organizational outcomes—or for purposeful well-being?

- Change from risk-avoidance to intentional opportunity creation
- Move from performative inclusion efforts to real-time impact
- Strengthen organizational resilience and long-term leadership

Replace general agendas with individualized leadership expeditions.

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- Strengthen organizational resilience and long-term leadership

Accelerated Action:

Make daring decisions through targeted interventions for long-term value creation (Fuller & Young, 2022)

Trust Outcome

It is maintained that when credibility, reliability, and intimacy are high—and self-orientation is low—trust development increases, and ultimately the pipeline acceptance converts into leadership.

Trust Centric Preparedness to Responsible Leadership

Reasons Behind the Frequent Stalls in Leadership Readiness

Capabilities and experiences from leadership talent streams throughout organizations, yet when positions become available, important choices are postponed based on evidence of trust.

Leadership potential is assessed by the ability to seize opportunities and act decisively in complex and ambiguous situations. In addition, strong leadership readiness is measured by trustworthiness displayed in action. In contrast, weak leadership is characterized by hesitation, inaction, and stalling in decision-making, regardless of a candidate's qualifications on paper.

A convincing method for examining leadership readiness moves to actual leadership is the Trust Equation, which divides Credibility, Reliability, and Intimacy by Self-Orientation. Organizations can move from cautious planning to confident action by purposefully implementing this strategy.

Visualising and Maintaining Trust as a Leadership Multiplier

The Trust Equation defines trust as:

$$\text{(Credibility + Reliability + Intimacy) } \div \text{ Self-Orientation}$$

Each element of the Trust Equation plays a discrete role in leadership development. When any of the four elements are missing, reluctance increases. When all are present—and self-orientation is low—action becomes normal.

Trust is not a dispositional attribute. It is constructed through repetitive behaviours, arrangements, and choices. Organizations that understand this stop asking, "Is this person ready?" and start asking, "Have we created the circumstances to trust them?"

Credibility: Belief in Self-Competence and Judgment

Credibility answers the question: Do we believe this person can deliver on this job?

Most organizations over-emphasize credibility through degrees, experiences, performance metrics, and capability frameworks to govern promotion deliberations.

However, this may often be assessed unevenly, leading to friction in the pipeline.

To fast-track action, this particular element must be institutionalised in the following ways:

- **Define leadership potential readiness criteria more clearly and transparently** Clear expectations create decisiveness with confidence.
- **Shift from probable narratives to established judgment** Leaders are trusted when they display wisdom in their thought processes.
- **Offer distinguish ability in talent performance via extended roles under real settings**

Reliability: Confidence That Assurances Will Be Realised

Reliability addresses the query: Can a particular person be counted upon consistently?

Leadership roles are risk-oriented. They involve missed obligations, inconsistencies, and avoidance of tough decision-making. On the contrary, reliability formalises confidence through opportunity and accountability in the absence of perfection.

To accelerate action through reliability:

- **Assign ownership and participation in deliverables**
- **Leaders must be held responsible for growth and advancement commitments**
- **Monitor Performance and Outcomes**

When leaders repeatedly and reliably notice talent deliver on commitments in ambiguous situations, promotion decisions feel safer and accelerate action.

Intimacy: The Undervalued Catalyst

Intimacy addresses the query: Do I fairly trust this person as a leader?

This is the most undervalued yet deciding component of the Trust Equation in leadership advancement.

Intimacy means understanding the functional performance of somebody under pressure, the way they receive feedback. It is motivational in nature and advances leadership towards predictable action.

The Leadership Talent Pipeline often lacks familiarity with decision-makers. However, they are known through performance ratings, reports, or second-hand chronicles rather than direct experience.

To accelerate action through intimacy:

- Create planned exposure to senior leadership problem-solving and decision-making scenarios
- Encourage honest, self-conscious, resilient conversations
- Shift leadership investment of time and advocacy to the relationship

Leaders hesitate to make decisions without intimacy-not because they are unsure of their abilities, but rather because the unknown seems risky. Developing intimacy turns abstract preparedness into a reliable presence in leadership.

Self-Orientation: The Hidden Obstacle to Advancement

Self-orientation addresses the query: Whose interests are behind this decision?

Action is drastically slowed by high self-orientation. Often, leaders delay making decisions to maintain control, avoid disruption, or protect their reputation.

This frequently manifests as:

"One more year of development." "First, let's see them in another role." "It's not the right time."

Even if these claims seem sensible, they indicate unbalanced priorities when they are made repeatedly.

To decrease self-orientation and speed up action:

- Rethink advancement; it is important to see it as an organizational necessity rather than a risk to oneself.
- Leaders must be recognised for shaping successors and their behaviour rather than hoarding talent
- Leaders must use prudence to protect the organization and ensure the comfort of the individual. Trust and momentum both increase when leaders consider organisational requirements over their own safety.

Trust in Action: From Pipeline to Realistic Possibility

Trust necessitates deliberate planning throughout the leadership structure.

- 1. Don't wait for Perfection, Design for a choice decision**



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Don't wait for total assurance. Leadership is acquired by action. For e.g the Tata Group actively designed and launched the Tata Nano for middle- and lower-class families. They did not design for perfection, but for affordability, ease of execution, and hence gathered a mass market.

2. Establish Measurable Sponsorship

Senior leaders must recommend emerging leaders for critical work projects and expanded roles, actively advocating for suitable promotion and visibility. Previous research has revealed that when high-potential talent is tied to expected results with deliberate guidance, opportunity, and accountability, placements and promotions are effectuated with expansion in responsibility (Garima Bajpai Harish Rawat Dr. Reena Singh, 2025).

3. Make Accelerated Moves Normal

It feels risky when progress becomes extraordinary; however, when progress becomes expected, trust grows. In manufacturing organisations, clear milestones are given to employees. As definite benchmarks are consistently achieved, progress becomes expected, and such employees can be trusted with higher budgets and more perilous decisions on sustaining growth and expansion in business.

4. Evaluate Conversion Rather Than Just Readiness

Keep track of the number of pipeline candidates who take on leadership positions and the reasons behind those who don't.

The Leadership Transition and Transform Everything

This is the most effective change that leaders can implement: "Are they prepared?" to "Do we trust them enough or have enough faith in them to take the lead?" For e.g, Microsoft high-potential employees are evaluated on integrity, transparent decision-making, admitting mistakes, and consistently acting with uprightness and accountability while displaying trust in maintaining confidentiality at work.

Similarly, in healthcare, nurses and doctors are trusted to embrace change. They follow ethical standards, protect patient confidentiality, and make patient safety-related, time-efficient decisions above cost/convenience.

This reframing shifts ongoing work assessments to dynamic responsibility and reaffirms that leadership capability and quality are ascertained through action and outcomes.

Leaders who steadily demonstrate dependability, compliance with protocols, and responsibility are selected for higher leadership roles. They maintain accountability for actions and build trustworthiness to make risk manageable at all times.

Conclusion: Trust Is the Accelerator to Meaningful Action

Organizations often suffer due to a lack of trust-oriented actions. Hence, it is substantial to be consistently watchful of trustworthiness in typical scenarios. This article emphasizes two ways to build trust in an institution: The Trust leadership pipeline model and the Trust Equation. These two models effectively indicate the necessary elements desirable for building trust for routine transactions and better relationships. Consequently, the Trust Equation formula states that when credibility is clear, reliability is demonstrated, intimacy is cultivated, and self-orientation is minimized, leadership readiness in the pipeline transforms into actual leadership. Hence, possible connections are renewed, trustworthiness is made visibly evident, and dependability is proven. Thus, it is envisioned that the Trust Pipelines can be enabled in the organisational systems through transparent communication, recognising and upskilling talent, and practising consistent and constant knowledge transfer. Instantaneous decisions prompt pipelines to make deliveries with confidence. Therefore, leadership quality is bestowed when trust is sufficiently strong and projected to lead to growth ahead.

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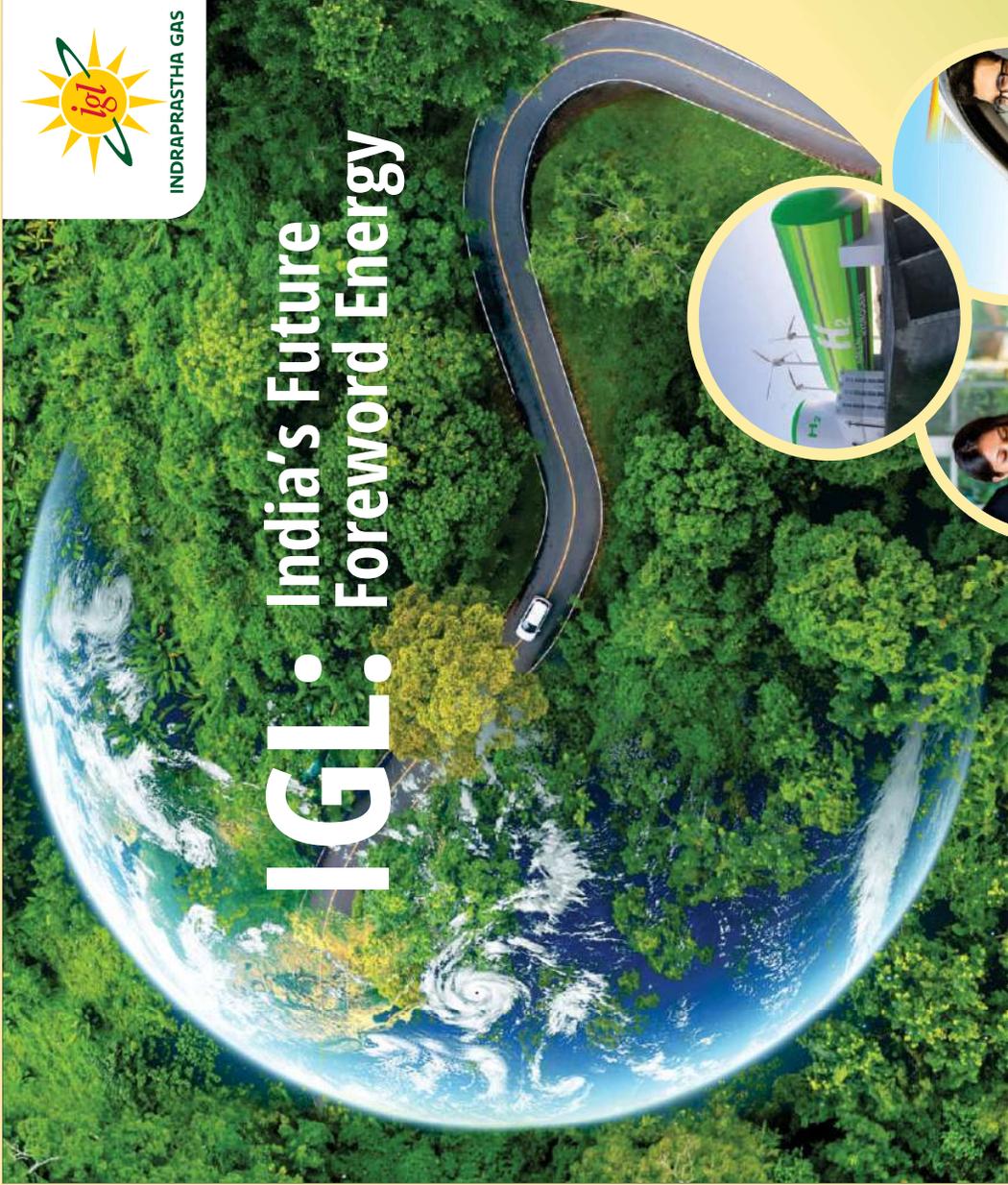


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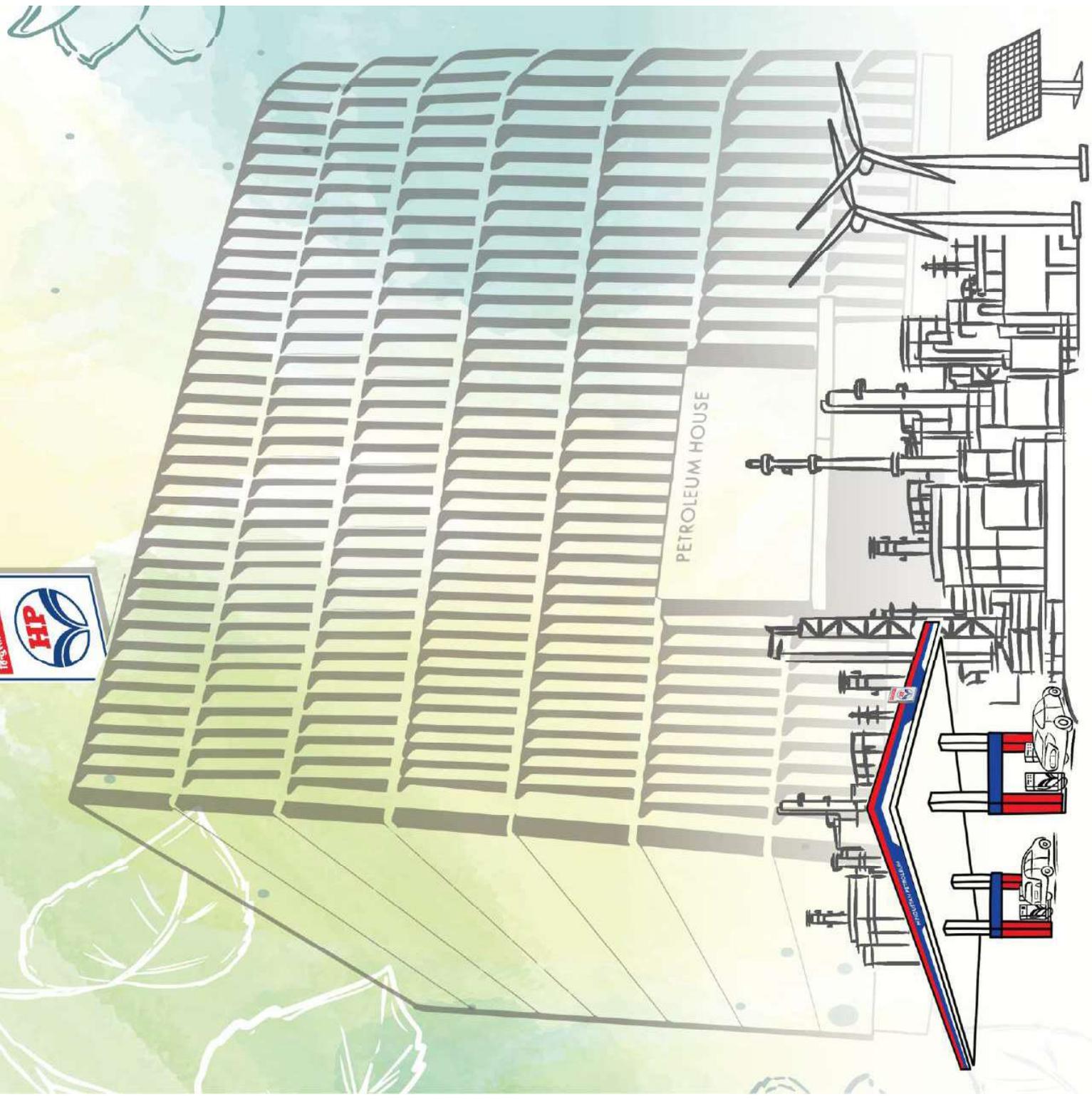
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